

The Church Year

The Church has traditionally used and structured the natural cycles of the world, to train the learner and to make sure the whole width of Christian spirituality, understanding and vision is covered.

So each day was structured by the Hours; the month was structured by the Lord's Days - the weeks being conventional phases of the moon; and the year was (eventually) structured by two (or three) interlocking cycles known as the 'Proper of the Time' and the 'Proper of the Saints' (with the 'Proper of Mary' sometimes separated out).

Nowadays the Church seems to have abandoned this. Now there are a few important feasts, and some short seasons associated with them, but otherwise the year has been dumped into 'ordinary time' - dozens of weeks with no structure or organisation at all. The consequences are obvious. Huge areas of Christian spirituality, understanding and life are being rapidly forgotten - or worse, rediscovered in other traditions and rejected as unchristian!

It has even got to the point where people are criticising the Church for not teaching about some particular topic, and inventing a new feast to represent - what the Church always has taught and has already represented in the original calendar. For example, the Church is criticised for not emphasising the importance of creation and the environment, and a feast called 'creationmas' or 'environmentmas' has been suggested - completely duplicating the traditional feast of Lammas that 'ordinary time' has suppressed.

I wrote these prayers for my own use because I wanted to rediscover for myself the whole width of Christian spirituality. So I have scrapped 'ordinary time'; I have reinstated the two great forgotten feasts of Lammas and Michaelmas; I have provided prayers appropriate - within my obvious limitations - to the seasons and to the weeks within the seasons.

The seasons therefore become:

Advent	Preparing The Way	preparing for Jesus' coming
Christmastide	God Is With Us	celebrating Jesus' incarnation and teaching
Lent	Growing In Grace	preparing for Jesus' death and resurrection
Eastertide	Christ Is Risen	celebrating Jesus' resurrection and glory
Whitsuntide	Come, Holy Spirit	celebrating the Holy Spirit
Lammas tide	Creation And Harvest	celebrating creation and our dependence on it
Michaelmas tide	Victory And Eternity	celebrating love, judgement and eternity

Advent - Preparing The Way

Advent is the season of preparation for Christmas. It is described as a 'penitential' season, but this is usually misunderstood: penitence in Christian usage does not mean being sorry, it means auditing your life in God's presence and looking for chances to change and to grow.

Advent runs from the fourth Sunday before Christmas - Advent Sunday - to Christmas Eve. It therefore contains four Sundays, with the last week possibly being incomplete.

Advent is about getting ourselves ready for Jesus, yes, but this implies working to understand exactly who Jesus is and why he came. In order to help with this, there are topics for the four Sundays of Advent, though they do vary from tradition to tradition;

First Sunday	Hope	God	God's promise in the Bible, the Church and the World
Second Sunday	Peace	the prophets	the good news of the gospel for the whole world

Third Sunday	Joy	John the Baptist	the good news of the gospel for each of us
Fourth Sunday	Love	Mary	choosing love, choosing justice, choosing grace

Sometimes the Third Sunday, representing Joy (and sometimes called Gaudete Sunday – Rejoice Sunday) is regarded as somehow a break in the penitential nature of Advent. This is wrong: penitence is not sadness; penitence, auditing, is just as much about our joy as about anything else. There’s a similar mistake made in the other penitential season, Lent, when the third Sunday – Laetare Sunday – is often seen as a break or relief, quite wrongly.

Christmastide - God Is With Us

Christmastide is the season celebrating Jesus’ birth, running on past his childhood into his earthly ministry. It is not the uniformly happy time that is sometimes portrayed; the murder of the other children in Bethlehem, commonplace though it was - and is - still gives a reality past the Christmas cake sentimentality. Indeed, in the middle ages Childermas was as important as Christmas; in a time when infant mortality was so high it gave people space to grieve and celebrate their lost children.

Christmastide runs from Christmas Day to Shrove Tuesday. It therefore can contain as few as six, or as many as eleven weeks or parts of weeks. It includes Epiphany on 6 January and Candlemas on 2 February, which may or may not be acknowledged in different traditions.

Lent - Growing In Grace

Lent is the season of preparation for the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Like Advent, therefore, it is a ‘penitential’ season - a season for auditing your life in God’s presence and looking for chances to change and to grow.

Lent runs very precisely for forty days - not including Sundays - and so begins on Ash Wednesday and contains six Sundays. The Sunday Before Lent used to be called Quinquagesima, and the Third

Sunday in Lent is Mothering Sunday – or Laetare Sunday. A day for wearing pink, apparently.

Easter tide – Christ Is Risen

Easter tide is the peak of the Christian year, the season celebrating Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension.

Easter tide runs from Easter Day past Ascension Day to Whitsun Eve.

It therefore contains six Sundays After Easter, and alone of all the seasons is free from the hassle of part-weeks. The Sunday After Easter is known as Low Sunday, because – well, I've read three different explanations, all totally confident, all contradictory.

Whitsuntide - Come, Holy Spirit

Whitsuntide is the season celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit and the growth of the Church she founded. It begins on Whit Sunday - the modern habit of calling it 'Pentecost' is not only inaccurate, it feels to me to be insulting to those following the Jewish faith, to whom Pentecost originally belongs and who celebrate it on a different day in most years.

And anyway, Pentecostide sounds ridiculous.

Whitsuntide runs from Whit Sunday to 31 July, Lammas Eve. It therefore can contain as few as six, or as many as eleven weeks or parts of weeks.

The First Sunday after Whitsunday is traditionally called Trinity Sunday, and was especially valued in England because it was Thomas a Becket's favourite feast, and he was remembered by the common people for his championship of the poor and oppressed.

Lammas tide - Creation And Harvest

Lammas tide is the season celebrating the creation of the world, our dependence on that creation and our responsibility for it.

Traditionally the first sheaf of new wheat was reaped the day before, and the first loaf of the new harvest cooked from it and presented at the Church altar, hence Lammas - Loafmas.

Lammastide runs from Lammas on 1 August to Michaelmas Eve on 28 September. It includes a couple of extra feasts relating to the natural world, but they don't seem to have been widely celebrated.

Michaelmastide - Victory And Eternity

Michaelmastide is the season celebrating the deeper things - the nature of God and what it means to be human, love and fear, hope and salvation, death and resurrection, the first and last days, heaven and hell, judgement and glory, time and eternity.

In mediaeval times it was not clearly separated from Advent, and some of its themes were traditionally preached on the four Sundays in Advent, but this tended to obscure the importance of Advent as preparation for Jesus' coming, so I have followed the more modern way for once.

Michaelmastide runs from Michaelmas on 29 September to Advent Eve. It therefore can contain eight or nine weeks or parts of weeks.

The last Sunday is traditionally known in England as Stir Up Sunday, because the collect in the 1662 prayer book began "Stir up, O Lord.." and this was taken as a cue for making the Christmas puddings. Nowadays it is often celebrated as "Christ The King", neatly bridging Michaelmastide into Advent.