

# THE CHURCH YEAR



# OUR JOURNEY OF FAITH

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## INTRODUCTION

The church year is described in the Encyclopaedia Britannica article as the “annual cycle of seasons and days observed in the Christian churches in commemoration of the life, death, and Resurrection of [Jesus Christ](#) and of his virtues as exhibited in the lives of the saints. “

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/church-year>

The extent to which the church year is observed, varies greatly between denominations.

The Celebrating of Religious Festivals and the sharing in them by people of faith as part of their relationship with God is an ancient custom. It was and is central to the Jewish religion and was consequently adopted as part of the life of the church. (See Genesis 1: 4)

As Jesus was a Jew, and Christianity grew out of Judaism, and, although Christianity changed significantly when the majority of Christians were Gentiles; some of the celebrations of the church, are still related to Jewish festivals. The most important being holy week and Easter, the anniversary of Jesus death and resurrection, as events of this time occurred before and or during the Passover.

The Passover and the Christian celebration of Easter do not necessarily coincide as they are based on different dating systems. The Passover begins with the 15th and ends with the 21st (or, outside of [Israel](#) and among Reform Jews, the 22nd) day of the month of Nisan (March or April). Where as Easter, in the Western church, following the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, is celebrated on the first full moon after the Spring Equinox or in the Southern Hemisphere, the Autumn Equinox. The Eastern Orthodox church has a different dating system and there is yet to be agreement within the churches for a common date to celebrate Easter.

St Augustine described the value of the Church Year as being a gradual process that we live through as central to our spiritual growth and development and in so doing growing into a deeper experience of Jesus Christ and God’s revelation through him.

As the church evolved, the church year became part of the ‘Catechumenate’. The Catechumenate was a process of preparing people for baptism

culminating with their baptism at Easter. But as St Augustine said, the process is really for all Christians, year after year.

Living the church year can be described as a process based on telling and hearing the story of salvation. Sharing our own story and learning to see God's hand in our own story and how it intersects with the story of salvation. This process is intimately connected with this process being shared in Worship and our reflection preparing for worship and then after it.

Foundational to our journey through the church year is the teaching of Jesus, the night before he died, where he said:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. <sup>18</sup> I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live..... <sup>25</sup> “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> But the Advocate,<sup>2</sup> the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. (John 14:16 – 19, 25-26. See also 14: 16-26)



## **CHRIST IN NATURE**

The church year is also deeply attuned to the rhythm of nature.

As already mentioned, Easter in the Northern Hemisphere occurs on the first full moon after the spring equinox. Spring being associated with new life.

Although 25<sup>th</sup> December is not Jesus' actual birthdate, it was chosen by the church as a day to celebrate his birth, as it occurs approximately three days

after the winter solstice. This being the shortest day. From that day, the power of the sun begins to wax again, symbolising the light of Christ coming into the darkness of the world.

At the solstice, the sun appears to stand still before beginning its ascent or descent.

In the Southern Hemisphere, the seasons are opposite. This is a challenge for us in the Southern Hemisphere. On the one hand, it is important to have global celebrations of the life of Christ, yet, on the other hand, we need to listen to the voice of Christ in nature. Christmas in July, does not really achieve this. It should be three days after the winter solstice, again approximately 25<sup>th</sup> June.

Although, as some critics say, the dating of Christmas was based on Christianising pagan festivals,

## **THE CHURCH YEAR**

### **ADVENT,**

We reflect upon themes related to the coming of Christ: His first coming, his coming into our lives and our looking forward to his second coming. We look at how we can prepare ourselves and how God prepared and prepares the way for His coming. We ask questions such as 'how can God, who is always present, already here, come into our lives?' Hence, we reflect upon how God is present in life, in human life, in the world. Present through all time.

### **CHRISTMAS**

At Christmas: the coming of Jesus; his birth, new beginnings, our birth, family; nurture and growth, personally, in Christ; God becomes human, the Word become flesh and dwelt among us. We continue the theme of the presence of God. We ask questions such as how can the eternal become finite? How did and does the birth of Jesus change our human nature? What does his birth mean for the whole of creation and all of human history? How do we grow in Christ?



Christmas is also a time to particularly reflect upon the part of the creed that speaks of Jesus true nature  
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God, begotten, not made,  
of one being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit  
and the virgin Mary  
and became truly human.



