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From earliest times the Church has gathered on Sundays to celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ. Over time an annual cycle of Christian memory-making has also developed, which allows us to remember his life, death, and resurrection; to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit; and to recall the ministry of the holy people who have spread the Christian faith over the centuries.

Through the structuring of our Christian memory, the past is able to come into our present.

The liturgical or Church year is divided into several seasons. It begins with Advent, which looks forward to Christmas. The visit of the wise men to Jesus is remembered at Epiphany, after which there is a period of 'ordinary time'. The six weeks of Lent prepare us for Easter, which celebrates Jesus's resurrection, leading forward to his Ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost. 'Ordinary time' then resumes until the end of the year.

So-called 'ordinary time' is hardly boring. It allows for more continuous reading from the Bible, for the exploration of other themes such as creation and the environment, and for creative responses to saints' days.

You may see different things in church depending on the liturgical season, some of which are described below.

## Advent

**The season of Advent marks the start of the Christian year. It is a season of expectation and preparation as the Church looks forward to celebrating the birth of Christ.**

Although it is a season of preparation, the characteristic note of Advent is expectation rather than penitence. Commercial pressure has made it harder to keep a sense of alert watchfulness in our anticipation of Christmas but, for many Christians, our preparation for the coming of Christ is a powerful reminder of the real meaning of the coming season.

In England, Advent falls at the darkest time of the year, and the natural symbols of darkness and light are powerfully at work. Many churches use an 'Advent wreath' of candles to mark the Sundays of Advent, lighting a new candle each week. In the Church of England the focus is on the patriarchs and prophets who predict humanity's salvation, then on John the Baptist, then finally on Mary as she prepares to give birth to the Saviour.

## Christmas

**The celebration of Christ's coming among us at Christmas (known as the 'Incarnation') is one of the two poles of the Christian year,** along with the story of Christ's death and resurrection. Christmas is much more than the celebration of Jesus's birth: it reminds us of the central truth that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1.14), fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah (7.14) that 'a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son.'

One of the challenges for Christians is to continue the celebration of Christmas long after the rest of the world turns its attention elsewhere. Historically, Christmas would have extended at least until the Epiphany (i.e. twelve days).

## Epiphany

**The Feast of the Epiphany, which always falls on 6 January, marks the beginning of a season which recognizes Jesus to be the Son of God.**

The word 'epiphany' means 'manifestation' or 'appearance', and the Feast of the Epiphany marks the recognition of the newborn Jesus by the world. Later, the Church remembers the Baptism of Christ by John, when a voice from heaven declares Jesus to be God's beloved Son. Finally, on 2 February, the season of Epiphany ends with the Feast of the Presentation. Jesus is brought to the Temple by his parents according to the law of Israel. There, he is recognized by Simeon, who declares him to be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel.' The traditional service for this feast includes a procession of candles, and so it is often known as Candlemas.

# Lent

**Ash Wednesday marks the start of the observation of Lent, a season of self-examination, penitence, self-denial, study, and preparation for Easter.** Lent is often described as lasting forty days (excluding Sundays) which recalls the Biblical account of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4.1-13).

Ashes are an ancient sign of penitence. From the Middle Ages onward it has been a custom to begin Lent by having the sign of the cross marked on one's forehead in ash. Lent is a time of preparation, particularly for those who are to be baptized at Easter, but the whole Christian community is encouraged to join them in study and self-reflection.

As Holy Week approaches, the atmosphere of the season darkens. Bible readings begin to anticipate the story of Christ's suffering and death. Holy Week begins with the re-enactment of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This is the beginning of a journey of the imagination which takes us to the Upper Room for the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, through Jesus' betrayal, trial and crucifixion on Good Friday.

In the Vigil on the night before Easter Day, the Church gathers to commemorate the mighty works of God through reading of scripture in preparation for the proclaiming of Christ's resurrection.

# Easter

Easter Day commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In the Church today, it provides a real experience of new life, as people are baptized and baptismal promises are renewed. Those who are baptized are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Traditionally, new fire is kindled and from this the Easter candle is lit and held aloft with the proclamation: 'The light of Christ.' This passing from darkness to light offers hope to all the faithful.

Since the late fourth century, on the fortieth day of Easter the Church celebrates Christ's ascension to heaven. This marks the end of his earthly ministry and the **Feast of the Ascension** is therefore closely connected with the theme of mission.

The season of Easter is celebrated for fifty days, culminating in the **Day of Pentecost**.

Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus's final words to his disciples, that they should go to all nations and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28.19-20). In John's Gospel, Jesus instructed his followers to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 14.15-17). The feast of Pentecost celebrates the account of the Holy Spirit coming on the disciples empowering them for mission (Acts 2.1-47). Ascension and Pentecost are closely linked. The Church is now to be the new body of Christ, filled with his life through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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