

# The Seasons of the Church's Liturgical Year

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## **Advent**

The church begins its new year with Advent Sunday, the first Sunday of the Advent season. Advent Sunday is four Sundays before Christmas.

Advent is above all a time of joyful anticipation. The word "Advent" means "coming." It has a threefold meaning for Christians today: the coming of the Lord in human form at Christmas, the coming of the Lord in Word and Spirit, and the coming of the Lord in glory at the end of the age. It is, therefore, a time when the church looks back at the historical event of Christ's nativity, looks around at the revelation of Christ in scripture and experience, and looks ahead to Christ's return at the end of time. It is still thought of as a time of personal introspection and preparation. During Advent, emphasis is placed on the reading of Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah.

The lighting of an Advent wreath is a familiar custom during this season in churches and in homes. A wreath is formed, usually of evergreen branches, and adorned with four purple. A single white candle sits in the middle of the wreath. On each Sunday in Advent a new purple candle is lit until, at last, all four candles are burning. On Christmas Day the white candle is lit to proclaim that the Light of the World has come. The traditional liturgical color for Advent is purple (violet).

## **Christmas**

Christmas is a season that begins on Christmas Day and lasts for 12 days, until January 5, the eve of Epiphany (known in England as "Twelfth Night"). The word "Christmas" is a contraction of "Christ Mass," the name given to the worship service for the day. Christmas is a season of great joy and is marked by reading the story of Jesus' birth, singing Christmas carols and songs, and by giving gifts after the pattern of God's greatest gift to us - Jesus.

December 26 is the Feast of St. Stephen. Stephen was one of the church's first deacons, appointed to help feed the widows and the poor among the church's fellowship. He was also the first believer to be martyred for his faith, reminding us that the baby in the manger may call us to make the ultimate sacrifice. The liturgical color for the Christmas season is white.

## **Epiphany**

The Epiphany season, which begins on Epiphany Day, January 6, varies in length depending on the date set for Easter. It lasts until Ash Wednesday, forty days before Easter Day.

"Epiphany" means "to be made manifest," and Epiphany observances emphasize the manifestation of Jesus as "Light to the Gentiles" and the "Glory of Israel" to Simeon when Jesus was presented at the temple, the manifestation of Jesus as God's beloved Son at His baptism, and the manifestation of Jesus to the whole world as represented by the Wise Men of the East. The liturgical color for the Epiphany season is white.

## **Lent**

Lent is a season lasting forty days which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the eve of Easter, including Holy Week, the last week of the season. The six Sundays during Lent are exempted, which means that Lent is observed for a total of forty days. Sundays are not included in Lent because worship services on the Lord's Day are always a celebration of the Resurrection, and the Lenten observance must be set aside for such a joyful day.

The word "Lent" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencfen*, which means "springtide" (the time of year when days begin to lengthen). Forty days recalls the 40-day trial of Jesus in the wilderness (e.g. Luke 4:1-13).

The last Sunday of Lent is Palm Sunday, when Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem is commemorated. Churches may be decorated with palm leaves, or worshipers may carry them in to the service as a reminder of the palm branches that were strewn before Jesus as he rode into the city. Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, which is given to meditation on the events of Jesus' last week before His crucifixion.

Thursday of Holy Week is called Maundy Thursday. "Maundy" probably comes from the Latin word "mandatum," which means "commandment." The reference is to Jesus' command that his disciples wash one another's feet. Maundy Thursday is a commemoration of the Last Supper Jesus celebrated with His disciples the night he was betrayed. It is usually celebrated with Holy Communion.

Friday of Holy Week is called Good Friday ("Good Friday" is probably a variant of "God's Friday," the same way we say "good-bye" today instead of "God be with ye"). Good Friday is an observance of Jesus' crucifixion. It is a somber day of reflection and repentance, and some churches remove flowers and all decorative elements from the sanctuary to reflect the mood.

