

St Leonard's Church Year

What, Why, When

Introduction for teachers and readers

Christian worship celebrates and commemorates the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth through the solar and calendar year, the progress of which was also marked ceremonially in pre-Christian and prehistoric times.

St Leonard's Church is in the "united benefice" of Flamstead and Markyate, which are two adjacent parishes. It is part of the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church, and is in the mainstream of Christian belief as practised in England.

To bring to life the church year of St Leonard's Church, this article is written from the perspective of a committed member of the Christian faith community.

The article is suitable for use within and beyond school, in terms of age, culture, and belief. Here we make some suggestions for its use in an age-appropriate way. The reading age is 12 years plus.

For teachers, the article enables learning across the aims of Religious Education. For both them and older school-age children it especially provides hooks for exploring the theological basis of Christian belief, including its conceptual underpinning. To support this, key terminology and concepts are given in bold text. These are amply explained in <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/schools-education-and-childcare/schools-and-collegescadem/bedford-borough-sacre/bedford-borough-sacre-syllabus>.

For younger children, teachers, parents, families and carers, this article offers teachers and others a means of introducing imagery, symbolism, and ideas. It also shows the children that they're not alone in enjoying dressing up!

We hope you find this article to be an excellent resource.

St Leonard's Church Year

Advent

The church year begins on the first Sunday of Advent and follows Christ's life and death throughout the year until the Feast of Christ the King in November the following year.

The word **Advent** means 'arrival' or 'coming'. At the start of the church year we commemorate the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and anticipate his eventual second coming. We celebrate this season in the four weeks before Christmas when, traditionally, there are no flowers displayed in church as we are waiting patiently for something incredible and wonderful to happen. By tradition, churches are not decorated for Christmas until after 17th December, the only addition being a wreath of evergreens that surround the five Advent candles. The wreath of evergreens represents eternal life and its never-ending circle.

One candle is lit each Sunday in the run up to Christmas and each has its own special significance. The first **purple** candle is lit on the first Sunday in Advent and is the **Candle of Hope for God's People**. The next Sunday the second **purple** candle is lit for The Prophets of the Old Testament and is the **Candle of Peace**. The third Sunday's **pink** candle for the Blessed Virgin Mary is known as the **Candle of Joy**. This Sunday is also known as **Gaudete Sunday**, from the Latin for 'rejoice!' The fourth Sunday's **purple** candle is lit for John the Baptist

and is known as the **Candle of Love**. The Final **white** candle is lit for Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve and represents the purity and innocence of the newly born Christ child. The flame reminds us that He is the light of the world.

Advent carols (The Advent Wreath, Hills of the North Rejoice and O come, O come, Emmanuel Carols) are sung, but Christmas carols must wait until 24th December, when we can sing loudly and truly celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

The Crib scene will be set up during Advent, but the Three Kings will not be there because they arrive later on. The manger will remain vacant until Christmas Eve, when the baby Jesus will be placed there at the Children's Service.

On 6th December we celebrate the feast day of **St. Nicholas of Myra**. St. Nicholas, the model for Father Christmas, is the patron saint of children and is known for his kindness and generosity. It is said that he saved three children from enslavement, or from being murdered, by paying off their captors. Since he is also the patron saint of pawnbrokers, you will often find three golden balls on their shop signs, which echo the giving of three bags of gold to set the captive children free. On the Continent of Europe, children may put their shoes by the hearth on this day, hoping that St. Nicholas will tumble gold coins and sweets down the chimney to fill up their shoes. In the UK, this is the origin of why we hang up our stockings on Christmas Eve and leave a treat by the

fireside for Father Christmas/Santa Claus.

The front of the Altar and the clergy's robes, called **vestments**, will all be **purple** during Advent. **Purple** is the colour of royalty and at this time we are watching and waiting for the arrival of the baby that would, one day, become a king and the saviour of all mankind. **Purple** also signifies that this is a season of penitence. A few people still give up something for Advent as well as for Lent.

