

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CALENDAR

by David Allen White

When I started writing this column several years ago I wasn't sure I would always have something to say, but each month I've managed to come up with something. Sometimes it has related to what was going on at St. Paul's, sometimes it had to do with the Episcopal Church, sometimes it was the world around us. Some articles were about history, some about theology, some about liturgy, some merely for entertainment. I'll let you decide where this one fits.

As I write this, we are about to end the old church year and start a new one, and it has made me think about the calendar. Judaism and Islam have their own stand-alone calendars with months and years, but Christianity has a calendar that only works against the backdrop of an already existing civil calendar that came into existence in the Roman Empire, and with few modifications is still in use today. Our Christian year begins on the Sunday nearest 30 November, which we call the First Sunday in Advent, but without the civil calendar we wouldn't know when November was, or what day was the 30th. Our lectionary for Mass is based on a three-year cycle, and this Advent begins Year B. Our lectionary for Morning and Evening Prayer is based on a two-year cycle, and because 2015 is an odd-numbered year, we are now in Year One. Notice that Year One starts in Advent of the preceding year.

Have you ever thought about the days of the week? Why are there seven of them? One day comes after another, and we could just as easily have arranged them in groups of five or ten, as some ancient peoples did. Why seven? Scientists tell us that certain biorhythms in the human body work on seven-day cycles. Other organisms, including bacteria, share these biorhythms. But the idea that there are seven days in the week dates from around 700 B.C. with the Babylonians, who probably didn't know about biorhythms. The Babylonians instead developed a calendar with seven days in the week named for the gods, or what they thought were gods: the sun, the moon, and five planets that they could see before the invention of the telescope: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, in that order. In classical Latin they were called *Dies Solis*, *Dies Lunae*, *Dies Martis*, *Dies Mercurii*, *Dies Jovis*, *Dies Veneris*, and *Dies Saturni*. This is why in Spanish Monday through Friday are called *lunes*, *martes*, *miércoles*, *jueves*, and *viernes*. Days of the week are not capitalized in Spanish.

However, when the Church took over the running of the Roman Empire, it was considered unseemly to use the names of pagan gods for the days of the week. Therefore Monday through Friday were called *Feria Secunda* (second day of the week), *Feria Tertia*, *Feria Quarta*, *Feria Quinta*, and *Feria Sexta*. They are similarly named in modern Portuguese. In Church Latin, Sunday was called *Dominica* (the Lord's Day) and Saturday was called *Sabbato* (from the Hebrew word for Sabbath), and the Spanish names *domingo* and *sábado* come from these Latin terms.

In English, which is a Germanic language, you might expect the names to be a little different, and they are. Sunday and Monday still come from the sun and the moon, but Tuesday is named for *Tyr*, or *Tiw*, a Norse god who is roughly the equivalent of Mars. Wednesday is named for *Odin*, sometimes called *Woden* or *Wotan*, the chief god in Norse mythology, not really the equivalent of Mercury. Thursday is named for *Thor*, a hammer-wielding god responsible for thunder and lightning, also not the equivalent of Jupiter. In German Thursday is called *Donnerstag*, Thunder Day. Friday is named for *Freyja*, the goddess of love in Norse mythology, and she is pretty much the equivalent of Venus. After all these

Norse gods it comes as a bit of a surprise that Saturday is still named for a Roman god, Saturn.

When I was teaching Spanish to English-speaking people, and English to Spanish-speaking people, I made up a little chart to show where these names come from. I thought it was rather fun, though I don't know if anybody else did. Perhaps you might enjoy thinking of all this as you make your Advent preparations.

God bless you all.