Saturday of Holy Week is sometimes called Holy Saturday, and is characterized by watchfulness and preparation. The liturgical color for Lent is purple (violet). On Good Friday, red (for the blood of sacrifice) is substituted.

## **Easter**

The Easter season begins on Easter Sunday and continues for fifty days until Pentecost and includes the Feast of the Ascension. Easter Sunday is the most joyful day of the Christian year. Though every Sunday is considered to be a "little Easter," Easter Sunday itself is the day of days on which Christ's Resurrection is celebrated. It is the oldest of

Christian festival days. In some churches, Easter is celebrated with baptism or renewal of baptismal vows. In liturgical worship, the joyful "Alleluia" returns to the service order after having been omitted for the duration of Lent. Easter was originally called "Pascha" after the Hebrew word ("Pesach") meaning "Passover," and much of Christendom still uses this term. The word "Easter," on the other hand, is derived from ancient names for the month of April in which Easter often falls. The date of Easter, which determines much of the rest of the church calendar, is fixed according to the Paschal Calendar developed by Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk, in 527. Essentially, Easter falls on the first Sunday following the first full moon falling on or after the first day of spring (March 21). Fixing Easter in such a manner causes it to fall at the same time as the Jewish Passover, since the first Easter coincided with that feast.

Ascension Day falls on a Thursday, 40 days after Easter, but it is often celebrated in worship on the following Sunday. Ascension Day commemorates the bodily return of Jesus to heaven (recorded in Mark, Luke and Acts) where he now reigns at the right hand of the Father. It was likely at or near the time of his ascension that Jesus gave the "Great Commission" to his disciples. It is also associated with his promise to empower them and to be eternally present with them. Properly observed, the Feast of the Ascension sets up a keen sense of anticipation for the next great event in the Christian calendar - Pentecost. The liturgical color for the Easter season is white.

### Pentecost/Trinity

Pentecost, which means "fiftieth day," is the beginning of the longest season of the church year. It lasts until the first Sunday in Advent. In some churches, Pentecost is known as Whitsunday, after the white robes once worn by candidates for baptism on that day.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples while they were gathered in Jerusalem, and they were empowered to preach to people from every nation who had come to Jerusalem for the feast. The Acts of the Apostles records that about 3,000 were added to their number that day. Christians since have considered this event to be the founding of the church.

The Sunday after Pentecost is known as Trinity Sunday, and is notable for being the only major Christian festival that celebrates a doctrine of the church rather than an event in its sacred history. The belief that we worship one God in three Persons is a distinctive of the Christian faith, but the early church was plagued by contrary views.

The last Sunday of the Christian year is called the Feast of Christ the King. It can occur on any date from November 20 to November 26. A relatively modern festival (it was introduced in 1925), Christ the King provides an opportunity at the end of the liturgical year for the church to proclaim and celebrate the eternal reign of Christ over all creation. It is also an occasion for every disciple to ponder and affirm the Lordship of Jesus in his or her own life. The liturgical color for Pentecost is red. The liturgical color for the Sundays after Pentecost is green.

## Colours Used in Liturgical Worship



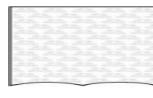
Green is the colour of plant life and growth, especially in spring. It is used to represent the triumph of life over death. Green is the liturgical colour for the Sundays after Pentecost, the time when we seek to Grow with God.



Purple (Violent) is the colour for preparation, penitence and mourning. It is also the colour of royalty. Purple highlights the liturgical times of preparation and penitence (or the time of waiting for our King) Advent (four weeks prior to Christmas) and Lent (six weeks prior to Easter).



Red is the colour of blood, and so is used as the colour for the commemoration of martyred saints. It is also the colour of fire and is used for the festival of Pentecost (when we remember the Holy Spirit coming as fire).



White/Silver is a symbol of purity, innocence and holiness. It is the colour for Christmas, Easter and Saints days.



Yellow /Gold represents divinity and so can commemorate the coming of the King (Christmas) or the rise of Christ as King (Easter). Some churches use White for these celebrations.