

## What is the Christian Year?

Everybody knows about Christmas. In America today, almost everybody, Christian or not, *keeps* Christmas in one way or another. But not everyone realizes that **Christmas, for Christians, is just one part of a year-long cycle presenting the whole range of the Christian story.** And Christmas, though important, is not even the greatest event in this cycle: that honor goes to Easter.

The Christian Year, as it is observed today, has developed over the centuries. The first Christians observed the weekly feast of Sunday, the Lord's Day, in honor of the Resurrection of Christ. As long as most Christians were of Jewish background, they also kept the Passover and other Jewish observances. But gradually they developed their own series of special commemorations, first Easter and the events associated with it, and later Christmas and the festivals of saints.

The calendar we know today, as found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, creates a drama of Christian teaching spread out over the entire year. It enables the Christian community to remember its whole history with thanksgiving. It also provides a healthy alternation of feasts, fasts, and ordinary times: Easter needs Lent before it. It is a wonderful "visual aid" and teaching device, for children, for

new converts, and for mature Christians as well.

### Advent, Christmas, Epiphany

The Church Year begins four weeks before Christmas with the season of **Advent**. The theme is the Coming of Christ, both his coming into the world in human flesh at Christmas, and his Second Coming at the end of time. The readings from the prophets, especially Isaiah, that are used in this season foretell both of these comings and do not really distinguish between them. So the dominant theme is one of *waiting* and *preparation*. The readings, hymns, and dark blue or violet vestments, with no flowers or other church decorations, give Advent a somber tone.

Keeping Advent as a time of quiet, simplicity, and preparation is a rather counter-cultural thing to do, when our society begins Christmas in October. But it is valuable, both for one's own prayer life and as an act of witness. Juggling the demands of shopping, office parties, and friends' invitations against the desire to hold Christmas until Christmas is part of living in our pluralist world.

**Christmas**, of course, commemorates the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus' birth of Mary in Bethlehem. The date of December 25 has no real historical foundation, but the association with the winter solstice and the birth of light in darkness is probably deliberate. Christianity, here as elsewhere, uses and

baptizes natural symbols rather than denying them altogether. Now the greens, music, best white vestments, and party celebrations are appropriate ways to honor the birth of Christ, keeping the focus on Jesus as the "reason for the season." The very popular Christmas Eve "Midnight Mass" (sometimes at 8 or 10 p.m.) often attracts non-churchgoers, and is therefore a splendid opportunity to be sure that they hear the Gospel of the good news of God's love for the world. The "twelve days of Christmas" include the **Feast of the Holy Name** on January 1 and the **Epiphany** (*Tres Reyes* to the Spanish) on January 6. The Epiphany season, the "showing forth" of Christ, continues until Lent. The last Sunday before Lent may commemorate the Transfiguration of Christ, when his Godhead was shown forth before he began his last journey to Jerusalem.

### Lent and Easter

**Easter**, the celebration of Christ's Resurrection from the dead, is the center and crown of the Christian year. Its date is tied to the Jewish Passover and so to the moon, and it changes every year. But the natural symbolism is here too, because Easter is linked to the spring equinox and the new life of spring. (Of course the symbolism is backwards for those in the Southern Hemisphere.)

The season of **Lent** first developed as the final preparation for adult converts who were to be baptized at Easter, and later became of time of penitence and

preparation for all Christians. Its forty days begin with **Ash Wednesday** and the custom of marking the faithful with ashes, in token of mortality and penitence. (In some places the three Sundays *before* Lent, beginning with Septuagesima, are observed as a kind of advance preparation.)

Church services in Lent all have a note of penitence. Individuals exercise penitence, extra prayer, perhaps attendance at extra services or special programs, self-denial and self-discipline, including some form of fasting. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday especially are traditional times to fast. The "Stations of the Cross" are a popular Lenten devotion and a meditation on the events of Christ's suffering and death. Special services on Palm Sunday commemorate Christ's entry into Jerusalem; ecumenical street processions are becoming popular in some places. For the final days of Holy Week, the Prayer Book provides special and very dramatic liturgies. These commemorate the Last Supper and Christ's washing of the disciples' feet on Thursday, and on Friday his death on the cross.

**Easter**, the great Feast of the Resurrection, has long meant flowers, bright colors, white vestments, music, and festal services. In recent years the ancient Great Vigil has also been revived. This service, on the Saturday night or before dawn on Sunday, provides Old Testament readings linking Christ's victory to the

first Passover, a public celebration of Holy Baptism, and the first Easter Eucharist. Easter continues for fifty days until Pentecost, with the **Ascension** on the fortieth day (always a Thursday). The feast of **Pentecost** recalls the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and their commissioning as the Church. The following Sunday is dedicated to the Holy Trinity.

### **Pentecost / Trinity Season**

After the dramatic events of the Easter cycle, there follow the long, quiet weeks of the “green” season, the Sundays after Pentecost (or Trinity). In these weeks the lessons deal with Christ’s teachings, and we get on with the daily business of the Christian life. The final weeks of this season, in the fall, begin to sound the note of the Second Coming, and we look forward to beginning the cycle again with a new Advent. Today the Episcopal lectionary provides a three-year cycle of readings, both Old and New Testament, to expose the faithful to the fullness of Scripture.

### **Saints’ Days**

Just as we keep birthdays and family anniversaries, so Christians over the centuries have kept special days in honor of particular events or particular Christian heroes. Some of these are very widely observed, while others are much more local. A parish often makes a major

celebration of its patronal festival, with both a special Eucharist and a parish party. Keeping holy days during the week is another counter-cultural challenge in today’s world, and parishes use a variety of ways to do this.

One group of these holy days really belongs to the Christmas cycle. The **Annunciation** (March 25) recalls the Angel Gabriel’s message to Mary; the **Visitation** (May 31), Mary’s visit to Elizabeth and her singing of the *Magnificat*; and the **Presentation** (February 2), the offering of the infant Jesus in the temple by Mary and Joseph. The **Nativity of St. John Baptist** (June 24) also belongs with these feasts (for these, see Luke chapter 1).

The Prayer Book provides special services for the Apostles and other saints of the New Testament and for a few other occasions. The book called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* also provides for a considerable number of other Christian heroes, including some quite modern ones, like the Martyrs of New Guinea (1942) and Jonathan Daniels (Selma, 1965). St. Francis (October 4) is quite popular. The idea is not necessarily to observe them all, but to choose ones that fit in a particular congregation. This great variety is especially welcome in a parish that has a daily celebration of the Eucharist.

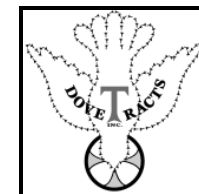
### **How can I pray by the Church Year?**

Following the cycle of the Church Year can be very enriching for an individual’s prayer life, as well as for the corporate worship of the parish. Left to myself, I can very easily get stuck in just one part of the Christian faith. The rhythm of the Church Year leads me through the full round of the Christian story, and keeps me in a balance of celebration and penitence, special occasion and ordinariness.

Many people use the readings appointed for feasts for their own Bible reading, and use the collect for the day in their own prayers. A number of other features fit well into individual and family life. The Advent wreath with its four candles serves as a reminder of the season in many homes. The old habit of “giving up something” for Lent is as much a reminder as anything else. Planning parties for festal seasons and feast days, and trying to avoid them in Advent and Lent, is quite appropriate. So is teaching a child to keep his “name day” as well as his birthday. All of these things keep us in the larger world of the whole Christian drama.

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timeless  
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