



FESTIVALS OF LIGHT

Light is a symbol of goodness in many cultures, and fire an important part of many customs around the world. Light and fire are important elements of celebrations all over the world, eg birthdays are often celebrated by lighting a candle for every year of the person's age

IDEAS TO EXPLORE WITH YOUR CLASS

Abbi and her friends decide to write a song about lights and about some of the winter festivals associated with light.

- The class might be divided into groups with each taking a religious or other festival in which lights or light are significant – they might present their findings to the class or make a whole-school display in the front hall or entrance where parents and visitors will see it.

Before the children begin work on the festivals of light, the teacher might initiate a discussion on how easily and brightly our homes are lit now, and how we feel about the dark. Are we frightened? What are we frightened of? How might our early ancestors have felt when they first discovered a spark/a flame/a fire? This might lead to a discussion about the positive feelings evoked by fire to this day – the warmth of a coal/turf/eco-log fire, the enjoyment of food cooked over flame, eg barbecue, or meats/vegetables/pizzas cooked in open wood-burning ovens. The children might know that in some countries food is nearly always cooked over open fires, either inside or outside the home, and suggest reasons for this practice (eg no chimneys in houses, communal cooking etc).

CELTIC PAGAN FESTIVALS WITH LIGHT

i **Samhain** (31 October) marked the beginning of the New Year in the Celtic calendar, and was thus especially sacred and significant. On the Eve of Samhain, time belonged to neither the Old Year nor the New, so boundaries between this world and the next, between the living and dead, between human beings and gods or forces of nature, were also blurred. Worlds intermingled, and the souls of the dead came to visit their former homes. In Ireland, at Hallowe'en, people used to carve faces into hollowed-out turnips and place a lighted candle inside to ward off evil and to deter the dead.

CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS WITH LIGHT

i The Christian year begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, a day that in some Christian denominations is still observed with a procession in a darkened church, lit only by candles carried in procession. In some of the Reformed denominations, people often have an Advent crown, and a candle is lit every Sunday during Advent (see below for simple version of Advent wreath).

The Christmas or Nativity story often tells of the coming of the wise men from the east – the Magi, who followed a star which led them to the manger where the young Jesus lay. Epiphany (6 January) is often celebrated by processions, especially common in southern Europe, in which people dressed as Magi arrive, bringing gifts, just as the kings brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Easter, the most important of all Christian festivals, happens on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. In Orthodox Churches, the church is dark and at the stroke of midnight/the new day, light is passed from one waiting celebrant to another and candles and lamps are lit. In Roman Catholic and some Anglican Churches, a new fire is lit to represent the light of Christ and a special Paschal candle is carried through the church, driving away the powers of darkness and death, and representing the light of Christ in his resurrection.

As part of the preparation for confirmation, some schools hold a Service of Light/Commitment to illustrate for the children the serious nature of the sacrament that they are about to take. In Roman Catholic schools, the service involves Mass and a procession with a lighted candle, as light has such huge symbolism for Roman Catholic ceremonies.

- Ask the children to investigate some Christian celebrations and feast-days which feature candles, eg the Filipino 'fiesta' on 8 December (see below for instructions on how to make lantern), St Lucia's day/Luciadagen (13 December) when families often make their own candles; or the Christingle (Christ-light), a tradition from Moravia – an orange with a lighted candle in the middle and cocktail sticks onto which are placed fruits, nuts and sweets representing the seasons and fruits of the earth.

ADVENT WREATH WITH LIGHTS

- 1 Ask an adult to chop three large potatoes in half.
- 2 Put them flat side down, and, with an apple-corer, make a small hole at the top (peak) of each half-potato.
- 3 Place four halves in a circle on a baking tray or flat plate and a fifth in the centre (discard the sixth).
- 4 Decorate the tray or plate with holly and ivy leaves, and/or small pine-cones.

- 5 Place a small red candle in each potato-half.
- 6 On each Sunday in Advent, light a candle, so that by the Sunday before Christmas four candles will be lighting.
- 7 The fifth candle is lit on Christmas Day.

Holly was traditionally added to a wreath hung outside on 21 December to show people that this house celebrated the birth of Christ.

TIN-CAN LANTERNS (from The Philippines)

- These lanterns would be hung in a dark place, maybe outside the house, to greet friends and neighbours. An adult is needed to hammer holes in the can, but it is relatively simple if a cleaned food tin or sweet tin is filled with water and frozen until solid, then the can placed on a folded towel before hammering the holes. A paper pattern with your own design on it could be secured around the tin and holes hammered accordingly. A night-light or candle is placed inside.

BUDDHIST FESTIVALS AND LIGHT

i Sangha Day is one of the main festivals marked by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. It falls on the day of the full moon in November and celebrates the love and friendship shared by the *sangha* or Buddhist community. On Sangha Day, the *mitras* (friends) visit their local Buddhist centre for a day of celebration. After lunch, people sit together and talk about their hopes and fears. In the evening, there is a special *puja* (worship) in the shrine room, which is beautifully decorated with red banners and flowers for the occasion. People often exchange small gifts and there might be a firework display.

Many Buddhist festivals happen at the time of the full moon when the most important events in the Buddha's life are said to have happened. In Buddhist countries, *Wesak* is celebrated on the day of the full moon in April or May. *Wesak* is the most important of Buddhist festivals, and celebrates the three important stages in the Buddha's life – his birth, his enlightenment and his death. It is traditional to hang up colourful lanterns and to light candles to mark the Buddha's birthday. Celebrations last three days and houses are cleaned and decorated with flowers, candles and lanterns. The lights or lanterns

stand for the Buddha's enlightenment: they light up the darkness just as the Buddha's teaching lights up the world. In Thailand, *Wesak* ends with a candlelit procession. In Sri Lanka, people decorate their homes and *viharas* (monasteries) with lanterns or candles, and small oil lamps are lit to symbolise enlightenment or illumination.

