

TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

“So teach us to number our days,” writes the psalmist, “that we may apply our hearts to wisdom”. (Psalm 90:12) All of us mark the passage of time in a variety of ways. We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries to mark the passage of years. We think in terms of weeks and months and seasons. We mark our days with meals and periods of work, play, and rest. So, too the church keeps a calendar by which days, weeks, years, and lives are numbered. These cycles of remembrance in the church guide us in numbering our days “that we may apply our hearts to wisdom”.

Since its earliest days the church has divided each day by periods of prayer. The followers of Jesus knew well the morning and evening sacrifices of the temple and adapted these to Christian worship. Over time these daily devotions developed into an elaborate round of “offices” throughout the day and night in which the Scriptures were read, hymns sung, and prayers offered. Throughout the history of the Anglican Communion, the services of Morning and Evening Prayer have provided the framework for our daily devotion and study. The Book of Common Prayer maintains these forms for daily prayer, as well as services of Noonday Prayer and Compline (at the close of the day). The continuous reading of the bible is at the core of these services, and the Daily Office Lectionary (p.934) provides a two-year cycle for the reading and study of Holy Scripture. There are also one-page versions of each of these which are especially suited for use by individuals and families (p.137).

The Christian week is marked by the keeping of the Lord’s Day. The celebration of Sunday, the first day of the week, recalls the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit. It should be noted that, although the distinction has been blurred by time and culture, the Jewish keeping of the Sabbath and the Christian celebration of the Lord’s Day have distinct meanings. The Sabbath, the seventh day, is the day of rest in honor of the creation; Sunday is both the first day and the “eighth day”, celebrating the reign of Christ in which we are a “new creation”. Christians should remember both meanings.

The celebration of the year has developed in Christian tradition over the centuries. In it are two cycles: a fixed cycle of days revolving around Christmas, the feast of the incarnation, and a movable cycle of days based on the date of Easter, the feast of the resurrection. Included in the fixed cycle are the seasons of Advent and Christmas, as well as festivals such as the Epiphany on January 6 – the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles (“the twelfth day of Christmas”); the Annunciation, March 25 (nine months before the birth of Jesus); and the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, June 24 (near the summer solstice as Christmas is near the winter solstice, recalling John’s prophecy, “He must increase, but I must decrease”). Included in the Easter cycle are the seasons of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter (the great 50 days from Easter to the Day of Pentecost), and Trinity Sunday (the Sunday after Pentecost). The remaining days of the year fall in season of flexible length following Epiphany and Pentecost.

The church also maintains a calendar of commemorations through the year which recall the lives and examples of those who have gone before us in the faith. These range from a celebration of holy men and women of the Old Testament, to characters from the Gospels (such as Mary and Martha of Bethany,

Joseph of Arimathea) to great figures throughout church history (Thomas Aquinas, exemplary Anglicans such as Thomas Cranmer) to people who have left their mark in recent times (Jonathan Myrick Daniel, the latest addition). These observances are listed in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, and each contains a collect and lessons appointed for the day, as well as a biography of the person being remembered.

But by far the calendar of the greatest scope is made up of the acts of worship which see each of us through our lives. As the community of the faithful, we join together for confirmation, marriage, ordination, burial of the dead. These and other acts form the life of the Christian community. And they are all supported by the two great sacraments which sustain us in all we do: baptism, our initiation into the household of God, and Eucharist, the common meal where we gather at God's table.