

Secular Guide to Liturgical Year Explained



Find out more about the Christian calendar, how the seasonal year is split into arrangements and what that looks like within the Cathedral.

The seven seasons of the Christian calendar

Early in its history, the Church divided the year into liturgical seasons based on the life and ministry of Jesus. In short they are:

1. Advent, starting four weeks before Christmas, tells of the coming (or advent) of Jesus. It begins with the first Sunday in December.
2. Christmas tells of his birth.
3. Epiphany starts with the Manifestation to the Gentiles – when three wise men from the Orient came to see the baby Jesus – and proceeds through key moments in Jesus' life.
4. The 40 days of Lent calling to mind the Hebrews' 40 years of wilderness wandering, and Jesus's 40 days of testing in the wilderness – are a time of repentance, fasting and preparation for baptism.
5. Lent leads up to Holy Week and the death of Jesus.
6. Easter tells of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, his appearance to certain disciples, and his ascension to God.
7. The season of Pentecost begins with the Day of Pentecost (concerning the gift of the Holy Spirit). Trinity season begins on Trinity Sunday which is the Sunday after Pentecost and takes you through to the beginning of Advent.



- Each liturgical season is grounded in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life. Old Testament readings or passages from the Epistles are read in worship, as well as Gospels for the day. This season is used to teach congregations about scripture and the faith.
- In liturgical churches like the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican, each season has certain special days, special music and special ways of preparing the worship space.

Events in more detail

There are two significant events which all Christian traditions commemorate every year: Christmas and Easter.

There are also several other points in the year which are marked by some churches but not others. These may be longer periods, for example, the six weeks of Lent before Easter or the four weeks of Advent before Christmas. They can also be single days such as Pentecost or Ascension Day.

In some churches almost every day of the year is assigned to remember the life of a **saint or significant figure**. 'Saints' are people acknowledged as holy or virtuous and regarded in Christian faith as being in heaven after death, they have been credited with miraculous events. Many are martyrs who were killed for their faith. Some of these saints' days are well-known. These include St David's on 1 March; St Patrick's (17 March); St George's (23 April) and St Andrew's (30 November).

Advent and Christmas - November and December

In western churches, Christmas Day always falls on 25 December. In the eastern, Orthodox Church it is celebrated in early January. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ around 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. Advent is seen as a time of preparation, looking back to Christ's birth and looking forward to his second coming. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day - so it can fall any time between 27 November and 3 December. In the Anglican Church, Advent is seen as the beginning of the church year. Some Christian traditions begin Advent slightly earlier.

Epiphany - January

This falls on 6 January (or 19 January in the Orthodox Church). It commemorates the visit by the Wise Men to the infant Jesus to give him gifts. Traditionally it is known as Twelfth Night, when people take down their Christmas decorations. It is also the date when some Christians mark the baptism of Jesus at, the age of about 30, in the River Jordan by John the Baptist.

Epiphany is particularly celebrated by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Lent, Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday - February/March/April

Lent is a period of about six weeks running up to Easter. It begins in February or March on Ash Wednesday - 40 days (excluding Sundays) before Easter Sunday. The exact dates vary because the date for Easter changes every year. Many Christians go to church on Ash Wednesday to seek forgiveness from God for what they have done wrong. Lent is a time of solemnity and self-reflection for Christians and many will fast from certain foods or activities. The day before Lent is traditionally marked by feasting and celebration. In the UK it is known as Shrove Tuesday or Pancake Day. In other parts of the world, it is called Mardi Gras. Alternatively, many will engage in activities or exercises to deepen their faith and understanding. Traditionally it is a time to use up things that would not last or would spoil during Lent. Eggs and milk were considered a luxury food and should not be wasted - hence making pancakes.

Holy Week and Easter - March or April

The date for Easter changes each year but always falls in March or April. The timing is linked to the phases of the moon and the Jewish festival of Passover. Easter commemorates the trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ in around 30AD and his resurrection, which is celebrated on Easter Sunday.

Holy Week marks the final week before Easter and begins on the previous Sunday:

Palm Sunday: the day Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on a donkey greeted by adoring crowds waving the branches of palm trees. (After Palm Sunday, some Christians will also mark other events described in the Bible which took place on the following days).

Maundy Thursday: thought to be the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest. He was taken by soldiers after celebrating the Jewish feast of Passover with his closest followers at a meal known as The Last Supper - this is celebrated with Holy Communion.

Good Friday: the day of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. Many churches mark the last hours of his life with a special, solemn service. The Gospel according to Mark records the time of Jesus' death as 3pm.

Easter Sunday: for many people the most significant date in the Christian calendar. This marks the day that Jesus rose from the dead. His followers discovered that his tomb was empty. He appeared to them and hundreds of other people over a period of six weeks.

