



# Festivals Christmas and Easter

Eduqas A level R.S. G1A Christianity Theme 4C

## Key Concepts:

- Similarities between Western and Orthodox churches at Christmas:
- Each has a period of preparation prior (**Advent/Nativity Fast**) with **liturgical colours** (violet-purple-blue/red-gold).
- Many Christians in each church attend a service the evening prior (Christmas Eve/Eve of the Nativity). This can include an all-night vigil.
- Christmas is a day of celebrating, feasting and exchanging gifts, though there is less **consumerism** in Eastern Orthodox cultures.
- Differences include more of a focus on fasting prior to Christmas in the Eastern Churches – the Eve of the Nativity has an especially strict fast.
- Western churches have distinct tradition during advent: Advent calendars, Advent wreaths, carol services, nativity plays and a **Christingle service**.
- Western churches celebrate Christmas on 25 December (Gregorian calendar); Orthodox churches on 07 January, following the **Julian calendar**.
- In the West there are traditionally three Eucharist services at Christmas (midnight, dawn, day); there may be a **Plygain** (Wales-early morning carol service); in the East there is a feast using a white tablecloth to represent the linens in which Jesus was wrapped.
- Similarities at Easter include both West and East engaging in the period of **Lent**, recalling Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11).
- Lent is viewed as a time of spiritual development, self-denial and fasting.
- **Holy week** is celebrated beginning the sixth Sunday of Lent; this remembers Jesus' celebratory entry into Jerusalem when palm branches were laid down on the path before him by his followers.
- Holy Week includes remembering the last supper on Thursday (Maundy Thursday/Holy and Great Thursday); remembering the events of Jesus' torture and crucifixion (Good Friday/Holy and Great Friday) and culminating in a joyful celebration of the resurrection on Easter Sunday morning.
- Differences include Lent beginning on **Ash Wednesday** in the West (ashes made from previous years' palms placed on foreheads) and **Clean Monday** in the East (spiritual cleansing; fasting).
- The Lenten seasonal colour is purple in the west and white for Orthodox.
- During Lent **Laetare** (rejoicing) and Mothering Sundays are celebrated; Orthodox churches have a commemoration of St **Gregory Palamas** and Mary.
- Good Friday ends with darkness in the West, extinguishing candles and black clothes laid over furniture and symbols. In Orthodox churches a cloth icon (**Epitaphios**) is placed on a bier (a moveable frame for a coffin).
- In the West, churches on Easter uses white and gold colours and some have a tradition of attaching flowers to the Lenten cross; in Orthodox churches there is a procession outside the darkened church, an announcement that Christ has risen and then all enter to worship.

## Key arguments/debates:

Some may see Easter between East and West as two very different celebrations. This is because the eastern lead up to Easter is stricter in terms of fasting and worship practices than the West and uses traditions such as the procession outside of the church on Easter morning (midnight of Easter-eve). Yet, both churches do view Lent as a time of spiritual preparation and Easter as a celebration of the resurrection.

Though it may appear that Christmas is a more important festival than Easter because of its cultural popularity, it could be argued that Easter is the more important festival given the focus of the first Christian kerygma on this event (see Acts 2). Of course, it could be argued that both festivals evolved from pagan holidays and that the most important event in Christianity is the proclamation and living out of the kerygma throughout the year.

## Key questions:

- How do differences in the way Lent is commemorated affect Easter celebrations?
- What are the most striking differences between Orthodox and Western churches at Christmas? At Easter?
- What key Christian teachings are celebrated at these two festivals?
- Which festival acts as a greater 'outreach' for the Church – and why?

## Key words:

**Advent Nativity Fast | liturgical colours | consumerism | Christingle service | Julian calendar | Plygain | Lent | Ash Wednesday | Clean Monday | Holy week | Palm Sunday | Laetare | Gregory Palamas | Epitaphios**



## Key quotes:

- 'Jesus' coming is the final and unanswerable proof that God cares.'* (W. Barclay)
- 'We are an Easter people, and alleluia is our song.'* (Augustine)
- 'The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed!'* (An Easter greeting used in East and West)