



Easter: Introduction to the Season from Common Worship Times and Seasons

The Great Fifty Days of Eastertide form a single festival period in which the tone of joy created at the Easter Vigil is sustained through the following seven weeks, and the Church celebrates the gloriously risen Christ:

Triumphant in his glory now,
his sceptre ruleth all,
earth, heaven and hell before him bow,
and at his footstool fall.

(*Fulbert of Chartres*)

Early Christians gave the name Pentecost to this whole fifty-day span of rejoicing, which Tertullian calls 'this most joyful period' (*laetissimum spatium*). It is sometimes also called 'Great Sunday'. In those places where the custom of lighting the Easter Candle at the beginning of Easter is followed, the lit Candle stands prominently in church for all the Eastertide services. The Alleluia appears frequently in liturgical speech and song; Morning Prayer begins with the traditional collection of Pauline texts known as the Easter Anthems, and white or gold vestments and decorations emphasize the joy and brightness of the season.

On the fortieth day there has from the late fourth century been a particular celebration of Christ's ascension. He commissions his disciples to continue his work, he promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then he is no longer among them in the flesh. The ascension is therefore closely connected with the theme of mission. The arrival of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost completes and crowns the Easter Festival.

Pentecost (from the Greek *pentekoste*, 'fiftieth' of fifty days of celebration) has its roots in the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which was completed on the fiftieth day after Passover. On the fiftieth day of Easter, God sends his Holy Spirit to empower the Church to perform the mission which the risen Christ has entrusted to it; and he inaugurates the messianic community of perfect communication. Pentecost celebrates both the Holy Spirit and the Christian Church. It was originally the crown and completion of the Easter season; only later, in the medieval West, did it become a new festival season of its own. After the Easter Vigil, the time of Pentecost was a preferred occasion for baptism in early Christian centuries, and the services of Pentecost also reflect this baptismal theme. Christ's disciples are born again of water and the spirit. There is some evidence that the ascension was first celebrated on the fiftieth day of Easter, but it was soon moved to the fortieth day in faithfulness to Luke's chronology. Ascension and Pentecost are closely linked. The risen Lord is no longer present to the Church in the body of his flesh; the Church is now to be the new body of Christ, filled with his life through the gift of the Spirit.

The Sunday after Pentecost came to be kept in the West as Trinity Sunday, although it was not prescribed as a universal feast until 1334. In a sense, every feast must be a festival of the Trinity, because the whole Trinity is at work in every moment of creation, redemption and sanctification; but Trinity Sunday provides a particular occasion to reflect on the revelation of God's self as Trinity, immediately after the Great Fifty Days of Easter.

