



## Festivals of the Christian Calendar

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**The Christian part of a two-part contribution.**

### Festivals of the Christian Calendar

**by Robert Gribben**

Christians like and — probably because of the Jews — have a calendar of feasts and festivals throughout the year. The core of these is universal, particularly Easter and Christmas, but each culture has added its special feature, not least culinary. So many celebrations are profound, complex and rich. Most of these can be experienced somewhere in multicultural Australia. Western Christianity underwent a Reformation in Europe of the 16th Century: this had the effect, in those churches which emerged from that reform, of reducing and simplifying many of the occasions and their rituals. In 20th Century Australia (as elsewhere in the West), Christian festivals are fighting to maintain their distinctiveness and their root meanings, as Christmas gift-giving provides the year's major commercial bonanza and Australians maintain their world record for the consumption of chocolate at Easter.

It is recorded in the New Testament that the earliest followers of Jesus — being Jews — observed the customs of the parent faith. Very early in the history of the Christian community, the first day of the week (Sunday) became the distinctive day for Christian corporate worship, alongside the continued observance of the seventh day, the Sabbath. When the Christian church began to emerge more clearly as a religious community separate from the

synagogue — and here the self-justification by denigration of their Jewish past really begins — the Sabbath was observed less and less. Nevertheless, it is true to say that the Sabbath has never been forgotten in Christian tradition: John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists in 18th Century England, kept it in spirit each week; in recent times, Sabbath has become a central notion in Christian spirituality.

## Sunday

Sunday became important because it was the day of Jesus' resurrection. "*And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome bringing spices to prepare Jesus' body for burial) went to the tomb.*"<sup>1</sup> The story goes on to recount how a young man at the tomb, which is empty, declares that Jesus has risen from the dead, and is going to Galilee. There is no doubt that the experience of the resurrection was the motivating force which gave rise to Christianity, and so it was natural to commemorate it every week, on what became known as *the Lord's Day* and, more solemnly, every year as Passover time (at which Jewish season Jesus was crucified) came around again.

Here is another interesting connection: for two centuries, some Christians continued to observe the festival of Jesus' death and resurrection on the fourteenth of Nisan, whatever day it fell on. Others, the majority, observed it on the nearest Sunday. At the Council of Nicaea, in 325 CE, the matter was decided in favour of Saturday/Sunday. The whole Easter event was celebrated during that night. Only later was Good Friday separated from Easter Day (Sunday) for a distinct commemoration. And later still that a Holy Week preceded it and

Easter began to be marked in an historical way, by moving through a sequence of the events of Jesus' last days drawn, in what to modern eyes is an unhistorical way, from all four Gospels (which vary from each other in their accounts of these events).

## Easter

After three centuries, the basic pattern was fixed — not identical across the Christian world, but recognisable and predictable — Easter clearly became the major feast. By its long observance in Europe, its Christian — and Jewish — proper title, Pascha, was supplanted by the folk name which came from a pagan observance, that of the fertility goddess Oestera, hence Easter. A great deal of the ancient Springtime festival was also adapted to Christian use — so that the fundamental symbol of fertility, the egg, gains the Christian meaning (there are many layers of them) — of new life hidden within, ready to burst forth. In the East<sup>2</sup>, the egg is painted red, and is hard-boiled; it may be further decorated — in Russia, with icons (images of Christ or His Mother). In the West, it is mostly chocolate, but can be of other sweet confections. In many countries, new clothes are worn for the Easter services. In England, spring flowers allowed the possibility of young women decorating an Easter bonnet.

The liturgies of Easter are the richest of the church's year; this is the feast of feasts. Eastern, and some Western Christians (Catholics, Anglicans and some others) gather in the largest numbers of the year late on Easter Eve (Holy Saturday) for a vigil service which begins around a fire burning outside the church. From this a very large candle (the Paschal Candle) is lit, representing the light of (the risen) Christ, and the people follow

it in procession into the darkened church. At the proclamation "Christ is risen", with its shouted reply, "He is risen indeed", everyone lights their own small candle from the great one, and the liturgy erupts into joy and singing. A service of the Word follows, where the biblical stories of salvation (including those from the Hebrew Bible) are read, and it is followed by the First Eucharist (Mass) of Easter. Different churches have different ways of doing these ceremonies.

