

Celebrating Advent and Christmas

Advent and Christmas are the seasons that herald a new beginning in the Christian cycle of time.



In some parts of Australia it is as though nature is in harmony as jacaranda trees and the simple agapanthus burst with masses of purple beauty - the traditional colour of the Advent Season. Nature sets up a contrast with the brilliant red of the flame tree, and the sun reaches its zenith with the summer solstice on 25 December, the feast of the coming of the light of the world at Christmas.

The subtlety of this time is lost on a society that exploits the sacredness of the Christian festival with massive displays of tinsel, fake snow and gaudy plastic trees, opulently extravagant gift ideas and Santa caves in every shopping mall. And all of this before the Advent season has even begun!

We Christians get caught up in this mayhem with frenetic end of year 'Christmas' parties and the exchanging of gifts, while our church invites us to be still and wait. The four Sundays of Advent are solemn in character and are powerfully evocative in their simplicity. The rich scripture readings speak of waiting with hopeful anticipation for the birth of the Christ child. In our worship we gently and confidently anticipate the Word made flesh that already dwells amongst us.

But when it comes to Christmas and the Christmas season our celebrations are almost an anticlimax. Christmas is becoming a children's feast, where nativity cribs are given great prominence and often the placing of a plaster cast replica of the Christ child in a manger is the highlight of our Christmas Masses. Children dress up as shepherds or angels and sing Christmas carols about snow and cold, and even on occasion sing happy birthday to Jesus. While the Advent liturgies are reflective and solemn the Christmas Masses run the risk of being banal and chaotic.

Christians are in danger of losing sight of the meaning of Christmas. The festival is no video re-enactment of the sweet and gentle birth of a helpless and cute baby or some historical re-enactment of an event that happened two thousand years ago, where a mother gave birth in a stable and shepherds came to visit. Rather the mystery and wonder of Christmas is that, because of the courageous faith that led to the 'yes' of a simple Jewish woman, and the deep trust of her husband, the Word of God took flesh and became one with us. That same Word, Jesus, showed such sublime love for humankind that he suffered a violent and terrible death. Christmas is as much about Easter and the paschal mystery as it is about new birth. The words of Irenaeus sum up this overwhelming memorial. We celebrate the mystery of a God who took on our human frailty so that we could become God.

Kristina Keneally, the former premier of NSW appeared on a recent edition of Australian Story on ABC TV. She spoke of the traumatic experience caused by the devastating loss of her baby daughter at birth. During this time Kristina's angry prayer to God was: Why have you taken my baby from me? Why isn't she with me now, alive and well? Eventually Kristina came to the realisation that God no more wished her daughter dead than she did. God is a mother who had also lost a child and mourned with her. God became human so that all our human experiences can take on a divine meaning because God in Christ is one of us. God became human so that we could become God.

So let's review the way we celebrate Christmas, both in our homes and our churches. Our Christmas liturgies should invite us, not to remember a helpless baby in a stable, but the Christ in the poor and helpless. The face of the Christ of the manger is to be found in a refugee boat, a detention centre or a prison.

Let's think again about our many end of year 'Christmas' banquets and lavish gift giving. Could our banquets become simple meals and our gifts more modest so that our wealth might be shared with the Christ who is starving and homeless? Along with our family and friends, will we invite the lonely and frail to our Christmas table?