

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 around 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 overlays the sacredness of the Christian festival with massive displays of tinsel, fake snow and plastic trees, extravagant gift ideas and Santa caves in every shopping mall. And all of this before the Advent season has even begun!

We Christians can get caught up in this mayhem with frenetic end of year 'Christmas' activity 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 who already dwells amongst us.

When it comes to Christmas and the Christmas season our celebrations can almost be 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.

Are we Christians 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 an 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.

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.

And let's use Christmas this year as a re-gathering of all who have struggled through so much this year – knowing anew the reassurance of Christ-who-suffered-into-new-life through it all.

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ADVENT : READINGS AND FIGURES

Advent is a challenge for those with ministerial roles in the liturgy (readers, preachers, musicians and artists) and for the liturgy committee which supports them. First the season directs our attention to the end of time when Christ will come again in triumph. Then John the Baptist, herald of Jesus' public ministry, takes centre stage. Finally, in preparation for the joyful celebration of Christmas, the liturgy of Advent focuses on the nativity. What joins these diverse elements together is the spirit of joyful expectation.

The gospel of the first Sunday of Advent looks to the Lord's coming in glory at the end of time. This year (year B), the message is urgent: *Stay awake!* Advent begins therefore by picking up themes that occur in the final Sundays of Ordinary Time at the end of the previous year's cycle, especially in the feast of Christ the King.

John the Baptist is the central actor in the gospels of the second and third Sundays of Advent. In year B, they are taken from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark and of John. It can sometimes be a little confusing just before Christmas to be hearing stories telling of events some thirty years after Jesus' birth. It is a reminder that the Church's liturgy is not a chronological re-enactment of past events but a living encounter with the whole mystery of Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection to glory.

The notion of the messiah/Christ may also assist us to recognise the fullness of this mystery. The first readings for these weeks are taken from the prophets who looked forward to the messiah. In year B, they come from Isaiah. These texts may help to situate John the Baptist as the last of the prophets who prepared for the coming of the Christ, the salvation of God's people.

The scripture texts are well supported in Advent by the two proper prefaces. The second may be the best choice for both the second and third Sundays because of the explicit mention of John the Baptist.

The character of Advent changes sharply on the 17th December. The fourth Sunday of Advent, like the weekday liturgy of this period, concentrates on the circumstances of Jesus' birth. This Sunday in year B has the story of the Annunciation from the gospel of Luke. The focus for this final week of Advent is on the role of Mary in salvation history.

The liturgy of Christmas day has a special character. The dominant symbol used for the birth of Christ is the light of dawn. For this reason, separate readings and prayers are given for a vigil Mass, and for Masses at midnight, dawn and during the day. The creative possibilities offered by this arrangement should not be easily discarded for the convenience of a uniform liturgical program. The symbol of light can also help us establish a link with Easter and thus connect the incarnation with the Easter mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection.