

The Christian Year

RUNNING THE RACE

See I Corinthians 9:24-27

Most modern races are run on a track going round and round. How we mark out time as Christians is a bit like this. The Church has an annual calendar that names and numbers every Sunday and has other festivals as well. Each year we keep approximately the same Sundays and Feasts. It's like a lap of the track. You might think this would become boring (and in some ways it can be – that's life!), but just as every lap of a race brings new things to see, every Christian year has new things; things maybe we missed last time round, new challenges, new set-backs, new joys. So with each circuit we learn more about our faith because the calendar turns our minds to different things in turn . . . **TWO CYCLES**

Actually there's two cycles, not one. First is the cycle of Sundays and related festivals, some of which change date each year (like Easter). Then there is a cycle of Saints' Days which have a normal diary date (e.g. 15 August).

When the two cycles clash we have rules to tell us which is more important and which we ignore for a year.

THE SUNDAY CYCLE

Sunday is the first day of the week for Christians.

Also called the Lord's Day because Jesus rose from the dead between Saturday night and Sunday morning.

the cycle starts with:

ADVENT: The Church begins the year 4 Sundays before Christmas. Advent means "coming" and prepares us for the coming of Christ: at Christmas and at the end of time.

CHRISTMAS: Literally **Christ's Mass**, the season we recall Christ's birth, his **incarnation = his being made flesh**. Traditionally the Church gathers late on Christmas Eve to welcome Jesus' birth at Midnight. The Christmas story is mainly told in Luke 2.

A variable number of Sundays – ORDINARY TIME

Because the date of Easter moves each year (depending on the Moon) there is next a variable number of ordinary Sundays up to Lent. (Ordinary means just that: no special season, Sundays counted in "order"!)

LENT: A time of six and a half weeks before Easter, starting with Ash Wednesday, when the sign of the Cross made with ash on our foreheads reminds us of what is most important about living and dying! Lent is there to prepare ourselves for the joy of Easter. Many people have a "last fling" on Shrove Tuesday (pancakes, Mardi Gras and all that). Lent is associated with Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness (see Luke 4) and so we think of fasting, study, prayer and penance. ("Shrove" comes from "shrive" = to be absolved through Confession).

The last week of Lent is called **HOLY WEEK**. **THIS IS THE CENTRE OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR**, because Jesus' death and resurrection is the centre of Christianity.

EASTER: lasts for 50 days. We celebrate the risen Jesus and all he did before going back to his Father (Ascension Day, Acts 1). Easter ends with **PENTECOST SUNDAY** when the Holy Spirit came down upon the Apostles.

Then 3 special feasts: **TRINITY SUNDAY**, the feast of the **BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST** (in Latin Corpus et Sanguis Christi) giving thanks for Holy Communion, then the **SACRED HEART OF JESUS**, celebrating the love shown to us by the Cross of Jesus.

ORDINARY TIME AGAIN: picking up where it left off before the start of Lent. Sundays go on until the last (34th) which is the feast of **CHRIST THE KING**.

Then we are back at the start of the lap with Advent....

SAINTS' DAYS

Besides the Sunday "cycle" there are Saints' Days and a few other events which have ordinary calendar dates. Usually the day chosen for a saint's day is the day they died (if we know it).

Some Saints' Days are kept everywhere, some are local to a city or country, some are fairly unknown saints. There will be a saint whose day is on your own birthday, *but you may have to look up in a dictionary of saints to find out who they are!*

most important dates in the year:

6 Jan:	The Epiphany (means Jesus shown to the world)
2 Feb:	Candlemass - Presentation (Jesus the light of the world)
19 Mar:	St Joseph
25 Mar:	The Annunciation (Gabriel tells Mary she is to be Mother of God)
24 Jun:	Birth of John the Baptist
29 Jun:	Ss Peter and Paul
15 Aug:	The Assumption of Mary (Mary's death and entry into heaven)
1 Nov:	All Saints' Day
2 Nov:	All Souls' Day

Just to confuse you these big feasts sometimes move to the nearest Sunday!

COLOURS

You will notice that the vestments worn by the priest change colour from time to time:

GREEN: is used for ordinary time. It reflects the ordinary colour of creation.

WHITE: (or Gold) is for celebration. It is worn for Easter, Christmas, feasts of Our Lord and Our Lady, most Saints' Days and for some special events like weddings.

RED: is for fire or blood: Pentecost, Palm Sunday, Good Friday and for martyrs.

PURPLE: is used at serious times: Advent and Lent, to hear confessions and at funerals.

The whole company of heaven

In the Creed we say “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” What does that life mean?

In the Gospels, Jesus speaks a lot about the “Kingdom of God” and the “Kingdom of heaven”. He seemed to be saying that this “kingdom” had now arrived with himself, his ministry and teaching. But then he also says that this kingdom is also still to come.

Jesus tells us that HE will come again. Christians believe Christ will return at the end of time to judge and gather all creation into the kingdom of God.

So, Christians believe God’s kingdom is both here and still to come. That we will rise to new and eternal life when Christ comes at the end of time AND we will meet with Christ and are judged by him at the time of our own death.

Oh, AND we believe that saints are already part of that resurrection life in the kingdom of heaven.

Confusing? You bet! How could it not be when we are talking about things where “time” and “space” have no meaning! Enough to say that God has a plan for us and calls us to share the victory that Jesus won in his death and resurrection. And even Jesus himself told us in his words about the kingdom that the edges between this world and the next are a little blurred! We are all part of **ONE FAMILY**.

ALL SAINTS / ALL SOULS

These two festivals express a lot of what Christians believe about human destiny. All Saints Day is 1st November (hence All Hallows Eve, the **non-Christian** “feast” of Hallowe’en on 31 Oct.).

On All Saints Day we give thanks to God for all those who have achieved the glory of heaven in THIS life and through God’s cleansing judgement, but whom the church knows little about. (Saints we DO recognise we will mention later). We praise God for their example and that the same promise is given to us, and we ask the saints to pray for us.

Christ ascended to his Father in heaven where he prays for us (Romans 8: 31-34). If he does, you can be sure the saints in his presence follow his example.

All Souls Day is the next day (2nd November) and then we PRAY for the souls of all those who did not achieve sanctity in this life, i.e. most people.

But: we pray for them because we KNOW that God wills to bring all of us to the glory of heaven. So we ask for his continued mercy for the departed. In a sentence: We pray for them, until they start praying for us!

Most of us cannot expect the glory of heaven just like that. Heaven is union with God, so if our sins separate us from God, what happens? Well, the church has developed the idea of **Purgatory**. This is our way of saying that after our death we will be cleansed of our sins until we warrant the fullness of heaven. More we cannot say!

SAINTS ALIVE!

the Christian Church has ALWAYS recognised saints – people who in this life are in total union with God. From the first, Christians revered those who had known and followed Jesus, and marked the places where they were buried.

The next saints were almost all **MARTYRS**, men and women who gave their lives rather than give up their faith in Jesus. As the church was regarded with suspicion and hostility for the first three centuries A.D., there were many, many martyrs.

The practice grew up of meeting for the Sunday Eucharist at the tombs of the martyrs – the origin of the ALTAR in church (An altar is either made of stone like a tomb or should have a stone inserted in the top.) Relics of the saints, their bones and possessions, were distributed to other churches early on. All of this was to help the faithful to focus on what the saints prove: God's love for **US**.

All sorts of saints have been recognised: those who led holy lives; those who explained God beautifully; teachers and servants. Particular saints were adopted as “patrons” by different groups of people.

The point is this: all of us are in the business of life together. We NEED help from each other in this world. So, as the saints in heaven pray before God, we join our prayers to their prayers and we ask for their help! A modern saint, Therese of Lisieux, said “I will spend my heaven doing good on earth” – That could be a definition of what we mean by saints.

Each local church recognises saints. If you go to Cornwall you will find churches dedicated to saints not known anywhere else! Nothing has changed. Have you heard of Mother Teresa or Oscar Romero? Find out about them as they may soon be recognised as 20th century saints.

Mary – (Theotokos) Mother of God

to Christians, Mary is THE saint of saints. A council of the whole church held in Ephesus in 431 A.D. said that Mary should be called the “Mother of God” for her role in bringing Jesus into the world.

Mary is the saint of saints because she obeyed the call of God as no other has (Luke 1:26-38) and because **EVERYTHING** she did pointed people to Jesus (John 2:5). She is our greatest example in following Jesus.

On the Cross Jesus gave Mary into the care of John, making her the mother of EVERY disciple, including YOU. (John 19:25-27). She takes that job seriously.

Mary brings heaven and earth together as no other. We ask her prayers, and she is associated with many miraculous actions at great places of pilgrimage.

The Church has outlined many beliefs about Mary that cannot be detailed here. Discover her place in the scheme of things as well as those of the other saints. (August 15th, when we remember Mary taken in heaven, is her main festival.)

We greet Mary in our prayers in recognition of her place in God's plan of redemption. In doing so we join with the angel Gabriel and Elizabeth and all heaven (Luke 1:29 &42)

Hells Bells!

God calls us to share eternal life in heaven and we use many images to explain that. But remember we are FREE (No.5) and if we choose to separate ourselves from God totally, we call that “Hell”. We use many images to talk about Hell, perhaps they need updating!

As well as saints, God’s kingdom contains ANGELS and other wonders. Angels are messengers. Find out their stories – are you friends with your Guardian Angel?

Something for you to do at home

Learn the words of the prayer **Hail Mary...** and write them out below.



This prayer is used to ask for Mary’s aid. It’s good to know we all have a mother’s love in heaven.