

CHRISTMAS DAY

Lord Jesus Christ, your birth at Bethlehem draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth: accept our heartfelt praise as we worship you, our Saviour and our eternal God. Amen.

Almighty God, you have given us your only begotten Son to take our nature upon him and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin: grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

26 December

**Stephen,
Deacon,
First Martyr**

Gracious Father, who gave the first martyr Stephen grace to pray for those who took up stones against him: grant that in all our sufferings for the truth we may learn to love even our enemies and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt, looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us, Jesus Christ, our mediator and advocate.

Amen.

© The Archbishops' Council of the
Church of England

26 December

**Stephen,
Deacon, First Martyr**

In the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen is described as one of the seven deacons whose job it is to care for the widows in the early Church in Jerusalem. His eloquent speech before the Sanhedrin, in which he shows the great sweep of Jewish history as leading to the birth of Jesus, the long-expected Messiah, and his impassioned plea that all might hear the good news of Jesus, leads to his inevitable martyrdom by being stoned to death. The description of Stephen in Acts bears direct parallels to that of Christ in Luke's gospel: for example, the passion; being filled with the Holy Spirit; seeing the Son of Man at the right hand of God, as Jesus promised he would be; commending his spirit to Jesus, as Jesus commended his to his Father; kneeling as Jesus did in Gethsemane and asking forgiveness for his persecutors. Witnessing to Jesus by acting like Jesus in every way is thus seen by Luke as of the essence of the Christian life.

Sourced from 'Exciting Holiness'

27 December

**John
Apostle and Evangelist**

Merciful Lord, cast your bright beams of light upon the Church: that, being enlightened by the teaching of your blessed apostle and evangelist Saint John, we may so walk in the light of your truth that we may at last attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ your incarnate Son our Lord.

Amen.

© The Archbishops' Council of the
Church of England

27 December

**John
Apostle and Evangelist**

Whether or not John the Apostle and John the Evangelist are one and the same, the Church honours on this day the one who proclaims Jesus as the Word made flesh and who is 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. John was one of the sons of Zebedee, along with James, who followed Jesus. John was there at the Transfiguration of Jesus on the holy mountain; he was there with Jesus at the last supper; he was there with Jesus in his agony in the garden; he was there with Jesus and his mother, standing at the foot of the cross; he was there with Jesus as a witness of his resurrection and 'he saw and believed'. John was a witness to the Word, he proclaimed the Word, and he lived and died witnessing to the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, who loved him and whom he loved.

Sourced from 'Exciting Holiness'

28 December

The Holy Innocents

Heavenly Father, whose children suffered at the hands of Herod, though they had done no wrong; by the sufferings of your Son and by the innocence of our lives, frustrate all evil designs and establish your reign of justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

© The Archbishops' Council of the Church of England

28 December

The Holy Innocents

Herod 'the Great' was appointed King of the Jews by the Roman authorities in Palestine and he proved to be ruthlessly efficient in his thirty-three years of dealing with his subjects. In Matthew's gospel, he tried to persuade the Magi, to whom he played the host on their journey seeking the one 'who has been born king of the Jews', to bring word of where they had found him. His desire was to eliminate Jesus and, when he realised that the Magi had tricked him and left the country, Herod had killed all the children under the age of two, in and around Bethlehem. These were God's 'innocent' ones, paralleling the story of Pharaoh slaughtering the Hebrew children in Egypt.

Sourced from 'Exciting Holiness'

29 December

**Thomas Becket
Archbishop of Canterbury,
Martyr, 1170**

Lord God, who gave grace to your servant
Thomas Becket to put aside all earthly fear
and be faithful even to death: grant that we,
disregarding worldly esteem, may fight all wrong,
uphold your rule, and serve you to our life's end;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

