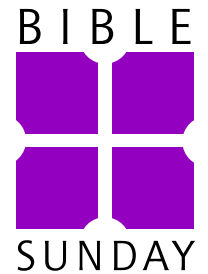


WELCOME THE WORD: Advent, Christmas and Epiphany – In Between Times.



Advent

Advent has been observed since at least the 4th century. Originally, it was a time when converts to Christianity prepared themselves for baptism. During the Middle Ages, Advent became associated with preparation for the Second Coming. In early days Advent lasted from 11th November, the feast of St. Martin (of Tours), until Christmas Day. Advent was considered as similar to a pre-Christmas season of Lent when Christians devoted themselves to prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Many Christians understand Advent both as a season to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus and to prepare for the incarnation of Jesus. More commonly however, it is seen as a time of anticipating the birth of the infant Jesus on Christmas Day.

Advent comes from the Latin word for an "arrival" or a "coming". So Advent means that the Lord is coming. Jesus Christ, our brother and our God is about to arrive. He comes to us in different ways: Jesus came at a specific time in history to Bethlehem about 2000 years ago. Yet in the Church's great feast of Christmas he mystically comes to us again each year. As the Alpha and Omega, he will come to judge the living and the dead in the Second Coming or Parousia. At all times and in all places he speaks to us in our hearts. He comes to us in the Eucharist and in the Word of God proclaimed. He comes to us in a myriad of ways, often in the people we meet and the experiences we encounter.

The Bible Sunday readings on the Second Sunday of Advent enable us to reflect on some of the promises and prophecies throughout the Bible that prepare us for Christ's birth and mission on earth. In *Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 84: 9-10; 11-12; 13-14; 2 Peter 3:8-14* and *Mark 1: 1-8* we hear how creation itself responds to the coming of Christ. We hear how God made covenants with his people and how they disobeyed him; yet restoration is at hand and all shall be made new in this little boy.

Christmas

The word *Christmas* derives from the combination of *Christ* and *Mass*. It is the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is second only to Easter in the Liturgical Calendar. We might be surprised to find that Christmas was not celebrated by the early Christians. The custom was to celebrate a saint's birth into eternal life i.e. their death. So Good Friday (Christ's death) and Easter Sunday (His Resurrection) became the focus of commemoration. To this day, the Catholic Church only celebrates three birthdays: **Christmas, the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Birth of John the Baptist.**

It took a while for the Church to develop the feast of Christmas. While it may have been celebrated in Egypt as early as the 3rd century, it did not spread throughout the Christian world until the middle of the 4th century. At first it was celebrated along with Epiphany on 6th January but slowly Christmas was separated and given its own feast day on 25th December. Many of the early Church Fathers regarded this as Christ's actual date of birth.

As our UK population is so diverse we are reminded that different cultures celebrate Christmas in a variety of ways; each culture brings established traditions to this sacred season. The Dutch, for example, celebrate the feast of St Nicholas on 5th December as a pre-Christmas ritual with presents, poetry and specific food. St Nicholas (Sinterklaas) was a 4th-century Christian saint and Greek Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor (Turkey). He performed many miracles and his habit of secret gift-giving gave rise to the model of Santa Claus. St Nicholas wears a bishop's robes, red cape and mitre and has several helpers as his travels on horseback, while distributing presents, are re-enacted annually.

In the western hemisphere, Christmas is celebrated in winter and there are powerful connections to be made with the coming light of Jesus overcoming the darkness of the season as well as the world. We notice that the Advent readings begin to refer to the light such as on the 3rd Sunday of Advent in John's Gospel 1:6-8; 19-28 where John the Baptist proclaims that he is a witness to the light, and that the true light is Jesus. So that by the time we celebrate Christmas the idea of light is so strong that we cannot ignore it. Indeed, the first reading for midnight Mass on Christmas Eve (Isaiah 9:1-6) is one of the prophet's most beautiful and comforting. *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone."* These are words of enormous promise. These are the words which we shout with joy as we experience the great light of Christ on Christmas Day.

Epiphany

Epiphany or the 12th day of Christmas falls on 6th January in the West and marks the official end to Christmas for Christians. Epiphany is the feast day that celebrates the revelation of Jesus Christ as a baby to the Three Wise Men (the Magi) who had travelled from the East to Bethlehem. The word 'Epiphany' comes from Greek and means 'to show', referring to Jesus being revealed or shown to the world.

In the West, Christians began celebrating the Epiphany in the 4th century, associating it with the visit of the Wise Men to Jesus. According to Matthew 2:1-12, the men found Jesus by following a star right across the desert to Bethlehem. Tradition then developed the idea that these men were Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar and represented different parts of the world. Melchior - Europe, Caspar - Arabia and Balthazar - Africa. On seeing Jesus in a manger, Matthew says that they bowed down immediately and offered symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts highlighted the importance of Jesus' birth: gold represented his royal standing; frankincense his divine birth; and myrrh his mortality.

Across the world, Epiphany festivities vary. In the Spanish-speaking world, Epiphany is known as Dia de los Reyes (Three Kings' Day). In Mexico, crowds gather to taste the Rosca de Reyes - Kings' bread. In other countries such as France, Germany and Holland, a Jesus figurine is hidden in the bread or a special 'Three Kings' Cake' is made with a coin hidden inside and whoever finds it in their slice is king for the day. During the mediaeval period, Christmas was celebrated for the 12 days from Christmas Eve on December 24, until the Epiphany. Even up until the 19th century, the 6th January was as big a celebration as Christmas Day. By the middle of the 6th century, Advent, Christmas and Epiphany had become an established sacred season with distinct feast days dedicated to the coming, arrival and manifestation of Jesus Christ.

Are we ready?

Are we ready to welcome Jesus whenever he comes, however he comes? In this focus on past, present and future, Advent symbolises both our individual journey and our collective journey as the Catholic Church. We live in the in-between period of our salvation - between the two comings, and this is at the heart of the tension of Advent. We wait in expectation since Christ, risen from the dead and now present among us in mystery, will be revealed to everyone on the Last Day as the glorious Son of our heavenly Father.

Prayer

God of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany,
you have given us many signs and prophecies
about your Son Jesus Christ's birth,
and they have been fulfilled.
May we see from the past to the present,
the present into the future,
that your loving hand guides all things.
Your glory is forever within our reach.
Amen.