

Christian Festivals

Advent Sunday



Advent Sunday is the start of the Christian year and, in the Western churches, is four Sundays before Christmas. The Advent season continues until Christmas.

The word advent means coming and during the Advent season the main theme is preparing for the coming of Jesus the Christ: preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus and preparing for the coming of Christ in our lives. Advent Sunday is marked in some churches by the lighting of the first of five candles, the final one being lit on Christmas Day representing Christ as the light of the world.

All Saints' Day – 1 November



The early followers of Jesus were called saints or 'holy ones'. Later in the first century, a Saint (with a capital S) was a great man or woman of the past who was formally recognised by the church as having lived a virtuous life of faith and who can be an inspiration to people today.

All Saints' Day is a festival on 1st November when many western Christian Churches honour and give thanks for both known and unknown Saints/saints. It used to be known as All Hallows Day (Hallows meaning a saint) and the feast day started the previous evening, the Eve of All Hallows or Hallowe'en. Many churches now move the festival to the nearest Sunday.

Ascension Day



Ascension Day mark the belief that Christ ascended to heaven after he was resurrected on Easter Day. It is normally celebrated 40 days after Easter following the Biblical accounts in the Gospel of Luke and in his Acts of the Apostles. Roman Catholics in England now celebrate it on the following Sunday.

The significance of the Ascension of Christ is twofold:

1. It is seen to mark the end of the earthly appearances of the risen Christ before the disciples received Christ's Spirit at Pentecost.
2. It is regarded as a spiritual 'ascending' and return of the 'cosmic' Christ to God, with whom, it is believed, he was 'before' time.

Ascension Day belongs to the Easter celebrations and may be losing popularity among faithful Christians because it is not seen to have a direct consequence in their lives in comparison to the Easter resurrection theme of new life and the Pentecost theme of God's Presence / Spirit.

Some Christians regard the Ascension of Christ as a theological statement rather than a simple 'event' (hence the single quotation marks in the second statement above).

Christmas Day - 25 December (Western Christians)



The 25th of December is the time when Western Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus who Christians believe to be both the Messiah (or in Greek: the Christ) and son of God (that is, divine). Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate the birth on the 7th January.

Jesus' birth or 'nativity' is described in the Bible, in the New Testament Gospels of Matthew and Luke. There is disagreement among Christians about the status of the accounts, some regarding them as describing theological truths but not historical ones. The Gospels do not mention the date of Jesus' birth which was set by Pope Julius in the 4th century CE in order to Christianise the Pagan celebrations that took place at that time of year.

The story of the nativity was taught through traditions of plays and also models of the manger, or crib, that Luke's Gospel states that the Jesus was born in. Today the Christmas festival has elements of Christian, Pagan and folk traditions and many Christians and non-Christians have concerns about its over-commercialisation.

Easter Day



Easter Day or Easter Sunday commemorates the resurrection of Jesus as the Christ (God's Anointed) after his death the Friday before (see Good Friday). His disciples began to experience Christ to be with them in a new way. Easter eggs are given which symbolise the new life which Christians experience and see at the heart of God's world.

Epiphany - 6 January



Epiphany is a Greek word meaning 'to show' and also marks the end of the 12 days of Christmas in Western Christian churches. The feast of the Epiphany celebrates the showing of Jesus to the non-Jewish world (or Gentiles), represented by the visit of the Magi (possibly wise men, astrologers or Persian priests) to Jesus as recorded in the gospel of Matthew (ch2 vv1-12). Matthew records that they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh and so it is assumed that there were three Magi.

The gifts have been regarded as symbolic of the nature of Jesus: gold for a king, frankincense (offered to God during worship) for a priest or even God, and myrrh (used for healing and embalming the dead) for the death of Jesus which brings healing or wholeness to humankind.

The Epiphany or the Epiphany Season (lasting for at least the whole of January) is also associated with the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan and the story, told by the writer of John's gospel, of the wedding at Cana in Galilee in which Jesus turns water into wine. Both are seen by Christians as a showing or revealing of the nature and work of Jesus. In particular, the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee may be seen as a revealing of Jesus as the one who turns our selfish nature (water) into a loving, or divine, nature (wine).

Good Friday



The most important events in Christianity are the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Easter Day) who Christians believe to be the Son of God and whose life and teachings are the foundation of Christianity. Good Friday commemorates the death of Jesus by crucifixion and is called 'Good' because of Jesus' example of sacrificial love by giving his life for the healing of the world. Christians meditate on Jesus' suffering and death and sometimes hold processions and / or re-enactments of the crucifixion.

Lent and Ash Wednesday



Lent is a time when Christians prepare for Easter by focusing more on prayer and spiritual studies, and occasionally by going without food (fasting). Lent lasts 40 days, a significant number in Jewish-Christian scriptures and is the period which the Gospels record that Jesus spent fasting at the start of his ministry.

For Western Churches, Lent starts on the 7th Wednesday before Easter Day, called Ash Wednesday, as the 40 days before Easter do not include Sundays. Eastern churches include Sundays and start Lent on the Monday of the 7th week before Easter and end it on the Friday 9 days before Easter.

On Ash Wednesday some churches hold services where Christians are invited to be marked with a cross of ash to show their desire to lead better lives.

Mothering Sunday



Mothering Sunday is the fourth Sunday of the Christian period of Lent and is very different from the American Festival of Mothers' Day. Centuries ago, once a year, people returned to their home or 'mother' church. It became an occasion for family reunions when children who were working away, often as domestic servants, returned home. They would take gifts to their mothers, including a simnel cake, a type of fruit cake with marzipan. Mothering Sunday was also known as Refreshment Sunday because the fasting rules for Lent were relaxed that day. The day has now become secularised and is popularly known as Mother's Day when children give cards, presents and flowers to their mothers.

Pentecost or Whit Sunday



In the Christian calendar, Pentecost is the festival celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's presence and inspiration in the lives of people today. It celebrates the anniversary of the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' disciples at the time of the Jewish festival Shavuot and falls on the Sunday 50 days after Easter.

St Luke wrote in the Acts of the Apostles (in the Bible's New Testament) that the disciples experienced the Holy Spirit like fire and a strong wind, and afterwards felt bold enough to tell others about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The festival is, therefore, seen as the birthday of the Christian church. The festival has been called Whit Sunday (White Sunday) because it used to be one of the main Sundays when baptisms took place and those baptised would be dressed in white.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 18-25 January



The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an international Christian ecumenical observance first celebrated in 1908. It actually lasts eight days (an octave) and Christians in the southern hemisphere usually observe it around Pentecost.

Each year the theme for the week is developed by one country which produces outline material that is adapted for use in other parts of the world. The theme for 2009 was 'Reconcile Your People' and Korea was the selected country. They chose the key Biblical text Ezekiel 37.15-28: God spoke to the prophet Ezekiel and said "they shall be one in my hand...They will be my people and I shall be their God".