

# ***Fractals: Alternative Resources for Worship in the Emerging Culture*** **(Mark Pierson, 2004)**

## **Section 4: The Church Year**

(1400)

### **Introduction**

(1401)

### **Observing the Church Year : What is it and why would you want to use it?**

This section has some explanation of what the Church Year is, followed by some of the ways we have recognised the events of the Year.

These notes are written primarily for those who are working within traditions that are not familiar with using the church calendar.

In its most basic form the Church Year (also called Church Calendar and Christian Year) is an assigning of events in the Christian Story to dates in the year on which they are remembered or celebrated. It is designed to cover these events in the order they appear in the Bible. Over time a large number of other celebrations and memorials have been attached to this calendar, e.g. saints days. At Cityside, we use a basic calendar of biblical events, with the addition of some local, national, and international events.

The advantages of using the Calendar in this way are numerous:-

#### **It links us to Christianity through the ages and across space.**

The origins of the calendar go back many centuries, and our contemporary use links us to the ancient traditions of the Church, reminding us that the faith we follow is not new. It also links us to the Christian communion worldwide, as we all remember the same aspect of the Christian story at the same time. This isn't without its problems as the different seasonal images, i.e. weather patterns, between Northern and Southern hemispheres mean some work needs to be done 'downunder' to make some of the traditional images work. For instance, in the south, Easter Sunday with its resurrection and new life themes, is in Autumn and not Spring.

#### **It renews our relationship to time, and makes connections to our personal rhythms and the rhythms of the Christian story.**

Moving through the events of the Calendar gives shape to our understanding of the Christian Story – it has a beginning and an ending and locates a person and a church community in a spiral dimension of time, a circular as well as a linear one – things come round again and again, but are going somewhere – what have we learnt, how have we grown and changed since this time last year? It gives something to look forward to, as we mark off seasons and months, a sense of rhythm and shape. This is particularly helpful in Auckland, New Zealand, where I live, as the seasons show little change in weather patterns. It also helps people to have a sense of story and shape to their own personal lives.

#### **It proclaims a present gospel.**

In 'Liturgy and Learning through the Life Cycle', pp54-63, John Westerhoff III and William Willimon (Seabury Press, 1980) talk about how the Church year proclaims a present gospel – there's an eschatological message of Jesus' living presence now and to come – the calendar should not be just about preserving and remembering, but also about proclaiming the ever present gospel. 'Christian time' opts out of both cyclic time and chronological time (See 2 Corinthians 6:2) It is celebration, not commemoration: not historical recollection, but remembering who we are, now. "As we share in the church's cycle of the soul, its festivals, feasts, and fasts, we each begin to discover our personal story as an integral aspect of the Christ story and the human story" (page 63). "Our celebrations make time into 'our' time" (page 54).

#### **It distinguishes between and connects with the whole of our life.**

The Christian calendar also helps to distinguish between the times and rhythms of the Christian story and secular times and rhythms. It reminds us who we are, and how this relates to the world and culture around us. We can ask ourselves how the themes and rituals and values attached to secular celebrations correspond to, or differ from, those of the Church, and what response we might want to make in our own observance. For example, to what extent will we absorb the rituals that accompany our culture's celebration of Christmas? And what rituals occur in secular life that could enrich our experience of the Christian story?

**It's a way of teaching the faith and establishing Christian and personal Identity.**

It identifies key events in the Christian journey for particular reflection – e.g. incarnation and crucifixion/resurrection and helps people to soak up Christian doctrine through participation, image, prayer, and story, rather than just in a verbal teaching context. Repetition is important in cementing things in our inner beings – the familiar can enable engagement at ever deeper levels of our selves rather than things always being new and superficial. Repetition can also become trite and meaningless... this is a tension to bear in mind.

As well as celebrating the Christian year, churches need to pay attention to the other significant days, festivals, and transitions that go into making up the identity of the congregation. Some of these are personal. Others are shared by the culture around us, such as national days, Mother’s day, days of remembrance, etc. Examples of some of these are included in the sections that follow. It’s important to develop a sense of what dates are important for your congregation or group to observe, rather than just picking up on things randomly from other cultures – including the culture of consumerism. It's also important to not just be 'anti' a celebration that is in the culture. Find the heart or historical core of the event and transform it rather than trying to put a gloss over it (Mothers Day is an example of this; see section 4 b.18 below).

