

THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Calendars by Canon I Collins, May 2002

Like a great deal of Christian practice the Liturgical year is something that has evolved over the years and is indeed still evolving. The first thing to note perhaps is that the Liturgical Year does not conform to the calendar year. That is, it does not go from January 1st to December 31st. At least, not quite.

The Liturgical Year begins, not unnaturally, with the birth of Jesus and goes through to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But even that statement is not the whole picture. The Liturgical year does not begin on Christmas Day and finish on Whitsunday. More of that later.

At first, most likely in the 2nd century, Easter was the only Christian Festival which was observed at all and it commemorated in a single feast both the death and the resurrection of Jesus - there was no Good Friday. And it is possible that Easter was then observed on the date of the Jewish Passover and not on a Sunday. The permanent transference of the date to a Sunday was a later development.

From the end of the 2nd century the observance of Easter was extended to cover a period of 50 days bringing it to the Jewish feast of Pentecost, but again it was not until later, in the 4th century, that any special emphasis was given to the 50th day itself. Then it was the practice to follow the chronology of St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles Chapter 2 and celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles on the day of Pentecost.

Ascension Day naturally emerged as a separate celebration also during the 4th century and this was set at the fortieth day after Easter.

Trinity Sunday did not emerge until much later - the 10th century. This was introduced in a sense to sum up the Liturgical year, commemorating the great saving acts of God in Jesus Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit. It was a celebration of the Trinity of Godhead. And it was the English Sarum calendar of the church which then numbered the following Sundays 'after Trinity' rather than 'after Pentecost'.

These then are the main Christian festivals as we know them today - Christmas, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday.

But that is still not the whole story. In the 4th century at Jerusalem it became the custom to re-enact the events of the last week of Jesus life on earth, with the whole Christian community visiting the sites of the events which had taken place there. So, on the Saturday before what later came to known as Palm Sunday there was a visit to Bethany where the account of the raising of Lazarus was read. On Palm Sunday they went to the Mount of Olives and then processed into the city carrying branches of palm. On the Tuesday evening there was a visit to the Mount of Olives commemorating Jesus's nightly withdrawal there. On Maundy Thursday the Last Supper was celebrated

and a vigil was held on the Mount of Olives. The Garden of Gethsemane was visited after midnight and then they all returned to the city on Good Friday for the reading of the Passion of Jesus and at the end of Good Friday they went to the site of the Holy Sepulchre where the account of the burial of Jesus was read. Many pilgrims came from overseas to this week of commemoration and took the idea back to their own countries. And so with considerable variation from place to place and with ever increasing elaboration in the Middle Ages, Holy Week became to be celebrated everywhere.

Lent took its origin from the final period of preparation for those who were to be baptized on Easter Day, which was usually six weeks. The same period became a time of penance for notorious sinners who had been excommunicated. They had ashes placed on their heads as a sign of mourning and penitence which stayed there until they had expressed penitence and repentance through fasting and works of charity and they were received back into the fold and readmitted to the Eucharist at Easter. Later it became the custom for the whole Christian community to take part in this period of penitence and fasting and it became associated with Jesus's 40 days fasting in the wilderness.

Advent possibly originated in Gaul in the 5th or 6th century as a period of preparation for Epiphany, when baptism was administered, and later Christmas. Its length varied from 3 weeks to 40 days but eventually it was fixed as the four Sundays before Christmas. Though influenced by Lent it was never accompanied with such strict fasting and penitence.

A note about Christmas and Epiphany. Unlike Easter these festivals did not emerge until the 4th century and only then as alternatives for one another. December 25th was observed in the west and January 6th in the east. Both were celebrations of the incarnation of Jesus, and included the birth, the baptism and the manifestation to the Gentiles. It is thought that the choice of date was a conscious attempt by the Church to counter the pagan celebration of the winter solstice. Now in the west December 25th is confined to the celebration of the birth of Christ. January 6th to the visit of the Wise Men, the Baptism of Christ, and his manifestation at the wedding at Cana.