© The Archbishops' Council of the
Church of England

29 December

**Thomas Becket
Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr**

Thomas was born in London in 1118, of a family of merchants. After a good education he served as clerk to another burgess then entered the service of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. Thomas proved himself an excellent administrator and skilled diplomat. In 1155 he was appointed Chancellor by Henry II. For several years King and Chancellor worked harmoniously together in mutual admiration and personal friendship. As a result, the King nominated Thomas as Archbishop of Canterbury to succeed Theobald in 1161. From the start there was friction, with Thomas insisting on every privilege of the Church. The conflict worsened until 1164 when Thomas fled to France. Encouraged by the Pope he pursued his arguments from exile, sending letters and pronouncing excommunications. Three efforts at mediation failed before an apparent reconciliation brought him back triumphant to Canterbury in 1170. But the nobility still opposed him, and words of anger at court led four knights to journey to Canterbury where they finally chased Thomas into the cathedral, and murdered him there on this day in 1170. Thomas was undoubtedly a proud and stubborn man, for all his gifts, and his personal austerities as Archbishop were probably an attempt at self-discipline after years of ostentatious luxury. His conflict with Henry stemmed from their equal personal ambitions exacerbated by the increasingly international claims of the papacy, played out in the inevitable tension between Church and State.

Sourced from 'Exciting Holiness'

1 January

The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus

To us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and he shall be called the Prince of Peace.

You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.

You have done great things, O God, and holy is your name.

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was circumcised in obedience to the law for our sake and given the Name that is above every name: give us grace faithfully to bear his Name, to worship him in the freedom of the Spirit, and to proclaim him as the Saviour of the world; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

1 January

The Naming and Circumcision of Jesus

The celebration of this scriptural festival marks three events: firstly, the naming of the infant Christ as Jesus; secondly, the circumcision as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham ‘and his children for ever’, thus Christ’s keeping of the Law; and thirdly, traditionally the first shedding of the Christ’s blood. The most significant of these in the gospels is the name itself, which means ‘Yahweh saves’ and so is linked to the question asked by Moses of God: ‘What is your name?’ ‘I am who I am,’ was the reply, hence the significance of Jesus’s words: ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ This feast has been observed in the Church since at least the sixth century.

Sourced from ‘Exciting Holiness’

2 January

**Basil the Great and
Gregory of Nazianzus
Bishops, Teachers of the Faith
379 and 389**

Lord God, whose servants Basil and Gregory proclaimed the mystery of your Word made flesh, to build up your Church in wisdom and strength: grant that we may rejoice in his presence among us, and so be brought with them to know the power of your unending love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

© The Archbishops' Council of the
Church of England

2 January

**Basil the Great and
Gregory of Nazianzus
Bishops, Teachers of the Faith**

Gregory and Basil were two friends bound together by their desire to promote and defend the divinity of Christ as proclaimed in the Nicene Creed. This was against the seemingly overwhelming pressure from both Church and State for the establishment of Arianism, which denied Christ's divinity and thus the whole Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Basil was renowned for being headstrong and forceful, in comparison to his friend, Gregory, who would rather spend his days in prayer and living the simple ascetic life. Gregory's brilliance in oratory and theological debate meant that a hidden life was virtually impossible, and Basil drew him into the forefront of the controversy. Their joint persuasive eloquence convinced the first Council of Constantinople, meeting in 381 that their teaching was the truly orthodox one and the Council ratified the text of the Nicene Creed in the form in which it is used in the East to this day. Basil died in 379 and Gregory ten years later.

Sourced from 'Exciting Holiness'

6 January

The Epiphany

O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: mercifully grant that we, who know you now by faith, may at last behold your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

© The Archbishops' Council of the
Church of England

6 January

The Epiphany

The subtitle in the Book of Common Prayer for this, one of the principal feasts of the Church, is 'The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles'. This emphasises that, from the moment of the incarnation, the good news of Jesus Christ is for all: Jew and Gentile, the wise and the simple, male and female. Nothing in the Greek text of the gospels indicates that the Magi were all male: even the idea that there were three and they were kings is a much later, non-scriptural, tradition. The date of this feast goes back to the tradition of the Eastern Church, which celebrated both the Nativity and the Baptism of Christ on 6 January, whilst the West celebrated the Nativity on 25 December. As often happens, the two dates merged into a beginning and an end of the same celebration. The Western Church adopted 'the twelve days of Christmas' climaxing on 5 January, the eve of Epiphany, or 'Twelfth Night'. The implication by the fifth century was that this was the night on which the Magi arrived. The complications of dating became even more confused with the changing in the West from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar, the Eastern Church refusing to play any part in such a radical change. So this day remains the chief day of celebrating the incarnation in Orthodox Churches.

Sourced from 'Exciting Holiness'

The Baptism of Christ

Eternal Father, who at the baptism of Jesus revealed him to be your Son, anointing him with the Holy Spirit: grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit, that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

© The Archbishops' Council of the
Church of England