

# Christian Holy Days, Holidays, and Seasons

Many in postmodern society downplay tradition. This change has rippled through some parts of the Church as well. However, tradition remains an important part of what the Christian faith is all about, because when the Church recognizes holy days, holidays, and seasons, it connects Christians of today with Christians throughout history.

## Lent

**When:** Begins 40 days before Easter

**Observance:** Self-examination and preparation for Easter

Lent was first observed in the fourth century as the 40-day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter. Its focus was on self-examination and self-denial, and Christians used *fasting* (abstaining from eating food) in the early years as a visible demonstration of this process.

Over the centuries, Catholics have relaxed some of the strict fasting rules. Today, only Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays during Lent are considered fasting days. On these days, Catholics over the age of 14 are to refrain from eating meat. (Historically, this practice was meant to help unify people who could afford meat with poor people who couldn't.) In addition, on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, those between the ages of 18 and 59 are to eat only one full meal and two smaller meals and aren't to eat between meals.

Orthodox Christians are far more rigorous in their observance of fasting during Lent, believing that regular fasting is a crucially important discipline for one's spiritual growth. Meat, dairy products, and eggs (which historically were considered more luxury foods than ordinary breads) aren't allowed, with some additional restrictions on certain days. They can only eat fish (which was historically considered less of a luxury than red meat) on the feasts of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday.

Some Protestant denominations observe Lent (such as Anglican and Episcopalian), but many Protestant churches attach less significance to the season of Lent than to the individual holy days leading up to Easter.

## **Palm Sunday**

**When:** Sunday before Easter

**Observance:** Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

**Biblical reference:** Matthew 21:1–11

Christians observe Palm Sunday on the Sunday before Easter, celebrating Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The reason they call it Palm Sunday stems from the fact that when Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem, a large crowd of people in the city spread out palm branches on the ground before him as a sign of his kingship. Throughout Jesus' three-year ministry, he downplayed his role as Messiah and sometimes even told people whom he healed not to say anything about the miracle to others. Palm Sunday is the one exception in which his followers loudly proclaimed his glory to all.

Today, Christians often celebrate Palm Sunday in a joyous, triumphant manner during worship services, emphasizing the glory of Jesus Christ. Some churches spread palm branches at the front of the sanctuary as a way to commemorate the event.

## **Maundy Thursday**

**When:** Thursday before Easter

**Observance:** The Last Supper of Jesus

**Biblical reference:** John 13–17

Within the midst of the Easter season, Maundy Thursday is one Christian holy day that many Christians and even many churches often overlook, yet it symbolizes a critically

important truth of the Christian faith — Jesus as a suffering servant and the call for his followers to do the same. It also draws a connection between the Passover sacrifice, a Jewish tradition, and Jesus Christ's sacrificial role on the cross.

The night before Jesus was crucified, he had a Passover supper with his disciples. (*Passover* is a Jewish holy day that celebrates God's deliverance of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt.) After supper, Jesus knew that this would be his final opportunity to instruct his disciples before the crucifixion, so he talked at length about his purposes, what his followers should do in response, and the promise of the Holy Spirit to come. He then washed his disciples' feet in an incredible demonstration of humility and servanthood. Finally, he gave bread and wine to his disciples and asked them to partake of it in remembrance of him. The act of partaking bread and wine is called *Communion* (or the Last Supper) today.

The word *Maundy* (pronounced *mawn-dee*) comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, which means "command." The command that this holy day refers to is the one that Jesus gave to his disciples during the Last Supper:

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just like I have loved you; that you also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

— John 13:34–35

## **Good Friday**

**When:** Friday before Easter

**Observance:** Crucifixion of Jesus on the cross

**Biblical reference:** Luke 23

Good Friday marks the day on which Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross for the sins

of the world. Good Friday isn't a happy day, but its name is a reminder that humans can only be considered good because of what happened on that day. Some believe that its name was originally *God's Friday*, which, over the years, became its present name. In Germany, Christians call it *Quiet Friday* (from noon on Friday until Easter morning, church bells remain silent). Christians in other parts of Europe call it *Great Friday* or *Holy Friday*.

Good Friday is a day of mourning and sorrow over the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ and a reminder that the sins of all people made it necessary for him to die in the first place. It's also a day of gratitude for the supreme sacrifice that he made.

Protestant churches sometimes hold services between noon and 3:00 p.m. to commemorate Jesus' hours on the cross. Catholics often remove everything from the altar and kiss the crucifix as an expression of worship. Some churches even hold a *Service of Darkness* in which candles are extinguished until people are left sitting in total darkness, as a reminder of the darkness that covered the earth after Jesus died (Luke 23:44–46).

## **Easter**

**When:** First Sunday after the first full moon after March 21

**Observance:** Resurrection of Jesus Christ

**Biblical reference:** Luke 24

Bar none, Easter is the single most important holy day of the Christian Church, for it celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the central event in Christianity. To Christians, the resurrection backs up Jesus' claim that he had the authority to die for the sins of the world and the power to come back to life again. It also gives hope to Christians that they too will experience a resurrected life in heaven.

