

Liturgical Colours – an informal explanation

You may have noticed that new silk embroideries have been appearing in some of our churches recently. These are new burses and veils for the communion chalice. The veil is placed as a cover over the chalice, the burse is on a stiff board which can stand upright next to the chalice and at the end of communion the white linen which has been used is tucked inside it. These burse and veil sets are in different colours, purple, white, green and red. Some churches also have coloured altar frontals and curtains in these colours too. Not every church has them, but, where they are used, I've been asked about the different colours, so I thought I'd write a brief explanation.

The colours mark the progress of the church year which begins on the first Sunday of Advent, progresses, broadly, through Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity and all the Sundays after trinity, to the last Sunday of the year, Christ the King.

The first season of the year then is Advent and during this time the liturgical colour is purple. The purple theme reappears during Lent. These seasons are seasons of preparation when we get ready to celebrate the great celebrations of Christmas/Epiphany and Easter. Traditionally this preparation takes the form of penitence which is why people often give up something they enjoy (like wine or chocolate) for lent. It's a time of self-examination when we consider how we are living our lives, and how we might improve our spiritual life. The purple colour, though it might seem opulent, is a dark dye (but not black which we associate with death), a sombre and serious colour to remind us that we all have human failings and need to allow God's light to illuminate our lives.

The contrast then between the purple colour of Advent and Lent and the dazzling white or white and gold (one might even describe it as bling) for Christmas and Easter which follow immediately after the purple weeks is very striking. Gold of course is a precious and highly valued metal, so this is appropriate for the church's high festivals and feasts. White is a colour of purity. It is also a colour which is very difficult to keep clean – I can confirm that embroidering on white needs a lot of washing of hands. So white is used only for very special occasions – in the days before washing machines, apart from personal items of linen, ordinary people didn't wear white outer garments, being able to do so was a sign of status – being special. It is appropriate for very special times of the year.

The green weeks largely fill the rest of the year – these weeks are termed ordinary time. There's always at least a few days of ordinary time between the end of Epiphany (celebration of the visit of the wise men) and the start of Lent, and ordinary time starts again at Trinity Sunday and lasts all the way to the penultimate Sunday of the year – which could be as many as 34 Sundays in a row in a year where Easter is early. The green for this season reflects the colour of nature, the creation and it is a colour for growth and health, so appropriate for those long summer months and the fruitful early autumn.

The year is also punctuated by various days which are celebrated with the liturgical colour of red. The primary day for the red dressings is Pentecost when the church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit as wind and fire on the apostles. However red is also used for the celebration of Christ the King at the end of the year and for the commemoration of martyrs. The red reflects the fire at the first Pentecost and also the blood of the martyrs. It is a colour to re-ignite the spirit with renewed vim and vigour.

Next time you're in church, you might like to look out for the new embroideries which seem to be inveigling their way in.