

THE SEASONS OF THE CHURCH AND THEIR MEANING

by Raymond Chapman

The Church has its own calendar, keeping certain seasons, and with special days of commemoration. This is a short guide to help in following the patterns of worship through the year

ADVENT

The Church's year does not begin in January, but on the Sunday nearest to the last day in November. This is the season of Advent, of preparing for the coming of our Lord Jesus at Christmas. It is solemn time – not meaning a sad one, but a time for thinking more deeply about the true meaning of Christmas. In our services we recall the centuries of waiting for the Messiah recorded in the Old Testament, and we think about the time when he will come again to judge the world, and also of the judgement which comes to each of us at the time of our death.

It may be hard to think of these things at one of the busiest times of the year, when preparation for Christmas presses upon us in our families, at work, in every shop, every newspaper. We need not be too hard on ourselves or our friends and forego all pleasures, but it is still possible to find some time for extra devotion, to make us more ready for the joy of Christmas.

A candle is lit on each of the Sundays in Advent, to show the light of Christ coming into the world, until it reaches its climax with the fifth candle at Christmas.

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40. 31).

CHRISTMAS

At Christmas we celebrate the nativity of Jesus, but it is not the anniversary of a birth. We do not know at what time of the year the great miracle happened. It is not a birthday, but it was a beginning. It was God taking our human nature, born to face all the experiences and troubles of a fully human life, yet keeping the divinity by which the death and resurrection of Jesus would be of our pardon and our salvation. It is a deep and wonderful mystery, made real for us through the birth of a baby, the tender love of a mother, the delighted wonder of simple men like the shepherds.

Christmas is for many people an occasion for a midwinter holiday, for pleasant indulgence, family gatherings, a happy time for the children. This is not its true meaning in the Christian faith, but they are good things if we see them as among God's gifts to us. Christmas is not complete unless it includes an act of worship, a thanksgiving for the greatest of all possible presents when Jesus Christ came into this world.

There will be many services in the church at this time, something for everyone, individually or in families. They all express praise and rejoicing, through the familiar hymns of the season, the crib which represents the Bethlehem stable, and above all by again hearing and thinking about the Christmas story telling of the love of God in sending his Son. It is indeed a high time of the year, for those who will receive it as little children.

*Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.
(Luke 2. 11)*

EPIPHANY

The end of the Christmas festivities, when the dusty decorations are taken down and the dry needles are swept up where the Christmas tree stood. A reluctant return to the routine of work in a cold month, with half the winter still to come. A time to pick up the bills and worry about the abused digestion.

So it seems to many people but our pattern of worship has rediscovered the celebration of the Incarnation for a longer time,. Forty days from Christmas to the Feast of the Presentation, forty days to make a pattern of faith with the forty days of Lent and the forty days of Easter. The Epiphany season is a time of continuing glory, when the light that shone around the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem is shown in the wonderful life which began that night. Epiphany means a showing forth, a revelation and we follow the life of Jesus through his baptism, his first miracle at Cana, the calling of his disciples and the beginning of his ministry. Light shines in a cold season and the people of God sing his praises and worship him in the beauty of holiness.

We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father. (John 1. 14)

LENT

After the forty days of Christmas and Epiphany we have the forty days of Lent, a reflection of the forty days when Jesus fasted and suffered temptation in the wilderness.. It begins on Ash Wednesday when we receive the ashes on our foreheads to mark our repentance and remind us of our mortality. This is the season when we think of the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our salvation, and feel the contrast between his love and our own weakness. It is a time to be sorry for our sins, for the wrongs we have done, the good which we have not done and our general failure to live in a way which shows our gratitude for all God's mercies to us. We are not doubting the reality of that mercy and of God's complete pardon whenever we repent of our sins, but it is good to make this special yearly effort.

It is customary to strengthen and prove our feelings of repentance by a rule of life in which some pleasure or indulgence, harmless in itself, is set aside. Even a small abstinence is an act of the will which can help us on our way. More important is an attempt to deepen our devotion, perhaps to add something to our regular prayers and to attend some extra services.

The last two weeks of Lent are Passiontide, when our thoughts and prayers move closer to Good Friday, the day when Jesus died on the cross.

In the church this season is marked by the removal of flowers, and some changes in the pattern of worship. On Good Friday all ornaments and hangings are removed and the church is left bare to signify the complete sacrifice of his death.

To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him. (Daniel 9.9)

EASTER

Easter is the crown of the Christian year, when we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. His victory over death brought new hope to the world and the promise of eternal life for all who believe and trust in him.

The signs of resurrection are all around us. In the yearly renewal of nature, in recovery from illness, in reconciliation after estrangement, in the knowledge of God's pardon, in all new hopes and fresh starts, its power is there. These are meaningful for us because they draw their power from the one great moment, the centre of history when Christ rose again.

As we pray in adoration, in penitence, in thanksgiving, in petition and intercession, our prayers are gathered up in the Resurrection faith. For the Christian every day is Resurrection day, but at Easter above all times we have pure rejoicing. Do we always come to our worship with equal joy and assurance?

This is a time of triumph: not the old triumphalism which sometimes asserted power and claimed authority above compassion, but the triumph of the Empty Tomb. Christianity is a triumphant faith, the triumph of joy over sorrow, life over death, the conquest of sin.

