

Sundays and other Celebrations of the Church's Year

On Sunday, September 14, 2014, the Church celebrates the feast or festival of the Holy Cross. In the Book of Common Prayer of the Church in the Province of the West Indies (BCPCPWI), reference is made to the fact that such celebrations take precedence over Sundays. Two reasons are given. First, “all Sundays of the year are feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ” (BCP p.10). This celebration means every liturgy or worship experience has as its focus the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Hymns, prayers, sermons, readings from scripture and other songs and drama, etc., all point to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Second, some “feasts appointed on fixed days...take precedence over a Sunday.” Lectionary readings and the corresponding Collect or prayer for the day replace the readings designated for the season after Pentecost or the set Proper. In the example given above for the feast of the Holy Cross, the set readings for Year A are for Proper 19. These readings are to be found on page 677 of the BCP with the corresponding Collect on page 178. With the feast of the Holy Cross, as a feast of Christ, these readings and Collect are to be replaced by those for Holy Cross on page 698 and 188, respectively. Additionally, hymns and song selections are to correspond appropriately to the readings for the feast day as is the case for other celebrations, including Sundays. Such selections are to be made from the CPWI hymnal or other sources.

As noted above, other feasts of Jesus that take precedence over a Sunday are: the Epiphany, the Naming of Jesus, the Presentation of the Lord and the Transfiguration. All these are to be observed if they fall on a Sunday as is the case with the feast of the Holy Cross cited above. If the feast day falls on a weekday the

celebration is transferred to the following Sunday for pastoral considerations. In this sense the observance is said to be within the octave of the feast. Octave means the celebration is being observed within the eight-day period of the celebration.¹ All feasts have a cycle of eight days for celebration and arose in contexts in which the event was literally celebrated for eight days. Though most festivals no longer have such protracted celebrations, provision is still made for not just one day but eight.

A similar observation is made at Christmas when the feast of the Nativity or the birth of Jesus is celebrated. On such occasions the celebration lasts not for eight days but for twelve. In this case more than one Sunday is included as opposed to the eight-day cycle or octave for other feasts. Another example is the celebration of the resurrection at Easter. Here the celebration lasts for forty days. Central to all these celebrations is the life and work of Jesus Christ. Such celebration is designed to form the faithful into the character of Christ, hence care should be taken to select appropriate hymns and songs that best reflect the life of Christ and the character of the faithful we wish to see as a consequence (II Cor. 5:17).

There is one exception to be noted. All Saints Day, set for November 01, may also be observed on the following Sunday. In some Roman, Lutheran and Anglican Churches the feast has traditionally been observed on a Sunday. In fact, from as far back as Pope Sixtus in the fifteenth century the celebration was mandated to be held on Sunday since it corresponds to the celebration of the lives of all the saints, especially those enthroned with Christ in heaven (BCP p.131). In this sense the

1 John Switzer, 203, What is an Octave? <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=78ec2e6c-4e9b-45a5-9da4-8b43c2aa0122%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4106>

celebration, though not a feast of our Lord, is nevertheless associated with those cited above.

One final note to take into account is that the list of other feast days on page 10 of the BCP are not to be observed on Sundays unless it is the patronal celebration of the Church. For example, only congregations named in honour of St. Peter and St. Paul would observe the celebration on a Sunday. This decision was taken at a Provincial Synod in 2007.

From the foregoing the implication is for worship leaders to take great care in preparing for celebrations of all feast days as well as Sundays. In particular, it would help to go through the liturgical year and mark on a calendar the fixed days indicated in the BCP on page 10. Liturgical calendars and diaries, usually published in North America and Europe, highlight such celebrations. Careful planning, especially through appropriate selection of hymns and songs, including special choir selections, should take into account the formation of the character of the faithful in accordance with the life of Christ (Eph. 1:1-10).