Christmas

Although we tend to think that Christmas ends on 6th January, within the church the season of Christmas goes on until 2nd February, when we celebrate **Candlemas**.

Naturally, on Christmas Day St Leonard's will be filled with beautiful flowers and many candles to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. From Christmas Eve until after Candlemas all the vestments and the altar frontal will be **white** and **gold**, because this represents purity and joy after the unadorned time of Advent. Although there will be many flowers and evergreens in our Church, there will be no mistletoe since this has been seen as a plant that was central to Pagan worship. Oddly though, the date of Christmas may well have been fixed near the winter solstice as this date was sacred to our Pagan ancestors.

The Feast Day of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is 26th December.

Technically, the vestments and altar frontal should change to **red**, because this represents the blood of those who lost their lives for their faith in God.

Smaller churches tend to stick with **white** and **gold** for convenience. St. Stephen is the patron saint of horses, amongst other things, so on his feast day there may be much sporting activity!

The original mince pies were oval in shape and had a tiny pastry baby on the top to represent the Christ child in the manger. The exotic spices that they contained also reminded people of the far-off land where Jesus was born.

Tradition says you should eat a mince pie every day for the whole twelve days of Christmas to ensure good luck all year round!

Our medieval forefathers really looked forward to the Feast of Christmas, when they were entitled to twelve days of holiday since there were so many saints' days at that time of year. There's Christmas Day, St. Stephen's Day, the Feast Day of John the Apostle and Evangelist, the Feast Day of The Holy Innocents, and the Naming of Christ at The Temple, - and this is all rounded off by the arrival of the Three Kings on 6th January.

Epiphany

The meaning of the word **Epiphany** is a sudden moment of clarity or understanding. In St Leonard's we celebrate the arrival of the Three Kings at

Epiphany on 6th January. On this day the figures of Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar will be placed by the crib to signify their arrival from afar. The three gifts are actually a prophecy of Jesus's life. **Gold** was given because he would become a King. **Frankincense** was given because he would become a priest. **Myrrh** was given because this plant, made into an oil, was used to anoint the dead. It therefore foretold Jesus Christ's suffering and death on the Cross. Alternatively, the three gifts can be said to represent purity (gold), prayerfulness (frankincense: this is also why incense is used during services) and suffering (myrrh).

The origins of the Christmas cake are a nod back to the great cakes made for the end of Christmas on **Twelfth Night**, in medieval times, when there was much feasting and revelry one last time. On this day, and just for one day, masters became servants and servants became masters. Travelling players, called **mummers**, arrived to perform cheeky stories and sing bawdy songs. The roots of this go way back to the Roman mid-winter festival of **Saturnalia** and, beyond that, back to the Pagan winter festivals of our ancient ancestors. These events were the predecessors of our modern pantomimes and all the fun that they generate.

Although the Christmas trees will come down on this day, the Church stays in celebratory mode until 2nd February. (From medieval times to the time of Oliver Cromwell (1649), festive decorations stayed in place until

Candlemas.) The first Sunday after Epiphany is known as Plough Sunday and, on this day, farms and farming implements were blessed to ensure a fruitful harvest later in the coming year.

Candlemas

This is the last day of the season of Christmas within our Church. On 2nd February, we celebrate the **Presentation of Christ in the Temple** and the Church is filled with candles for one last Christmas hurrah. Elsewhere we discuss the Churching of Women: the time when Mary, the mother of Christ, was blessed and purified according to the ancient Jewish rite. We call this day **Candlemas** because, in times past, all church candles were blessed for use throughout the coming year. All frontals and vestments will remain **white** or **gold**.

Ordinary Time

After Candlemas we go into a period of the year called **Ordinary Time** until the start of Lent. Since Easter is what we call a **movable feast**, meaning that its date is determined astronomically, Lent starts within two or three weeks of the end of the Church's Christmas season. This is a period of relatively quiet activity. The vestments and altar frontal are changed to **green** to represent growth and new life, bringing to mind the verdant seasons of spring and summer.