The church is decorated again, our worship is full of joy, our readings and hymns celebrate the Resurrection.

With all Christian people, we greet the greatest of the good news: Christ is risen, Alleluia. He is risen indeed, Alleluia, alleluia

Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. (1 Corinthians 15. 20)

ASCENSION

Forty days after Easter, a Thursday in our modern calendar, is Ascension Day. After being with his disciples in his risen body and teaching them many things which they needed for the beginning of the Church entrusted to them, he went back to the heaven from which he had come to be born as a human baby. The Bible tells of his

being taken up from a hill near Jerusalem. The special joy of this day is the knowledge that he has lifted up our human nature into the presence of God and that our lives and our worship here on earth are for ever upheld by the power of his death and Resurrection

I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. (John 20. 17)

PENTECOST

Fifty days after the Resurrection, the Holy Spirit came to the Apostles, touching each of them with tongues of fire.

This is sometimes seen as the 'birthday of the Church'.. The Holy Spirit is a gift to the Church, to uphold and inspire her for ever until the final fulfilment of God's purpose. We call on the power of the Holy Spirit in the blessing of baptism and in the wonderful celebration of the Eucharist..

The Holy Spirit is also a gift to the world, which is a good world, God's world, though damaged by human sin. The power given to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost to speak in many tongues shows that that divine grace is not confined to one nation or race. The Holy Spirit is at work in the world, often silently and unknown, but mighty in power.

The Holy Spirit is also a gift to the individual who will receive the gift in faith and love. The mystical union of God and humanity, restored by the redemption brought by Christ, means that we live in the Spirit and the Spirit lives in us. There is no need to seek for special gifts or great signs. The power of the Holy Spirit appears in quiet lives, in the acceptance of the routine prescribed for us, as much as in any spectacular events in the history of the Church.

The Holy Spirit is from the beginning, in the Church, in the world and in the individual soul, sustaining through time and leading God's people towards the coming of his Kingdom.

Hereby we know that we dwell in him, and he is us, because he has given us of his Spirit. (John 4. 13)

TRINITY SUNDAY

On the Sunday after Pentecost we praise the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the greatest of Christian mysteries, which many have tried to explain by analogies but which we can never fully understand in this world. It is enough to know that it has been the distinctive belief of Christians through the centuries. It is a defence against the corruption of faith and the errors of those who claim new revelations previously unknown to the Church. It is associated with highest praise and adoration, acknowledgement of the divine majesty, greatness and power. The

word 'glory' best expresses our worship, and gives us joy which stays with us through the long season following this day.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. (Revelation 4. 8)

TRINITY SEASON

The Sundays between Trinity Sunday and Advent are 'Sundays after Trinity'. The period is sometimes called 'Ordinary Time' which may at first suggest something not very important or interesting, a dull season with no character of its own, but this is far from being the case. We have followed the life of Christ on earth from his birth to his Ascension, and now Ordinary Time reminds us that we cannot live for ever on the heights. The work of God in this world is done mainly through faithful obedience in daily life, in the routine of work and recreation, of family and strangers, upheld by the times of shared worship and private prayer.

God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. (2 Corinthians 5. 19)

FESTIVALS

There are two cycles of worship in the Christian year. The seasons already described follow the life of Jesus on earth from Advent to Pentecost, and then keep Ordinary Time for the rest of the year. This is the scheme followed in Sunday worship week by week, but there is also the cycle which commemorates the same calendar dates every year as Festivals. The services on these days honour the Apostles and other people of the New Testament, or recall particular events like the Annunciation and the Transfiguration. Yearly worship thus has a double rhythm, the two systems continually working together.

On the saints' days we praise God for the grace which gives such power to ordinary people who are chosen to do his work. We reflect on the particular gifts granted to them, as for example, St Andrew is associated with missions, St Luke with doctors and the work of healing. The fact that we are commemorating real human beings, who often made mistakes and went astray in their lives, is a continual source of encouragement for ordinary, very fallible, Christians.

The spirit of the Festivals is one of rejoicing, though many of those whom we are remembering suffered grievously for their faith, even to the martyr's death. The triumph of their faith is the triumph of God who brings good out of evil, joy out of suffering, life out of death. These are holy days – the origin of the holiday – and they can still touch with their holiness the daily life which we must follow between Sunday and Sunday.

This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118. 24)

NOTE ON COLOURS

It is an ancient custom of the Church to mark the season and festivals by using colours for the vestments and for the hanging in front of the altar. There are many possible choices, but at St Mary's we use four colours.

White is used at times of particular joy and praise. It is the colour for the Christmas and Easter seasons; for great Gospel commemorations like the Annunciation; and the Transfiguration; on Trinity Sunday; for weddings and baptisms.

Purple is the colour of repentance, for recognising the frailty of our human nature. It is worn during Advent and Lent; often for funerals, although white may be chosen as a sign of praise for the gift of eternal life.

Red commemorates the martyrs who shed their blood and died for their faith. It is also the colour for Pentecost, when the power of the Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire.

Green is the colour between Trinity Sunday and Advent. It is the colour of nature, of the world created and sustained by God, a reminder that the environment which we too often take for granted is itself holy. It is a gentle, restful colour which helps us to feel the calm assurance of the love that is all around us.