MAKE A LANTERN:

- Glue some pieces of coloured tissue paper over a small/shallow clear glass jar; place a night-light inside and hang it up by tying some string around the top of the jar. Now light it. Children might also read stories from the life of the Buddha and explore the diversity of symbolism in Buddhism.

O-bon is a Mahayana Buddhist festival which is celebrated in Japan in July or August. It is a time for remembering people who have died and to welcome their spirits home for their yearly visit. On the first day of the three-day festival, people decorate their homes with lanterns, place herbs and flowers on the family shrine, and light small fires to welcome the spirits home. On the second day, there is a great feast and everyone in the village takes part in a traditional folk dance. At the end of the O-bon festival, miniature boats made from paper or straw, and filled with tiny candles, are set sailing on lakes and rivers to carry the spirits back to their world. People pray before casting the spirit lights adrift.

MAKE YOUR OWN FLOATING SPIRIT LIGHTS

- Fill a glass bowl with water. Float small, flat candles on the surface for a glittering effect. Do not leave burning candles unattended.

Type into browser for resource material on Diwali:
<http://www.ngfl-cymru.org.uk/vtc/ngfl/re/b-dag/ngfl-container/re-unit3-en.html>

HINDU FESTIVALS WITH LIGHT

i Diwali (or Divali) means 'rows of lighted lamps' and is a festival celebrated by Hindus worldwide. Diwali lasts for five days in late October or early November. Small oil-burning lamps (*dipas*), made from clay, appear on pavements, walls, roofs etc of homes and businesses – villages and cities are full of light during this festival. Some people say the lights are a tribute to Lakshmi, the goddess of luck and prosperity: the more lamps there are, the more likely that the goddess Lakshmi will bring wealth.

Diwali commemorates the return of Rama – Prince Rama and his wife, Sita, were banished for fourteen years from their home in the city of Ayodhya by her father, the king, and sent into the forest with Rama's brother Lakshmana.

During the festival, people dress up in their best clothes, meet their friends, eat special food and give each other sweets.

- The children might make *dipas*, using self-hardening clay and a small amount of vegetable oil to cover the wick which is placed on the inside. Small 'jewels' made of paste could be used to decorate the outside of the *dipas*.

Diwali Valthukaal = 'happy Diwali' in the Tamil language.

HINDU HOLI

- i** Holi is celebrated by Hindus in India and all across the world. Is it marked on the day after the full moon during the month of Phalunga and it celebrates the start of spring. It commemorates the story of Holika, sister of the demon king, who was burned to death in a fire that was meant to kill the king's son. On the evening before Holi, bonfires are lit in the streets and coconuts are roasted in the fire. Sometimes a model of Holika is thrown on to the bonfire.

SIKH FESTIVAL WITH LIGHTS

- i** Sikh Diwali/Divali provides an opportunity to explore the idea of good triumphing over evil, and is an autumn festival of light commemorating the founding of the Harimandir Sahib, or Golden Temple, in Amritsar, during Diwali in 1577 CE. At Diwali, Sikhs also remember the story of how Guru Har Gobind (Horgobind), the sixth Guru, was released from prison in 1619 CE. When he returned home, the people lit lamps in every house to welcome him. Sikhs today put hundreds of lights around the Golden Temple.
- Sikh Diwali may be explored in similar ways to Hindu Diwali, even though the central story is not the same – friendship, caring and being true to one's beliefs could be emphasised.

JEWISH FESTIVAL AND LIGHTS

- i** Hanukkah is an eight-day festival in November/ December. The Hanukkah story took place in the hills around a sleepy

village called Modin, Israel. 'Hanukkah' means 'dedication', and the festival marks the rededication of the Temple.

The Roman Emperor Antiochus IV, who came to power in 200 BC, persecuted the Jews. Antiochus raided the Temple in Jerusalem and ordered an altar to Zeus to be built there instead. After three years of fighting, a group of Jews known as the Maccabees defeated him, but their temple had been destroyed. When it was cleaned and rebuilt, the Hanukkah menorah was lit.

This menorah has nine candlesticks, one for each day of the festival, and the ninth candle, called the *shamash* or servant candle, which stands apart from the others, is used to light the other candles.

But they had only one jar of the special olive oil needed to keep the menorah burning. Only the purest oil could be used to keep the flame alight – it was made from the first drop of oil from each olive pressed.

A miracle occurred: the oil lasted eight days and the menorah, with its lights, became a symbol of goodness.

During Hanukkah, huge flames are lit in cities all over the world in memory of the menorah that burned for eight days instead of one. It is a festival of lights and celebrates this miracle in Jewish history.

Hanukkah is a special time for children, with gifts being given on each of the eight nights; it is also a time for eating special foods that are cooked in oil, eg latkes, pancakes and jam doughnuts called *sufganiot*.

- Look for examples of the menorah in museums and examine the designs. The Irish Jewish Museum is located in the once highly Jewish-populated area of Portobello, around South Circular Road, Dublin 8. Adult and school groups can be catered for by telephoning 085-706-7357.
- Find out from the internet how to play the special Hanukkah spinning-top game *dreidel* or *sevivon*.
- Read Chapter 7, 'The Festival of Lights', pp67–80 of *17 Martin Street*, by Marilyn Taylor, and find out how Hanukkah was celebrated in wartime Dublin in the 1940s (ISBN 978-1-84717-125-2).
- Children might research how the festival is celebrated nowadays in various places around the world; they might compare celebrations and note the similarities and differences.