Lent

The word 'Lent' comes to us from the Anglo Saxon 'lencten', meaning 'lengthen', which was used by them as the word for springtime. This period lasts from **Ash Wednesday** until **Easter Eve**. As mentioned before, this is a period of penitence and abstinence. Many observe this season by giving up small pleasures or indulgences in an echo of the sacrifices Jesus made when he went into the desert to pray for forty days before dying on the Cross. The days of abstinence do number forty, but you are allowed Sundays off as they are classed as days of refreshment!

The colour for this season is **purple**, to symbolise penitence. All vestments and frontals will be this colour until the fourth Sunday of Lent, when **pink** vestments are used. The use of the colour **pink** roughly marks the mid-point of Lent and is known as **Laetere Sunday**, meaning 'Rejoice!' in Latin. (**Pink** vestments may also be worn on the third Sunday of Advent for the same reason.) This day is also **Mothering Sunday**, when nowadays small posies of flowers are given out to the mothers in the congregation. Originally, though, this was the day when you returned to your **Mother Church**: the church that baptised you.

From the beginning of Lent until Easter Day, all crosses and crucifixes are covered as a mark of respect. On 25th March, the **Annunciation of Our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary** is celebrated. For this day only, the vestments and

frontal are changed to white to signify purity and joy. The **liturgical** (meaning formal ceremonial) colours then revert to **purple** until Palm Sunday, when they move to **red** to represent the death of those that die for their beliefs. From the start of Lent until **Maundy Thursday** there are no flowers in the church. ('Maundy' comes from the Latin word 'mandatum', meaning to command. it refers to the instructions Christ gave his disciples at the **Last Supper**.) On Maundy Thursday vases of pure white lilies are grouped round the altar in a representation of the **Garden of Gethsemane**, where Jesus was betrayed and arrested. After a silent, candlelit vigil until midnight, the church is stripped of all colour and the altars are left bare, except for a crown of thorns. The lilies are set aside and all the crosses are removed. On **Good Friday**, a service of Holy Communion will take place at about 2pm, ending at 3pm, the time at which Christ finally died upon the cross.

Easter Day

For **Easter Day**, our Church will have been transformed, and filled with fragrant, spring flowers and lilies. All the vestments and the altar frontal will have been changed to **white** and **gold**, and the crosses and crucifixes unveiled and put back in position. A **Service of The Dawn** usually takes place, when worshippers gather in a darkened church to await the breaking of the dawn on Easter morning. This is a day of great rejoicing and

thanksgiving after all the hard work of Lent.

The word **Easter** is fabled to derive from Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn. On the other hand, it may simply come from the old Germanic 'Oster', meaning 'eastern' or 'erstehen', meaning resurrection.

The colours in church will remain **white** and **gold** until **Pentecost**, except for the saints' days belonging to St. George, St. Mark the Evangelist, Saints Philip and James, and St. Matthias the Apostle. Ten days before Pentecost, we celebrate **Ascension Day**, the day when Christ bodily rose into heaven. The Sunday before Ascension, we mark **Rogation Day**. The word 'rogation' derives from a Latin word meaning rust or disease. This has its roots in Pagan and Roman customs, when on Rogation Days people marched around fields saying prayers and leaving offerings to the gods of the harvest. Today, we follow our medieval forefathers to walk around the parish boundary and bump into some poor unsuspecting souls at the marker posts.

Pentecost

Pentecost, meaning fifty days after Easter, or **Whit Sunday (Whitsun)**, marks the descent of the **Holy Spirit** into the disciples of Christ. This time of year was met with great joy by medieval agricultural workers, who were given time off because there was a natural pause in the farming calendar. It was a time of

general happiness and festivity, and its roots may be found in the Pagan festival of 'Beltane'. Although the word Whitsun is derived from **White Sunday**, all vestments and frontals will be **red**. On this occasion, **red** represents the burning fire of the Holy Spirit.

