

SEASONS AND FESTIVALS

The year of the seasons is the interval of time which the sun requires to make a complete circuit of the sky, vernal equinox to vernal equinox, springtime to springtime. Four key events occur in this year: 1) The sun's crossing of the equator going north on or about the 21st of March, called the vernal equinox, taken as the beginning of spring. 2) The sun's attaining its maximum northerly position on or about the 22nd of June, called the summer solstice, taken as the beginning of summer. 3) The sun's crossing of the equator going south on or about the 21st of September, called the autumnal equinox, taken as the beginning of autumn. 4) The sun's attaining its maximum southerly position on or about the 22nd of December, called the winter solstice, taken as the beginning of winter.

The world of nature, the world of weather, plants and animals, is closely guided by the seasons. The seasons not only carry changes in light and dark, warmth and cold, but also changes in mood and feeling, changes in what might be termed the quality of time. For these reasons, since prehistoric times the seasons have been marked, measured and celebrated. The ritualistic observance of the solstices and equinoxes, the beginnings and ends of the seasons, was the basis for both the religious and economic life of most primitive peoples. Through the centuries pagan cultures enhanced their rituals of the annual cycle. Their calendars became increasingly sophisticated, with many supplementary sacred dates being added to the solstices and equinoxes. For the religious life of more recent times, the Church proved itself adept at adopting and adapting these pagan festivals, relabeling them and gradually modifying their emphases. However, in this process, there was an innate wisdom that understood, whatever the label, there was a special significance to the dates themselves, and these must not be changed. The same wisdom also saw that places that had been recognized by pagans as sacred were sacred and though a church might replace a grove or temple, the selection of locations for places of worship was not an arbitrary matter.

Of particular meaningfulness to us, because of their influence on our present calendar, are the festivals of the Celtic peoples who inhabited Britain, Ireland, Wales and much of western Europe in pre-Roman times. The Celts had established an elaborate set of annual rituals associated with the solstices and equinoxes and with four additional days, known as cross-quarter days, all with vestiges in our present calendar. Referring to the Table I, Bridgit or Imbolc, the cross-quarter day of mid-winter, celebrated on February 2, was dedicated to the Triple Goddess Brigit who represented the three phases of womanhood--maiden, mother, and crone. The Church took this as the date of the Purification of the Virgin or the Presentation in the Temple, or Candlemas but retained February 2.