The reformed churches tended to abolish the Liturgical Year, but the Church of England in the Prayer Book of 1559 retained the general pattern, but did away with much of the elaborate ceremonial of the middle ages. Since those days and particularly in recent years much of the traditional ceremonial relating to the Liturgical Year has been restored in the Church of England and has been formalised in such books as 'Lent, Holy Week & Easter and 'The Promise of His Glory' which set out the ritual and ceremonial for the periods of Lent and Easter and for the period from All Saints' Day to Candlemas (February 2nd).

Saints' Days

These began to be kept as early as the 2nd century when local martyrs were commemorated on the day of their martyrdom and at the place of their burial. Gradually others, other than the martyrs, were added to the calendars. So, in fact, the Biblical saints

were rather late in coming to be commemorated in the annual cycle. Like a great deal else, the number of saints being commemorated burgeoned in the middle ages until every day of the year had a saint attached to it and some days more than one.

The problem for the Church of England is that since the Reformation it has had no official mechanism for making saints - the process known in the Roman Catholic Church as 'canonization'. So it was not until the ASB Calendar of 1980 that some of the great figures of the Church of England since the Reformation were included in the calendar - such people as Nicholas Ferrar, Josephine Butler, George Herbert, Edward King, Thomas Crammer, John Keble, John & Charles Wesley, William Wilberforce, Lancelot Andrewes, William Tyndale, James Hannington. I believe in the new calendar being worked out for the next ASB even more names will appear.

Liturgical Colours

To assist with the marking of the various seasons of the Church's year different liturgical colours are used. These are seen principally in the altar frontals and the eucharistic vestments.

The use of different colours to denote the different times in the Liturgical Year is first found in the 12th century in the Augustinian Canons in Jerusalem, but is not until much more recent times that they have generally accepted in the western church. There are five colours generally used during the year: White, red, green, purple, black. Generally speaking white is used for festivals (Christmas, Easter); red is used on Whitsunday, feasts of apostles and of martyrs; green is used in period after Trinity Sunday until Advent and after Epiphany until Lent; purple is used in Lent and Advent (unless sackcloth array is used in Lent) and sometimes at funerals. Black can be used at funerals and requiem masses. There are some local variations from this norm.

See the following calendars

THE LITURGICAL YEAR: THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

CHRISTMAS DAY (December 25th)

THE SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

THE EPIPHANY (January 6th)

UP TO SIX SUNDAYS AFTER EPIPHANY

SEPTUAGESIMA

SEXAGESIMA

QUINTAGESIMA

ASH WEDNESDAY (date variable - depends on the date of Easter)

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT (Mothering Sunday)

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT (Passion Sunday)

HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY

Monday in Holy Week

Tuesday in Holy Week

Wednesday in Holy Week

Maundy Thursday

Good Friday

Easter Eve (Holy Saturday)

EASTER DAY (date variable)

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER (Rogation Sunday)

ASCENSION DAY (always the Thursday following Easter 5)

SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION

WHITSUNDAY

TRINITY SUNDAY

SUNDAYS AFTER TRINITY (up to 25)

THE SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE ADVENT

THE LITURGICAL YEAR: COMMON WORSHIP

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

CHRISTMAS DAY (December 25th)

THE (FIRST) SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

THE EPIPHANY

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY (The Baptism of Christ)
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY
THE FIFTH SUNDAY BEFORE LENT
THE FOURTH SUNDAY BEFORE LENT
THE THIRD SUNDAY BEFORE LENT
THE SECOND SUNDAY BEFORE LENT
THE SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE LENT

ASH WEDNESDAY (date variable, depending on the date of Easter)

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Mothering Sunday)
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (Passiontide begins)

HOLY WEEK

PALM SUNDAY
Monday of Holy Week
Tuesday of Holy Week
Wednesday of Holy Week
Maundy Thursday
Good Friday
Easter Eve

EASTER DAY (date variable)

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (Rogation Sunday)

ASCENSION DAY (always the Thursday following the Sixth Sunday of Easter)

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

PENTECOST

TRINITY SUNDAY
TWENTY-ONE SUNDAYS AFTER TRINITY
THE FOURTH SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT
THE THIRD SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT
THE SECOND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT
THE SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE ADVENT (Christ the King)