Denham Grierson says: “One of the dangers afflicting us in modern life is that all events become the same, indistinguishable from all other events, flowing together to form an undistinguished, even monotonous pattern. No spaces are observed, no vigils set, no silences held. Nothing in particular is honoured. As a consequence, everything in general is in danger of losing its meaning. That, after all, is the significance of Sunday: a day when we stop, and recover, and reflect and remember who God is, and therefore who we are in the light of our confession to be his children. But we need to make our lives deeper and richer in ceremonial tradition. Only in such ways is the meaning of our lives enhanced, the significance of our human journey recognised and upheld. It has been said of our present generation in contrast to those of other generations: ‘They were experience rich and stimuli poor; we are experience poor and stimuli rich.’ We would add: and as a consequence, without meaning. It is time we began to attend to such things, intentionally, deliberately, intelligently. Perhaps the first step is to look at the rituals we honour and which define us – or, more accurately, those we neglect because we have ceased to notice them. Is it not time in relation to this matter of rituals that we asked each other, ‘Did you observe that?’ ”  
 (‘Did You Observe That?’ in *On the Move* Issue 40, April 1983, pages 3-4)

**An overview of the Christian year and its significant dates as celebrated by Cityside**

(See more detail in section introductions below).

NB. This is not a complete calendar. There are feasts and Holy Days celebrated by various Christian traditions that do not appear on this table. For a full calendar, check out an Anglican or Catholic prayer book or do a web search. There is some variation between the different calendars when it comes to the detail of colours and specific days.

| Date                                    | Event                               | Season  |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| 4 <sup>th</sup> Sunday before Christmas | First Sunday in Advent              | Advent (4 Sundays)<br><br>Purple/Violet   |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Christmas | Second Sunday in Advent             |   |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Christmas | Third Sunday in Advent              |   |
| Sunday before Christmas                 | Fourth Sunday in Advent             |   |
| <i>December 21</i>                      | <i>Summer Solstice (SH)</i>         |   |
| December 25                             | Christmas Day                       | Christmas (12 Days)<br><br>White/Gold   |
| December 26                             | Boxing Day + St Stephens Day<br>Red |   |
| <i>January 1</i>                        | <i>New Year's Day</i>               |   |
| January 6                               | Epiphany                            | Epiphany (Variable length, depending on timing of Easter. Runs to last Sunday before Lent ) |
| <i>January 27</i>                       | <i>Holocaust Memorial Day</i>       |   |
| <i>6 February</i>                       | <i>Waitangi Day</i><br>Green        | White/Gold  |
| <i>14 February</i>                      | <i>Valentine's Day</i>              | Sundays before Lent (Ordinary)<br><br>Green   |

|   |  |              |  |  |
|---|--|--------------|--|--|
|   | Shrove Tuesday   | Green        |  |  |
| 6 Sundays+ 4 days before Easter Day                 | Ash Wednesday  | Violet       | Lent (40 days before Easter Day, not counting Sundays)                                   | Passiontide (begins 5 <sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent)                        |
| <i>21/22 March</i>                                  | <i>Autumn Equinox (SH)</i>   |              |  |  |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent                      | Palm Sunday  | Red          | Holy week  |  |
|   | Maundy Thursday  | Red          |  |  |
|   | Good Friday  | No Colour    |  |  |
| First Sunday after the full moon after the equinox. | Easter Day   | White        | Eastertide (Runs for 50 days after Easter Day, not counting Sundays. Ends at Pentecost.) |  |
| <i>25 April</i>                                     | <i>ANZAC Day</i>   |              |  |  |
| <i>11 May</i>                                       | <i>Mother's Day</i>  |              |  |  |
| <i>22 May</i>                                       | <i>World Water Day (since 1993)</i>  |              |  | White  |
| 40 days after Easter Day (Not counting Sundays)     | Ascension Day  | White        |  |  |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Ascension              | Day of Pentecost (Whitsunday)  | Red          |  |  |
| First Sunday after Pentecost                        | Trinity Sunday   | White        | Ordinary time (variable length, depending on timing of Easter)                           | Green  |
|   |  |              |  | Kingdomtide (last Sunday of August to first Sunday of Advent is an option) |
|   |  |              | Creationtide (from Spring Equinox to first Sunday in Advent is another option)           | Blue   |
| <i>21/22 June</i>                                   | <i>Winter Solstice (SH)</i><br><i>And roughly at this time...Matariki (Maori New Year)</i> |              |  |  |
| <i>6 August</i>                                     | <i>Hiroshima Day</i>   |              |  |  |
| <i>7 September</i>                                  | <i>Father's Day</i>  |              |  |  |
| <i>21/22 September</i>                              | <i>Spring Equinox (SH)</i>   |              |  |  |
| 31 October  | All Hallows Eve (Halloween)  |              |  |  |
| 1 November  | All Saints' Day  | White        |  |  |
| 2 November  | All Souls' Day   | White        |  |  |
| <i>1 December</i>                                   | <i>World AIDS Day</i>  |              |  |  |
| Last Sunday before Advent                           | Christ the King  | Red or Green |  |  |

NB. SH = southern hemisphere.