The exact day of the year that Easter falls on is very confusing, and the logic seems pretty

old-fashioned in this digital age, because it's based on the lunar calendar and tied to the start of the solar spring. But the Western Church (Catholic and Protestant) continues to observe it based on the rules of long ago — that it falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after March 21. It can't come before March 22 or after April 25. In contrast, Orthodox Churches wanted to tie Easter to Jewish Passover, given the relationship between Passover and the day of Christ's resurrection. Because the Jewish calendar determines the date that Jews celebrate Passover, Easter for the Orthodox Churches can vary by as much as five weeks from the Western Church.

## **Pentecost**

**When:** 40 days after Easter

**Observance:** Coming of the Holy Spirit

**Biblical reference:** Acts 2

Originally, Pentecost was a Jewish holiday held 50 days after Passover. One of three major feasts during the Jewish year, it celebrated Thanksgiving for harvested crops. However, Pentecost for Christians means something far different. Before Jesus was crucified, he told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would come after him (see John 14:16). And 40 days after Jesus was resurrected (ten days after he ascended into heaven; see Luke 24:51), that promise was fulfilled when Peter and the early Church were in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Although many North American Christians hardly notice Pentecost today, traditional European churches consider it a major feast day. Pentecost, also called *Whitsuntide* in parts of Europe, is just behind Easter in overall importance. For example, in Germany today on only three occasions does the observance of a national holiday span two days: Christmas (December 25 and 26), Easter (Sunday and Monday), and Pentecost (Sunday and Monday).

## **Advent**

**When:** Period marked by the four Sundays before Christmas

**Observance:** Preparation for Christmas and Christ's Second Coming

Advent began in the early Church as a 40-day time of preparation and self-examination before *Epiphany*, a January holiday that observes the visit of the Magi to Jesus (by the Western, or Catholic and Protestant, Church) and the Baptism of Jesus (by the Eastern, or Orthodox, Church). During Advent, the Church welcomed new Christians into the Church to be baptized. Over the years, Advent was eventually tied to honoring Christ's birth and anticipating his Second Coming.

Advent started off as a time of solemn preparation like Lent, but by the fourth century, the season had evolved into a more celebratory occasion in the Western Church. In contrast, the Orthodox Church has always tended to observe Advent in a more reflective, somber manner.

The lighting of the Advent wreath is the most popular tradition of the season. An Advent wreath is a circle of evergreens with four candles, three of which are usually colored violet purple (symbolizing royalty in some churches and penance in others) and the fourth colored rose red or pink (representing the joyous expectation that people have in the coming Messiah). One of the purple candles is lit during the service on the first Sunday (highlighting the theme of hope) and another purple one on the next Sunday (love). On the third Sunday (joy), the rose-colored candle is lit; and the last purple candle on the final Sunday before Christmas (peace). Some wreaths include a white candle (for the purity and holiness of Christ) in the center, which Christians light on Christmas day.

The origin of the wreath started as a pre-Christian practice by Germanic peoples as a symbol of the hope of a coming spring. Christians kept the tradition but changed its meaning as they looked forward to Christ's return.

St. Francis of Assisi is credited as displaying the first Christmas nativity scene, a re-

creation of the manger scene, during Advent in 1223.

## Christmas

**When:** December 25

**Observance:** Birth of Jesus Christ

**Biblical reference:** Luke 2:1–20

Christmas is the observance of Jesus' humble birth to a virgin in a stable in Bethlehem. The holiday also celebrates the events surrounding his birth, such as an angel's appearance to shepherds, telling them to visit the newborn king.

Although the Church doesn't consider it the most important Christian holiday, Christmas is certainly the most popular, at least in terms of cultural and social significance. But the early Church, believing that events later in Jesus' life should be the focus, didn't even consider it all that significant. What's more, when Church leaders first discussed observing the birthday of Jesus, some argued against celebrating it like you would another great person in history. Nonetheless, the Church had enough pro-observance support to mark the calendar.

Neither the New Testament nor any historical record marks the exact date of Jesus' birth. As a result, the Church initially considered many different dates, including January 2, March 21, March 25, April 18, April 19, May 20, May 28, November 17, and November 20. The Western Church first observed December 25 in the fourth century, and eventually Eastern Churches followed suit.

Some people criticize that Christmas has its origins as a pagan holiday. Some truth lies in that notion, considering that the timing of December 25 was selected to line up with several pagan Roman holidays that celebrated the winter solstice and worship of the sun. However, Church leaders didn't see matching the date as compromising Christian teaching with the culture. Responding to any criticism, a fourth-century bishop

remarked, "We hold this day holy, not like the pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of him who made it."

Most of the traditional customs of Christmas, such as gift giving, tree decorating, light hanging, and feasting, come from sources other than the Church.