## Holy Week

Easter is preceded by a full week of special observances, beginning with Palm Sunday which recalls Jesus' entry into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey — certainly not any triumphant view of a Messiah — during which the bystanders had torn down branches of nearby trees, certainly olive as well as palm — to wave and to strew in his path. Jews will note the echoes of Tabernacles, and the use of Psalm 118:26-27 at this time may suggest that Palm Sunday has been adopted into the Easter ritual from another event and another time of the year.

Churches in the West are decorated with palm branches for this Sunday. In the East, sprigs of olive leaves are handed to the congregation, and in both there may be solemn processions around the church or local community with hymn-singing.

The fact that Jesus was crucified during Passover, that his trials took place before the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem, that his execution took place before a crowd of local people (under Roman authority, such as it was), and that all this was

remembered at Easter meant that, for communities in the past where Christians and Jews lived together, Holy Week became a living hell for Jews. How it came about that the readings from the Gospels accentuated a spirit of blaming Jews for the death of Jesus is explored elsewhere in this and other volumes. Without avoiding proper responsibility, it ought to be said that care is increasingly being taken that Easter observances do not foster this spirit. One liturgical prayer, which in earlier times contained a condemnation of Jews, has now replaced it with: (The liturgist speaks in the name of Jesus) *I grafted you into the tree of my chosen Israel, and you turned on them with persecution and mass murder. I made you joint heir with them of my covenants, but you made them scapegoats of your own guilt.*<sup>3</sup>

Jews do not need to accept the theology of covenant herein implied, which is very important for (Gentile) Christians, but there is a new spirit present in these liturgies.

## Lent

After many centuries more, a further period of preparation was attached before Holy (or in the East, Great) Week. In the West, it lasts forty days, not counting Sundays and is called Lent. It was originally a time of strict fasting, so on the last day before Lent forbidden foods were eaten up — fatty foods, butter and other dairy products, yeast, sweets. This Tuesday was known (in French) as *Mardi Gras*, Fat Tuesday. Because it also marked a time of making confession and of spiritual preparation, it is also known (chiefly in England) as Shrove Tuesday, from the verb to shrive, to be purged of sin.

Again, the parallels to Judaism, *mutatis mutandis*, will be clear: The clearing of the house of yeast before *Pesach* (Passover), the seeking of forgiveness of past wrongs practiced at *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). In the West, fasting has in many places become merely formal — adopting a personal rule to give up some luxury (sugar, tobacco(!), wine) or, in many families, to eat fish on certain days, perhaps particularly on Good Friday. It may also mean a resolution to take something on — more regular prayer, an act of charity etc. In the Eastern churches there is a gradual reduction in permissible foods over the seven weeks of Lent until, in Great Week, the strictly observant will not only refuse meat, but also fish, all animal products (lard, eggs, butter, milk, cheese) and wine and oil.

Perhaps curiously, the basic purpose behind this period of preparation was that baptisms took place at Easter, and the candidates were registered for an intense period of final preparation during these weeks. Part of this was indeed fasting, but the penitential spirit, encouraged perhaps by the presence of death everywhere in mediaeval Europe, pervaded the whole season and its didactic purpose was forgotten. This is being revived today, however, especially in the West.

Very little of this survives in the churches of the Reformation. Baptists, Churches of Christ, Presbyterians, Pentecostals and, to a lesser extent, Lutherans and Uniting Church may well not observe a liturgical calendar at all, apart from Christmas and Easter Day. They will not have any particular ceremonies on either of these days, but their worship will follow its usual pattern of prayers, bible readings and a sermon. Certainly there are hymns

and carols appropriate to the season, but the services have a marked simplicity. In the 16th century, many Christians felt that the liturgy was so overlaid with intricate symbolism that its fundamental meaning was obscured. In various ways and in various places, the services were stripped of these elaborations, and in particular (to quote John Bunyan), the ear gate was preferred to the eye gate as the way to truth.

