

# The Three Cycles of the Christian Year

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To appreciate the construction of the historic Christian year, and the sequence of its days, it is necessary to realize that it consists not just of a single cycle, but of three cycles, running concurrently. When this is understood, nearly everything becomes beautifully clear.

## The First Cycle

The great festivals of the Christian year – those which have numbered Sundays before or after them – follow an easily recognizable chronological sequence based on the life and saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The first of these festivals is the feast of the Nativity, Christmas, on 25 December, with Advent as a period of preparation, commencing about the end of November; and Christmas is followed by the Circumcision of Christ on 1 January; the Epiphany, celebrating the coming of the Wise Men (or, in the East, Christ's baptism), on 6 January; Good Friday and Easter Day, celebrating Christ's death and resurrection, at Passover season, with Lent as a period of preparation; Ascension Day, forty days after Easter; Whitsun, celebrating the pouring out of the Holy Spirit by the ascended Christ, at Pentecost season, another ten days later; and Trinity Sunday, summing up the revelation of God through these events, the next Sunday. There follows the long period of about 25 Sundays after Trinity (called in the Church of Rome and the Orthodox Church 'Sundays after Pentecost') which brings us back to Advent. Since the traditional collects and readings for Advent speak of Christ's second coming as well as his first, the 25 Sundays vividly speak to us of the long period between Christ's two comings.

The sequence is chronological, but the whole is comprised within a single year, and as a result much of it has to be in symbolical time rather than in real time. The week from Christmas to Circumcision – eight days, counting inclusively – is real time (see Lk 2:21), and the period of seven weeks from Good Friday and Easter Day to Whitsun (equivalent to the seven weeks from Passover to Pentecost) is real time. The rest, however, is symbolical time: this is true even of the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany, which probably correspond to something approaching two years (see Matt 2:7, 16).

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This, then, is the first and main cycle of the Christian year, the great Dominical cycle.

### **The Second Cycle**

The second cycle is the cycle of the saints' days. This has no real beginning or end, since the days are independent of each other, but it can for convenience be thought of as likewise beginning and ending in November. St Andrew's Day, on 30 November, celebrates one who, as far as we know, was the first of Christ's apostles to be called (see Jn 1:40), and some other saints' days which fall early in the cycle (though not all that do) have a similar sort of priority. St Stephen's Day, on 26 December, celebrates the earliest Christian martyr, and the Innocents' Day, on 28 December, celebrates the babies of Bethlehem slaughtered after the Wise Men's visit, during Jesus's infancy. It can seem strange that the Innocents' Day comes before Epiphany and not after it, but the explanation is that they belong to two different cycles of the Christian year, Epiphany to the great Dominical cycle and the Innocents' Day to the cycle of the saints' days. The last date in the cycle of the saints' days (if we ignore black letter days, which are not intended by the Prayer Book to be liturgically observed) is 1 November, All Saints' Day, which sums up the cycle before it recommences again on 30 November.

The earliest saints' days to be observed were the festivals of martyrs, and were therefore observed upon the anniversary of the saint's death. The practice of observing them, at first locally but then more widely, seems to have originated soon after the middle of the second century. By that period, however, the dates when New Testament saints died may already have been forgotten, so the dates chosen for the commemoration of New Testament saints (and all the red letter saints of the Prayer Book are such) were due to a variety of factors. In some cases (the Conversion of St Paul, the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary) it is made quite explicit that it is not the saint's death which is primarily being commemorated. St John Baptist's Day, anciently called the Nativity of St John Baptist, is another such case. So is the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, commonly called The Purification of St Mary the Virgin.

### **The Third Cycle**

The last-named of these festivals, as its main title in the Prayer Book indicates, is really a Dominical festival rather than a saint's day. And it does in fact belong to the third cycle of the Christian year, a cycle which is frequently overlooked, and which may be called the lesser Dominical cycle. The Dominical days in this cycle are not preceded or followed by numbered Sundays, and two days in the cycle draw attention to its independence by the incongruity of their dates with the sequence of the great Dominical cycle. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, otherwise

called the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and in the Middle Ages Candlemas, falls on 2 February, after (and not, as one might expect, before) Epiphany. Still more surprisingly, the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary falls in the weeks leading up to Easter. The cycle coincides at two points (Christmas and Circumcision) with the great Dominical cycle, and includes saints' days as well as Dominical festivals, but only the days of certain saints who were closely related to our Lord, namely, his mother Mary and his cousin John the Baptist. This cycle is all in real time, and hence covers only one year (the first year) of Christ's earthly existence. Moreover, it does not, like the other two cycles, begin in November but in March.

