

**ADVENT : COLOURS AND SYMBOLS**

The liturgical colour for Advent, as for Lent, is purple. However, the mood generated by the readings and texts for Advent is one of devout and joyful expectation – not penance. Hence a move away from the heavy purple of Lent to lighter violet shades for Advent is liturgically appropriate. It is also culturally appropriate. Our predominant colour during this time of year is blue – the blue of summer skies and sparkling water. As well there is the jacaranda and agapanthus.

A most effective way of decorating the worship space for Advent is to hang drapes in various shades of blue and mauve, perhaps with a different panel of colour added each week. Such “progressive” symbols which visually represent the build up to Christmas work well in Advent. The lighting of Advent candles also uses this principle.

The Advent wreath is of ancient origin and relates to celebrations of the winter solstice when European days are shortest and gloomiest. Because people longed for the return of the sun’s light and life, they suspended wagon wheels, decorated with greenery and candles, in their celebration halls. There they waited for their sun gods to return.

Around 200 years ago, the Advent wreath became customary in German homes and public buildings. It made its way into the Church and has become a popular symbol of the passing of time during Advent.

The circle of the wreath, without and beginning or an end, symbolises God’s unending love for us and reminds us of eternity. The evergreen leaves represented growth and hopes of eternal life. The symbol of evergreens is rather lost in our part of the world, so Australian gum leaves, nuts and flowers are sometimes substituted.

The four candles mark the four weeks before Christmas, with one more candle lit each Sunday during Advent. Traditionally three candles are purple with the candle for the third, or “Gaudete”, Sunday being rose. Now that Advent no longer has a penitential focus, it is not necessary to set one Sunday apart from the rest for a bit of “light relief”. All Sundays are days of festivity in any case!

Sometimes a “Christmas candle” is placed in the centre of the wreath on Christmas Eve. This candle should be lit throughout the Christmas season. Its visual link with the Paschal candle helps connect the celebration of Christ’s birth with its fulfilment in the Easter mystery.

Because evergreen branches and burning candles lose much of their significance in the middle of a hot, lush Australian summer, some parishes replace the Advent wreath with other symbols which retain a sense of anticipation but which relate better to the local setting.

A Southern Cross banner, for example, combines the symbol of light with a uniquely southern hemisphere symbol. One star of the constellation can be added each week with the small fifth star added on Christmas Eve.

The visual environment of our churches during Advent serves to remind us that we are people who “wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.”