## **Pentecost**

It may surprise Jews to see this Jewish festival listed here. However, St Luke, the writer of the Third Gospel and its sequel, The Acts of the Apostles, recorded that on the fiftieth day from Passover, the infant Christian community underwent a further religious experience, second only to the resurrection, in which they experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit. This experience, he says, was accompanied by the sight of flames flickering on the heads of the company assembled in an upper room in Jerusalem, and by an ability amongst members of the crowd outside, a crowd symbolic of the nations of the world, to understand the preaching of Peter each in their own language. The Pentecostal experience followed the Ascension of Jesus, when he was removed from their sight after the forty days following his resurrection, during which he appeared to many and taught them. It was also understood as a confirmation of all that they had learned, and an empowerment which drove them out of their hiding places, from Jerusalem down the trade routes to spread the new message throughout the Roman world and beyond; most significantly, perhaps, out of Judaism itself into the Gentile world.

Most churches hold special services on Pentecost Sunday. In many churches of the West, the liturgical leaders wear red (=flames of fire) as the colour of their vestments; the

hymns will speak of the coming of the Spirit of God to the waiting disciples. The first great season of the Christian year comes to a close. The Roman Church significantly calls the rest of the year (excepting the period we shall now describe) as ordinary time.

## Calendars

The Christian world has many divisions; one of them is calendrical. In most years, the date of the Eastern celebration of Easter may be up to five weeks different from the Western observance, and yet they are both calculated from 14th Nisan. The minutiae of the calculation may be investigated in learned sources elsewhere. However, the major divergence is through the fact that the Western church (and most of the world) follows the Gregorian calendar. This was a correction by eleven days to the calendar devised by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE, and proclaimed by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. Until the first World War, the East continued to follow the Julian calendar which is presently thirteen days behind. An Inter-Orthodox consultation held in Constantinople in 1923 proposed a revision of the Julian calendar to bring it nearly into line with the Gregorian; one variation allows the date of Easter to be — almost — uniform throughout the Orthodox world, in conformity with the Julian date. The New Style was adopted with varying enthusiasm over most of the Orthodox world from 1924. Dissentients include Jerusalem, Russia and Serbia, and the monastic communities on Mount Athos, and dissent in some quarters has led to church splits.

## Christmas

The other major season in the Christian year is Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus. There is a popular conception amongst Christians that this observance arose very late



in time, and was a Christian adaptation of a pagan feast, the birth of the Unconquered Sun, proclaimed at Rome in 274 CE. After all, no-one knows the date on which Jesus was born. The winter solstice, December 25 in the West and January 6th in the East (both dates are inaccurate!), with its potential pun on the birth of the Son, was an appropriate date to choose. Recent scholarship has provided us with a profound explanation. The historians have uncovered two facts: that a feast of Christ's birth was celebrated before 274 CE; and that the pagan festival was not known far outside Rome itself, yet the East celebrated the same Christian rite. They also take us back to that vital common date, the 14th Nisan, the day of Jesus' death. In the thinking of the early Christians, the time of their Saviour's death, and that of his birth, were equally fixed by God; he was no accident of history. Indeed, they believed that the date of his conception and the date of his death were identical. They calculated the date in the Roman calendar of Jesus' death in the year 29 CE: it was March 25. That day is universally celebrated as the Annunciation, the announcement by the archangel Gabriel to Mary that she would conceive. Take it forwards nine months (rather precise obstetrics, this!) and you have December 25. In the East, 14th Nisan in 29 CE fell on April 6th: hence, January 6th. The moral of the tale is that Christian observances are not based on a take-over of pagan festivals (though some customs are), and that there is a deep connection, based on the date of Passover, for both of the key Christian feasts.

