

# LITURGICAL COMMISSION & FOOTPRINTS OF GOD

## The Liturgical Colours

### Liturgical Colours

Have you ever wondered why priests wear different colours during church services and why some churches use different colours throughout the year? Where did this practice originate, and what do the scriptures have to tell? Is this a practice worldwide? How have we adapted local cultural symbolism and identity into worship through the use of colours? This article briefly explores the symbolism and significance on how the use of Liturgical colours enhances our worship today.

In the Bible, there are many instances where colours are used to convey a message. For example, when God promised Noah never to flood the whole earth again, a rainbow appeared as a sign of His promise. Thus, the rainbow has become a reminder that God always keeps His word. In the book of Exodus, God gave Moses specific instructions on how to build the Tabernacle, including the exact pattern, type of furniture, and colours to be used. The Tabernacle had seven symbolic colours with their meanings as follows:

- blue for divinity and the presence of God;
- purple for royalty, sovereignty, and God's kingship;
- scarlet for life sacrifice, atonement, and sins of the people;
- white for purity, holiness, righteousness and separation of priests;
- Gold for divinity and the unchanging nature of God;
- silver for redemption and atonement;
- bronze for judgement, purification and sacrificial system.

All these colours have been integrated into designs, patterns and images that inform our expressions of worship. In fact, the Bible is full of verses relating to the symbolic use of colours to express God's nature, message, and presence. Colours are used to describe God's creation, the way prayer goes to God, His presence, and the majesty of His holy place. Revelation 19:6-7 – Triumphant King; Acts 2:3- Holy Fire; Isaiah 1:18- Redemption; Psalm 150:6- Praise; Numbers 14:21-; 1 Peter 1: 18-19- love. The liturgical colours have, to an extent, captured these elements and added to the rich celebration of God's presence in worship.

Before the Reformation (19<sup>th</sup> Century) the Sarum Rite (use of Salisbury) was introduced as an attempt to produce an English expression of a Catholic Church in England. Variations in worship began to take place, signalling the importance of liturgy being reflective and relevant to the local context. Today, the Anglican Church continues to use some liturgical colours as the Roman Church, according to the season calendar.

In the 1980 Alternative Service Book (ASB), liturgical colours were recommended for seasons, with detailed advice offered as part of the Common Worship series of liturgies. This includes colours for all Sundays and festivals printed in the above-mentioned Collects and Provincial lectionary. Now, with the use of the Common Lectionary, the liturgical colours are explained in the first few pages of the lectionary.

The Church Calendar uses different sets of colours for each season. Plain, lighter colours, which were once used, have now been replaced by more vibrant colours in African and Asian churches. The most

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commonly used colours are white, red, green, violet, and black. Here is a list of colours you might see in church and when they are typically used:

White or Gold is a festive colour used for key services such as Christmas and Easter, baptisms, weddings, and significant feast days such as patronal feast days and saints not martyred. White is used for All Saints Days and also days after Epiphany. White is also used for funerals, especially for a child.

Purple (violet) symbolises repentance and penance and is used during Advent and Lent. The colour reminds us of the violet flower that bows its head and symbolises humility.

Green represents life, growth in nature, and the hope of a fresh start. It is the most commonly worn colour, especially during Trinity Sundays. is a time of the year when the church focuses on teaching and nurturing its members, equipping them with all the necessary knowledge and skills so that they may be faithful disciples of Jesus.

Red symbolises blood and fire and is commonly associated with the Passion i.e., Palm Sunday, Pentecost Sunday and the celebration of the sacrament of confirmation. It is also worn on the feast days of Martyrs of the Christian faith.

Rose pink is an alternative colour that may be used on the Third Sunday of Advent and the fourth Sunday of Lent. The antiphon invites us to rejoice in these days, signifying a less penitential tone during the season. It is a relatively new colour in our churches because it is used only twice yearly. However, a growing awareness of the season and the teaching during this time has led some to use this colour.

How, then, do churches in Malaysia use colours to express their faith? Colourful expression in worship has evolved beyond vestments and banners. In many ethnic churches (and some established churches), dancing with ribbons and tambourines is seen to create a beautiful visual representation of worship. Indeed, during festival days, this form of worship has resulted in an immersive and sensory worship experience that has touched the hearts of many young people.

Within the local community, different colours are used in church cultural celebrations. For instance, the Chinese community often incorporates red into their decorations and vestments, using red envelopes, lanterns, and designs to create a lively and festive ambience while preserving their ethnic identity and heritage. Likewise, the Indian community, when they celebrate the Pongal festival in January, offers praise and thanksgiving to God our Creator. One of the heritage art forms is making kolam (rangoli) with many vibrant colours and Christian motives to signify blessings, wealth, and peace. In our East Malaysian church communities, the use of many colours using the colours of the hornbill, signifies confidence, strength, trust, warmth, respect and true community sense. The use of Green and brown for the harvest of the land implies the Creator and provider of our existence.

The question that should be in the minds of liturgists is how we can create a Malaysian liturgy using different colours to express worship. Do we need to restore or reform the liturgical colours?

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In conclusion, the deliberate use of colours in the Anglican liturgy is a way of participating through beauty and art in the many seasons that celebrate our faith.

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