From the Middle Ages onwards, 25 March, popularly called Lady Day, was one of the various New Year days, competing with 1 January and Advent Sunday. It is still a quarter day for secular purposes, such as the payment of rents, but up until 1752, when the Gregorian Calendar was introduced in England, it was the day when the number of the year changed. The introduction of the corrected calendar was made the occasion of moving this annual change to 1 January, so that 1752 and subsequent years began on 1 January and not on 25 March.

By origin, of course, 25 March was a religious observance, the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This event, thought of as the occasion of Christ's conception, was the beginning of his earthly existence, and the date was chosen because it was nine months before his birth, celebrated on 25 December. St Luke tells us that the Annunciation occurred in the sixth month of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (see Lk 1:24-27), so the birth of John the Baptist would have followed three months later; and hence the festival of the Nativity of St John Baptist occurs on 24 June (24, not 25, because the dates were fixed by the Roman method of computation, counting backwards from the first day of the following month, and June is one day shorter than March or December: in each case the festival is eight days, counting inclusively, before the first day of the following month). The third festival in this cycle is Christmas Day, on 25 December. The fourth is the Circumcision of Christ, on 1 January (eight days, counting inclusively, after his birth, in accordance with the law of Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3). The fifth is the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, on the occasion of his mother's purification. This is held on 2 February (forty days, counting inclusively, after his birth, in accordance with the law of Lev 12:1-4), and so brings us almost back to the beginning of the cycle on 25 March.

There are two more dominical or related festivals from the mediaeval calendar which deserve a mention. One is the Transfiguration, on 6 August. This does not belong to either of the Dominical cycles, and is

included in the Prayer Book calendar only as a black letter day. Chronologically and thematically, it would come most appropriately in the Epiphany season, but, as it is, it falls in the weeks following Trinity. The other is the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth, which, since the event it commemorates took place three months before the birth of John the Baptist and immediately after the Annunciation (see Lk 1:39f, 56), would naturally fall in late March or early April. Actually, it falls on 2 July, some days after the festival of John's birth. This too is included in the Prayer Book calendar only as a black letter day. Both these festivals had been late additions to the calendar, and, in revising the calendar, the Reformers had the choice of either moving them or else altering their status. They evidently decided on the latter course.

### Topical Postscript

The widespread failure to understand the threefold structure of the calendar is strikingly illustrated by the recent report *The Promise of his Glory* (London: Church House Publishing and Mowbray 1991), produced by the Church of England Liturgical Commission and commended by the House of Bishops. This rather portentous provision of optional material to be used around the period of Christmas, amounting to no less than 419 pages, is subtitled *Services and Prayers for the Season from All Saints to Candlemas*. There is in fact no season 'from All Saints to Candlemas', and there could not be any.

The central provision here (parts 3-5) is for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, which belong to the great Dominical cycle. All Saints' Day, however, belongs to the cycle of the saints' days, and belongs to it as its end rather than its beginning; while Candlemas, ie the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, concludes the *lesser* Dominical cycle, a cycle which begins not on 1 November but on 25 March. The Liturgical Commission describes this feast as the 'natural climax' of the Christmas/Epiphany season and 'an important turning point in the Christian year' (p 259). On the contrary, the Presentation does not belong to the Christmas/Epiphany season, which is a season of the *great* Dominical cycle, and all the turning points of the Christian year are in fact festivals of that cycle, as is shown by the numbered Sundays which precede or follow them. The Presentation is not such a festival.

*The Promise of his Glory* thus reflects a complete confusion between the three cycles of the Christian year, and though this does not necessarily invalidate all its liturgical provisions (which need to be assessed individually), it shows how unsuitable the report is, as it stands, to form part of the planned revision of the Anglican liturgy.