This sanctified imaginative way of thinking is not strange to Jews: some of the rabbis held that the 14th Nisan was the day on which the world began, that the Patriarchs were born, that the Exodus took place, as well as the Day of the Lord at the end of time. The early Christians built on this tradition. Leaving aside these calendrical mathematics and primitive theology, the festival of Christmas is probably the one best known to the world outside the church. Its carols are sung in mega-stores and on the streets and at parties by people who have no religious faith and respond to the story of a child born in poverty, but

pay him no more attention than they do the world's (or Australia's) homeless and hungry. Perhaps that is too cynical! At this time in our history, we must be grateful for all opportunities to supply employment, even if seasonal. And there is goodwill and generosity in the community. But for many faithful Christians, it feels as it must to Jews if Pesach were celebrated simply as a time for eating, drinking and singing songs, without the solemn remembrance which gives it its true meaning. The season is a rich one. Like Easter, Christmas has its preparatory period attached: in the West four weeks, in the East, on a parallel with Lent, forty days. Its name, Advent, Coming, has two strands of meaning: the one focuses on the end of time, the final coming of Jesus as Judge, and the other focuses on the first coming of Jesus, as the Child of Bethlehem. They tend to be mixed over the season, but the second strand has one implication for Jewish-Christian relations. Part of the preparation for the celebration of Jesus' birth has been the reading of the Hebrew prophets, interpreted as they have been throughout Christian history, as predicting the coming of a Messiah. The Gospels themselves use the scriptures in this way. There is a strong move across the churches now to help preachers and teachers to use the Hebrew scriptures in their own integrity, and to correct the suggestion that their only purpose was to predict Jesus' coming.

Christmas also has its own season, twelve days, connecting 25th December and 6th January, which in the West is called Epiphany (Revelation). The season is commemorated in the (secular) carol "A partridge in a pear tree" which spreads its fantastic gift-giving over the twelve days. Tradition also held that the Magi, or wise men, also known as the Three Kings, arrived from the East at Bethlehem on January 6th, and this too is remembered in carols. There are many ways of understanding these strange visitors, but since they were clearly Gentiles, one element is the marking of the revelation (hence Epiphany) of Christ to non-Jews, a sign of the direction his message was to take. In the East, January

6th is a very special day, usually known as Theophany (Revelation of God). Orthodox Christians recall the baptism of Jesus, and hold ceremonies of the blessing of the waters, which takes crowds down to wharves by rivers and sea-shores, where young men vie to retrieve a cross thrown into the water by the bishop.

## Other times and seasons

Eastern Christians mark twelve other great feasts of the year, including Transfiguration on August 6th, recalling the vision of Christ's glory on the mountain before his going to Jerusalem, recounted in the Gospels e.g. Mark 9:2-8; the blessing of fruit is a part of this celebration. Another solemn day is Holy Cross Day on 14th September, which commemorates the discovery of the true cross by the Empress Helena (mother of Constantine) in Jerusalem in the early fourth century. In addition, there are several major feasts dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary under her Greek title of Theotokos, the God-bearer. The beginning of the Orthodox Liturgical year is 1st September, and is marked by special ceremonies in Constantinople; their more recent theme has been the protection of the natural environment, marked by a sermon on this subject by the spiritual leader of the Orthodox, the Ecumenical Patriarch.

It is easy to get lost in detail. For Christians, as for Jews, the yearly round of feasts, festivals and fasts is a way of entering into the life of God, a way of aligning our lives with the great events of our sacred history. To observe such times and seasons is to sanctify all time. We may give thanks to God that, in words and music, in dance and ritual, in food and the use of all the senses, human creativity may be seen in all its variety as we

celebrate days of awe and mourning, days of joy and gladness, and the ordinary days in life without which no festival is possible.

#### Notes

1. So the Gospel of Mark, ch.16, verse 2. Mark is the earliest Gospel, written around 65 CE.
2. By the East, I mean the churches of the Middle East — the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Jerusalem, Antioch (now Damascus), Alexandria and Constantinople (Istanbul) and the (usually) smaller ethnic churches in those areas, Syrian, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Armenian. I also include the later churches of Eastern Europe — Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania; there are some smaller independent churches. By the West, I mean the churches of the Roman Empire, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. For a general introduction to the divisions of the Christian Church, see my essay in John Roffey (ed.), *Jews and Christians: Creating a New Spirit*, Victorian Council of Churches 1987, pp 60 ff.
3. From "The Reproaches", a series of prayers for the liturgy of Good Friday in which Jesus accuses the church of its betrayal of him. This version from the United Methodist Church (USA), see Hoyt L. Hickman et al, *Handbook of the Christian Year*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1986, p.189

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See also: [The Jewish Calendar](#).