Ascension Day - April or May

This falls on a Thursday in April or May. It is the 40th day after Easter Sunday. It commemorates the day when Jesus ascended back into heaven from the Mount of Olives which overlooks Jerusalem.

Pentecost (Whit Sunday) - May or June

This falls seven weeks after Easter Sunday and can be seen as the birth of the Christian church. It marks the day Jesus' closest followers had a supernatural experience of God in the form of the Holy Spirit in the form of wind and fire. This inspired and empowered them to preach about Jesus and miraculously heal people just as he had done.

Other festivals, feast days and holy days

Candlemas or The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple: Celebrated on or around 2 February. It marks the time when Jesus was taken to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem as an infant to be formally inducted into the Jewish faith.

The Annunciation: In the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. It is marked on 25 March and remembers the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary to announce that she would conceive and give birth to Jesus.

All Saints' Day commemorates the Christian belief that there is life after death. It is when Christians celebrate that all people who follow Jesus Christ and his teachings will be reunited in heaven after they die. On 1 November we think especially of those many thousands of people who have lived holy Christian lives and of people whose names are not known to us.

All Souls Day - 2 November: It is a time for some Christians, to remember and pray for deceased family members and friends.

Mothering Sunday: This falls on the fourth Sunday of Lent in March or April. Initially a day to celebrate the motherly nature of the Church, it is now an occasion to thank mothers and celebrate motherhood.

Trinity Sunday: It is the first Sunday after Pentecost and falls in May or June. It is the day when the church celebrates the 'Trinity' – the three persons of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Corpus Christi: This falls in late May or June on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. It celebrates the Eucharist or Communion – the ceremony of remembrance initiated by Jesus. In this festival Christians remember Jesus' death by eating bread and drinking wine.

The Assumption: This feast, on 15 August, marks the taking up into heaven (assumption) of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This event is not recorded in the Bible and is not marked by many Christians, but is a significant date in the calendar for many others, including Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

What are liturgical colours?



Liturgical colours within Christian ritual signify different seasons and times of year.

Each **season** has its own **mood, meaning and type of prayer**.

Each colour has its own **meaning and feeling**, and can be seen **worn or hung** throughout the church during specific times of year. You will see this in the clothes that clergy wear (people ordained for religious duties) or by what clothes are hung over the *altar, an elevated table or structure*.

The primary colours in the liturgical calendar are *red, white, gold, violet, green, and black*.

Colours of the Christian Year

The Christian year contains two cycles: the Christmas Cycle (Advent– Christmas–Epiphany) and the Easter Cycle (Lent–Easter–Pentecost). Within each cycle are a foundation season symbolised by the colour purple and a festival season symbolized by the colour white. After each cycle there is an ordinary time of growth symbolised by the colour green. Thus there is a sequence of seasons using purple, white, and green in that order twice each year.

Purple is a colour of both penitence and royalty – used during the preliminary seasons of Advent and Lent.



Blue a colour of hope, may also be used during Advent

White and **gold** are joyous and festive colours used during the Christmas and Easter Seasons (except on the Day of Pentecost) and on festive days such as Baptism of the Lord, Transfiguration, Trinity, All Saints, and Christ the King.

White may also be used at weddings and is recommended at services of death and resurrection because it symbolizes both death and resurrection.

Green is a colour of growth, used in the Seasons after the Epiphany and After Pentecost, except when special days call for white or red.

Red is a colour of fire, symbolizing the Holy Spirit. It is used on the Day of Pentecost and when the work of the Holy Spirit is emphasised.

Red is also the colour of blood – the blood of Christ and the blood of martyrs. It may be used

beside white and gold through the Easter Season. It may be used during Holy Week, beginning with Passion/Palm Sunday, to symbolise the blood of Christ.

Black is a colour of death and mourning. It is also the standard colour for the clergy's everyday clothing, but is also sometimes used at funeral masses or the anniversary of the death of loved ones.

Liturgical colours, meanings, and seasons at a glance

Liturgical Season	Time of year	Colour	Meaning
Epiphany (sometimes referred to as Time of the Church, or Ordinary Times)	January	Green	Life, hope, anticipation
Lent	February-March	Purple or Roman Purple On the 4th Sunday of Lent they wear Rose.	Penance, sacrifice, preparation
Holy Week: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday	The week immediately preceding Easter	Red or Roman Purple	Penance, sacrifice, preparation
Easter	March or April	White and/or gold	Purity, light, glory, joy
Pentecost	Late May/Early June	Red	God's love, blood, fire, celebrations of Martyrs
Time of the Church or Ordinary Times	After pentecost ends to when Advent starts	Green	Life, hope, anticipation
Advent	Early December	Blue and Purple On the 4th Sunday of Advent they wear Rose	Penance, sacrifice, preparation
Christmas	December	White and/or gold	Purity, light, glory, joy