There are also many Jewish festivals that can be celebrated as part of the Christian year, and other local and national days. In New Zealand the Maori New Year begins with the first new moon after the first appearance of the star cluster Matariki (Pleiades), usually around the end of June. Some iwi (tribes) celebrate the appearance of the bright star Puanga (Rigel) that appears about the same time, rather than Matariki. Either way the time is a celebration of life and respect for the source of life. A time of lamenting those who have passed on and welcoming the new season. It marks the start of the crop planting season and the gathering of pikopiko (fern fronds) and native berries. It is also seen as a good time to fish. Another seasonal round of regeneration in the natural world is marked. Matariki is a time for celebration, storytelling, and ceremony. A Kiwi Christian spirituality could find much to build on and connect with in this season.

The Church year is based around two annual cycles centred on Christmas and Easter, with periods of non-seasonal ordinary time in between. The Christmas season is fixed to actual calendar dates. The seasons relating to Easter need to be calculated by counting the Sundays before and after Easter Sunday, which varies with the cycles of the moon. The different parts of the year have become associated with certain seasonal words, prayers and reading material, seasonal music, colours, and seasonal actions (e.g. lighting the advent candles). More detail for each section follows below.

Awareness of how the Seasons of the year are reflected in the church's worship is important – it is helpful for the songs and mood of the music, for example, to relate to the more explicit references to the season that might be made in the choice of Bible texts or preaching. I will always remember going to a large Pentecostal church for their highly publicised Good Friday multi-media service and opening with the hymn 'Up from the Grave He Arose'. They ignored the suffering and skipped straight to the resurrection.

You can use colour and visuals to reinforce the themes of the season. We drape a long length of cloth (about 6 metres/yards) the colour of the season over our large wooden cross. The different symbolic words and actions and images should co-operate with rather than compete with each other. Colour can be introduced through banners, pieces of cloth draped or hung from pulpit or cross, flowers, etc.

The lectionary, developed from the ancient church, is a system of assigning set biblical texts - a Psalm, Gospel, Letter, Old Testament - to each day of the year. You can purchase these in book form from most mainstream denominational bookstores or find them online. Search under *lectionary*.

At Cityside, I introduce each major Christian festival by bringing out a set of about 20 cardboard boxes. Each box is painted matt black and has the name of a festival or season chalked on one edge. I place the box of the day in the center of the floor and members of the congregation call out which box comes either side until we have set up the full Year. It also works well with a clothesline strung across the space and a series of 'towels,' bearing the name of each festival or day, pegged along it.

### **A note about Daily Cycles.**

In addition to the rhythms provided by the principal seasons of the Christian Year, the Church has traditionally observed the rhythms within each day, and structured prayer accordingly. A web search ([www.universalis.com](http://www.universalis.com) is a good start) for Lauds (Morning Prayer), Little Hours (Prayer through the Day), Vespers (Evening Prayer/Evensong), Compline (Night Prayer), Matins (Office of Vigils - in the middle of the night!) and also Benedictus, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis... will give you some good possibilities for reframing and remediating these ancient forms in your context.

We recently ran a series of Lauds or Morning Prayers at a Christian Arts Festival. Running for 20 minutes from 8.30am we modified a liturgy from the Iona Community's *A Wee Worship Book* (Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow: 1999) and chose a different scripture reading and slide of associated art for each morning (see *Imaging the Word* (Kenneth T. Lawrence ed., Jann Cather Weaver, Roger Wedell, United Church Press: Cleveland, Ohio, 1994, 3 vols.) for art and texts linked to the lectionary).

At Cityside we offer an unstructured hour of silence at 7.30 am on Wednesdays. A candle tray, icons, and other images and texts are available. Those who use this tend also to use a prayer stool in order to kneel for the hour.

NB.

1. A useful source for non-religious designated days to celebrate can be found in the United Nations International Days list at [www.intuition-in-service.org/main/unitednations/specialdays/index.html](http://www.intuition-in-service.org/main/unitednations/specialdays/index.html)

2. A very detailed background to the Christian Year can be found in *The Evolution of the Christian Year*, A. Allan McArthur. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1953.