Christmas concludes with the celebration of the Epiphany which is the coming of the Wise men to worship Jesus (the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles).

## EPIPHANY

We reflect on ways that Christ is manifested in the world, in various religions and cultures, being mindful of how the wise men, through the intellectual culture of their society and aware of the expectations of the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah, were led to Christ.



The first Sunday after Epiphany celebrates **the baptism of Jesus**. This is a pivotal revelatory moment where after Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist, as Matthew describes ‘And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.’<sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The baptism of Jesus leads us to reflect upon our baptism and what his baptism teaches us about the way we experience the Holy Spirit. The season of Epiphany now concludes with **the Transfiguration of Jesus** and revealing to us the signs of a person fully indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

The Baptism and Transfiguration are given special focus as they not only help us to understand who Jesus is but they also show us something of the significance of our Baptism and who we are to become in Christ.

## LENT

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. For many Christians around the world, it is preceded by Shrove Tuesday. A day to party and let go of the past before beginning the Lenten journey.

In Lent, we seek to imitate Jesus fasting in the desert for forty days and nights. The themes of Lent are Jesus' death and resurrection; our life in Christ and we explore the mystery of our Baptism. What it means for us to die with Christ in order to rise to new life with him.



## HOLY WEEK

In Holy Week these themes receive sharper focus as we remember the last week of Jesus life; the events leading up to and including his death and resurrection. Of central importance is Maundy Thursday, when we remember and celebrate Jesus celebrating the Passover, possibly a day early, with his disciples and instituting the 'Lord's Supper', Holy Communion, the Eucharist or the Mass.

**Good Friday** honouring and reflecting upon Jesus' Crucifixion.

**Easter Saturday:** a central, yet not well recognised day in some faith traditions, remembering that after his death, Jesus descended to the world of the dead, freeing all who had died in the flood, all the imprisoned spirits, all who had died including Adam and Eve. (1 Peter 3: 18-22, 4:6)

## EASTERTIDE

Beginning with Easter Day and the disciples finding the empty tomb, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and we remember how Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days after his resurrection before ascending into heaven. We reflect upon his resurrection appearances as to



what they reveal to us and about death, eternal life and, in terms of our themes of presence, how Jesus is present with us now as our Risen Lord.

John's account, in describing three of Jesus' resurrection appearances, gives emphasis to

the future role of the disciples in continuing Jesus' ministry. Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit upon them and saying 'As the Father sent me, so I send you'.

**Ascension Day:** We remember how Jesus ascended into heaven. In many ways it is a climax of many of the themes that we began with advent and leads us into **Pentecost** where we celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit, the beginning of the church and reflect upon the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in human life.



*The Ascension*



*Pentecost*



*Icon of the Blessed Trinity*

**Trinity Sunday:** Sums the Christian revelation up as we celebrate the fact that God has been revealed to us as one God three persons: Father, Son (Word) and Holy Spirit. We seek to explore the importance of this revelation and what it means for us. In our own culture, we are being asked to look at why most of the language that we use about God is male.

## **SUNDAYS AFTER PENTECOST**

In the current lectionary, Trinity Sunday, is the first Sunday after Pentecost. In the book of common prayer these Sundays were called the Sundays after Trinity and in the 1977 Prayer Book, Ordinary Sundays. By calling these Sundays, the Sundays after Pentecost, emphasis is given to the centrality of

the church and each of us, living life empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. In these Sundays, we listen to Jesus' teaching and learn from the various things that he did, including the many miracles that he performed. They also help us to focus on living our Christian life in the world.

## **SAINTS DAYS**



The year is punctuated with various Saints Days, Mary and the Apostles being the most significant of these. These days give the Christian story a human face by helping us to see how Christ has affected the lives of other Christians as well as reminding us of the communion of Saints; that oneness that we share with all that have gone before us in the faith and the part that they still can play in our lives. As a part of this we also need to include testimony and witness where we hear how God has affected the lives of people today including members of our own congregation. All Saints and All Souls Days are the climax of these days. All Saints remembering and honouring all the Saints of God both known and unknown to us. All Souls, although not in the traditional understanding of the day, a time of prayer for all who have died.

## **CHRIST THE KING**

The Church Year concludes with Christ the King where we reflect upon God's ultimate purpose for creation, the coming of God's kingdom and how all things are to be brought under Christ.

All these themes we look at in terms of 'as it was, as it is now and as it will be'. Past present and future.

