

The Liturgical Year

Worship is a way to mark the time and to remember God being there all through the times. Therefore the church does not measure time linearly, but cyclically. The liturgical year begins on the first Sunday of Advent, and end on every year it will start again. To connect this liturgical calendar with the days as we count them in western society, there are two methods.

The Advent cycle is bound to the set date for Christmas, 25 December, although the Advent can start between 27 November and 3 December. Depending on that the whole of Christmas time will move a bit forward or backward on the time line.

The Easter cycle, starting on Ash Wednesday and ending with Pentecost, depends on the date for Easter, which has a variable date. Determining the date requires a complex calculation in which the solar year, including leap days, is reconciled with the lunar reckoning. This both connects and distinguishes the church from the Jewish method of calculating the date of Pesach (Pass-over). The earliest date can be 22 March, the latest 25 April, and with this date the whole Easter cycle moves forward or backward.

Because of these two different methods the number of Sundays between the two cycles will vary from year to year. All lectionaries have provisions to adapt to that. The saints calendar, in churches that use this, only has set dates. In general a saint day will be moved forward to the Monday if it would fall on a Sunday.

There is one more way to mark the time: the daily prayers ('offices') in monasteries or cathedrals. The Rule of St Benedict sets out seven times for daily prayer - matins, laud, terce, sext, none, vespers and compline - but more active orders will tend to reduce that to three. On Iona we are even more active, having only one morning prayer and more or less regular evening services.

The backbone of the liturgical year are the three high feasts: Easter, Pentecost and Christmas, of which Easter is the eldest and Christmas the most recent. Even if the liturgical year starts with Christmas, the whole depends on Easter, for on Easter we celebrate the central mystery of Christian faith. From Easter we count back to Ash Wednesday and forward to Pentecost. The Christmas cycle developed later as prelude to the Easter cycle (and as a way to incorporate the pagan midwinter feasts).

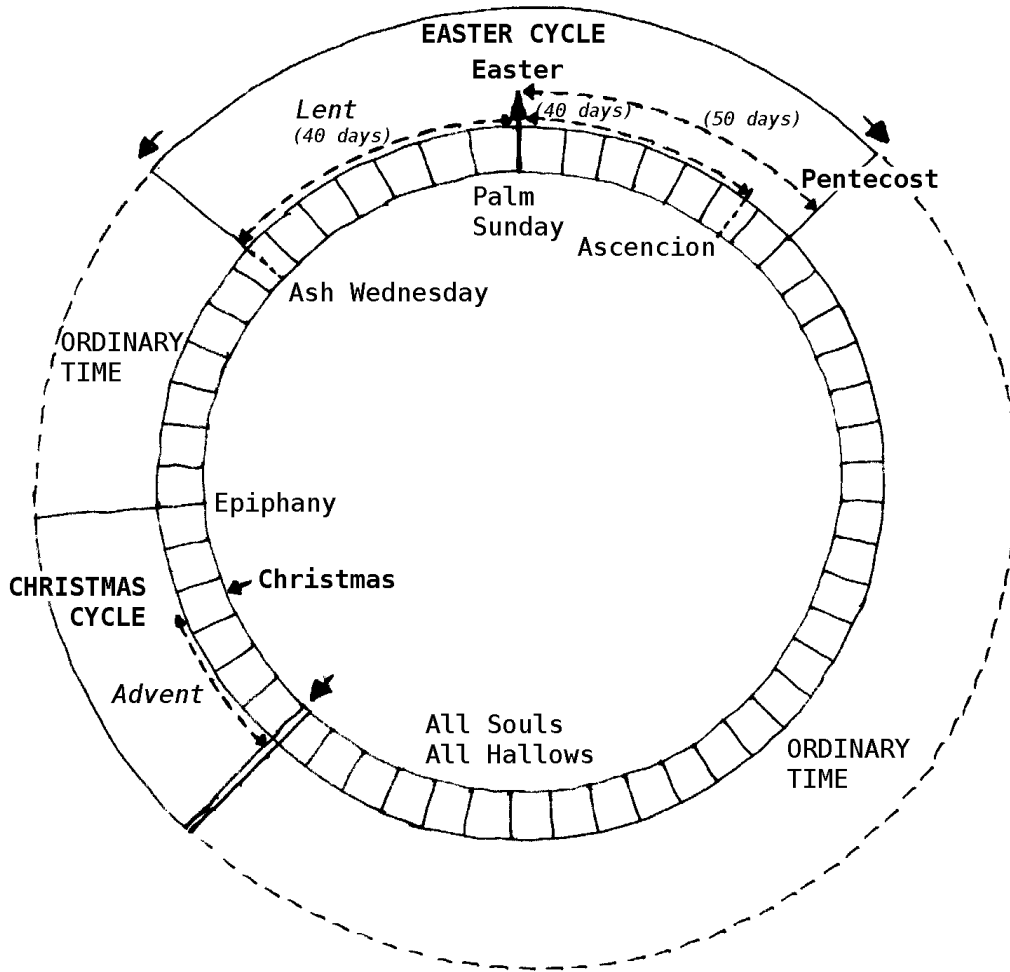
The church has odd ways of counting the time, because the times are in God's hand and not at our command. Lent has '40 days', but only if you do not count the Sundays; from Easter to Ascension Day it is '40 days', and '50 days' to Pentecost, but now Sundays are included. Strictly speaking Advent is just a series of 4 Sundays, rather than a special period in time. '40' refers to the 40 years the people of Israel lived in the desert, the 40 days Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the 40 days the people of Nineveh repented etc. '50' comes from the Jewish way of counting the time from Pesach ('Pass-over') to Shavu'ot ('Festival of Weeks')

In general Advent and Lent are times of preparation and reflection, possibly penance too, while the 3 Sundays after Christmas and the 6 between Easter and Pentecost are especially festive times. In the early church Lent was especially important, for this was the time that new members ('catechumens') prepared themselves for their initiation in the night before Easter. This included study, prayer and fasting, and on Easter morning they would be baptized, clothed in white and admitted to eucharist for the first time. Most of the year counts as 'Ordinary Time', because work and worship belong together.

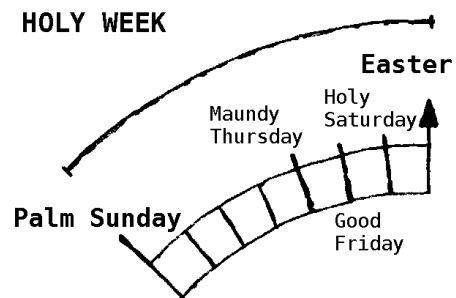
To keep track of the time colours can be used. Basically there are four: purple for times of reflection and preparation, white (or gold) for high feasts, red for Pentecost and green for ordinary times. Colours can be used in stoles and altar or pulpit cloths.

purple:	Advent and Lent
white/gold:	Christmas + 3 Sundays, Easter + 6 Sundays
red:	Pentecost
green:	all other Sundays

Red can also be used at ordinations, weddings etc. Purple or white can be appropriate for funerals. Some churches use black for Good Friday and funerals.



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The Days in Holy Week