Trinity Sunday

Trinity Sunday is celebrated one week after Pentecost. All vestments and frontals will be **white** and **gold** to reflect that this is a principal feast of the Lord and the purity of faith. This Sunday is used to celebrate the Christian doctrine of the **Trinity**: Father, Son and Holy Spirit united as one.

Corpus Christi

Corpus Christi (the body of Christ) is celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. The vestments and frontals remain the same as for Trinity Sunday, for the same reason. On this day, we recall the consecration of bread and wine at the Last Supper, through the ceremony of the **Eucharist**, the sharing of bread and wine at Holy Communion.

Ordinary Time

After Corpus Christi, churches move back into a quieter mode and vestments and frontals revert to **green** to represent growth and new life. During this extended period of time in the church calendar, which lasts until the end of

September, we take a slight step back and use this time to reset and refresh before the busier times to come.

Ordinary time after Corpus Christi lasts, more or less, for three months. From time to time, though, we celebrate some saints' days, for example St. Alban, St. Peter and St. Paul, as well as days marked for certain apostles, and feast days for the birth of John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. The festival of the **Transfiguration of our Lord** is also marked at the beginning of August.

St Michael and all angels

On 29th September we mark the biblical story of the triumph of good over evil, in which St. Michael and his brother angels succeeded in finally banishing **Lucifer** from heaven for ever more. (Lucifer is one of the names used for Satan or the Devil in English culture and religion). With the help of the other Archangels, called Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel, the Devil was expelled from Heaven once and for all. Michael is God's avenger, Gabriel His herald, Raphael His protector, and Uriel His interpreter and keeper of His sacred light. This day is also known as **Michaelmas. Michaelmas, Lady Day** (the feast day of the Annunciation), Midsummer Day (feast day of John the Baptist) and Christmas Day the (feast day of the Nativity) are the four quarter days when rents were paid and servants were hired. Our Anglo-Saxon ancestors called September 'halig monat,' or holy month, due to all its feast days, starting with the

feast day of the nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 8th September, and ending with the celebration of Michaelmas on 29th

September. Vestments and frontals will be **white** and **gold** for the purity of faith.

Harvest Festival

This festival of thanksgiving is held on the Sunday closest to the harvest (full) moon, after the autumn equinox. On this day, we thank God for the earth's fruitfulness and share our harvest gifts with those in need. From now until the beginning of November, the vestments and frontal will remain **green**. Only a couple of days are marked for lesser saints. **Hallowe'en** is not celebrated in church as this has many parallels with the old Pagan festival of Samhain. The vestments and frontal will be **white** and **gold** for the reasons mentioned for Trinity Sunday.

All Saints Day

1st November is the day when we remember all the saints and martyrs that have died in the Christian faith and the good works that they did when alive. The older name for this day is **All Hallows Day**, the day before being **Hallowe'en**, which is **All Hallows Eve**.

All Souls' Day

On this day we remember the faithful departed and vestments will be **black** out of respect for the dead. A memorial

service is held and the names of people we wish to remember are read out. This marks the beginning of the short season of remembrance.

Remembrance Sunday

This is the Sunday closest to 11th November and is a day dedicated to remembering the terrible events of the wars of the 20th century and those who died in the service of their country. All around the UK, services will take place and a minute's silence is observed by all.

Black vestments will be worn, but the altar frontal will be dressed in **red** to honour those who died.

Kingdom

This is the final season of the liturgical year and all vestments and frontals will change to **red**. This is a time for celebration and reflection on Christ's reign on earth and in heaven and over all living things. It culminates in the **Festival of Christ the King** at the end of November (the last Sunday before Advent). The feast day of Christ the King is the end of the church's year and the vestments and frontal are usually **red** or **white** and **gold** for the reasons you now know.

Coming full circle

Now we have arrived at Advent to begin our church year again, in a circle of remembrance, continuity and renewal.