

Services through Advent and Christmas (Gill Ambrose)

A new church year begins on Advent Sunday. The Lectionary year changes and a new calendar helps us find our way through. But why, when the secular calendar year changes just five weeks later, is the church different? There are several ways of addressing this, none of which answers the question directly, but they do shed light on it. The Jewish cycle of festivals emerged in response to their pastoral way of life, the cycle of nature and its impact on yearly agricultural practice and also to their great events, in the great festivals, when the people remembered momentous events in their history and gave thanks to God. In the same way, it became Christian practice to celebrate momentous events in the history of the faith, the foremost of which was the Resurrection: as Jesus died and rose over the period of the Jewish Passover, Easter came more or less to coincide with Passover, celebrated in the spring. Other festivals emerged and a pattern developed. At the same time, Christian faith, grounded in its Jewish roots of profound thanksgiving to God for all his gifts, came in time to respond to the local seasons more closely and to reflect everyday life in its religious practice. We can find evidence of this, for example, in the very many carvings, in medieval churches all over Europe, of the calendar of the agricultural months. Our interest at this time of year – the celebration of the Incarnation, the birth of Christ – was a later addition to the pattern of Christian festivals than the celebration of the Resurrection. There are those who would argue that the Christian church simply imposed one of its major festivals on the mid-winter festivals of the pagans whom they sought to convert, and if that is the case, we might observe that it was a very successful move. Another idea however, based on Jewish beliefs about the dates of significant events and worked out by some of the Fathers of the early church, suggests that the dates of 25th December for Christmas and 6th January for Epiphany were quite deliberately chosen. An account of this is to be found in one of the predecessors to the Liturgical Commission's *Common Worship: Times and Seasons, The Promise of His Glory*.¹

However the date of Christmas was determined, there is no doubt that today, in north-west Europe, the way in which we keep Advent, Christmas and Epiphany – three seasons, but one big idea, and one of the two big liturgical cycles of the year – is powerfully influenced by the natural calendar. We keep Christmas in winter and winter determines how we keep it.

In the weeks before Christmas the world around us is alive with symbols, not just in church but practically everywhere we go. Long before the end of October the shops are full of Hallowe'en masks and costumes. More hopefully, children make lanterns out of pumpkins. Remembrance Day poppies follow and all too soon Christmas decorations surround us. We may regret this commercial exploitation of symbol, but it is also possible for those of us concerned both with Christian worship and Christian education to build on this symbol-rich ambience to draw people closer to an awareness of God. And this, we must remember, is not new. The stable has its ox and ass, nowhere mentioned in the birth narratives but present to remind us that Christ came for Jew and Gentile alike. The Magi follow their star, and we come to know that if we see three figures and a star then they are the Magi. And, of course, they carry their gifts, whose meaning the carol 'We three kings' so helpfully unpacks for us.

This sensory and visual experience is the carpet on which we build the structure of our Advent, Christmas and Epiphany liturgies. It is an important foundation layer. In the first volume of his

¹ *The Promise of His Glory: Services and Prayers for the Season from All Saints to Candlemas*, Church House Publishing 1991

Complete Guide to Godly Play,² Jerome Berryman reminds us of the importance of non-verbal communication for religious growth and development, indeed for religious expression. Where there is discord between verbal and non-verbal communication, he argues, souls may wither and die. And in his book, *Tools for Transformation*, Peter Craig-Wild describes how his experience of inviting people to pray has led him to conclude that ‘people respond more freely and more deeply to a symbolic representation of the love of God than to a verbal presentation from a leader.’³ He suggests that like storytelling, symbolic action is open to meaning-making in a variety of ways and at a variety of levels. He calls this *polyvalence*. Although there are those who avoid symbolic action because it cannot be held within the confines of official theological meanings, Craig-Wild suggests that the thought and action of worshippers cannot realistically be thus controlled and ‘the use of symbols and symbolic action can liberate worshippers into encounters with God in new and personal ways.’

The Liturgical Commission’s new *Common Worship* volume, *Times and Seasons*, adds to this a rich source of verbal and structural resources from which to draw in developing our Advent and Christmas services. Outlines for a range of services are provided, together with a directory of resources: Greetings, Invitations to Confession, Introductions to the Peace, Proper Prefaces, Blessings and Endings and so on. There are resources for Advent and Christmas carol services; significant traditional seasonal texts, for example the Advent Antiphons, the Advent Prose and the Dies Irae; prayers for use at the Advent wreath and at the crib and resources for use at the New Year (i.e. 31st December/1st January). The Epiphany section, in addition to Eucharists for the Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ and Candlemas, also contains extensive resources on the themes of Mission and Unity. There is, in summary, all that we have become accustomed to expect in directories of this nature and probably more.

Of what else, then, do we need to take account? One of the big challenges for those responsible for worship through Advent and Christmas is what we might call ‘the encroachment of Christmas’. While driving through the countryside in August during our summer holiday, my husband and I came across a banner outside a country pub which suggested that you should ‘book your Christmas dinner now’ with the menu that had just become available. Of course we laughed, but this creeping Christmas phenomenon is a challenge when it comes to managing the space for preparation which Advent is designed to afford us.

I want to suggest that we need to find ways to steer a considered course through complicated waters in facing this dilemma. Do we take a purist or pragmatist approach? There is no doubt that it would not be difficult to lose sight of Advent altogether when the pressure of planning many services for the festival period, and the innumerable rehearsals that seem to go with them, come upon us. The conservation of energy we employ in order to ‘do Christmas’ well might militate against investing energy in Advent. And yet the customs of the season help us, at least in the northern hemisphere. As the days grow shorter, the Advent wreath gets larger, and if we start Advent with an almost empty church, the addition, slowly, of other items (in the service of the Christmas liturgies of various community groups) can enhance the anticipation during the four Sundays of Advent during which we follow the lectionary pattern.

With our ‘outreach hats’ on, we will remind ourselves that when schools, businesses and community organisations come into our churches for carol services and other events during the two weeks or so before Christmas, the liturgy they experience will, for many participants, be

² Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Living the Good News, Denver, Colorado 2002

³ Peter Craig-Wild, *Tools for Transformation: Making Worship Work*, Darton, Longman and Todd 2002

their faith celebration of Christmas. It is important that we help them to do it well and have a good experience. Here the pragmatist approach is vital: it is worth investing as much time and energy in these services as in those which take place at Christmas itself. People organising them will often be grateful for the help that is offered and entranced by the various traditions of gesture and symbol available to enhance their worship. We can afford to be brave about offering the strengths of our traditions. It is worth, also, thinking about the ways in which we can offer to share from these traditions with organisations beyond the church building: an Advent wreath offered to a school or a library for instance, shines through the gloom of winter with a hint that there is more than just darkness. Perhaps the German tradition of hanging a large star, not just in the chancel arch but also in windows which face the street, might commend itself to us here. In Germany many of these stars come from the Herrnhut, where they have been made by the Moravian church since the eighteenth century and sold in support of missionary work. You can find them to buy on the web. Similar large stars are now available in Britain, though often in shops devoted to the sale of lifestyle goods and ornaments. Maybe we have lessons to learn here!

As travel further afield in the winter becomes a norm, we face the issue that our services over the Christmas period are often full of strangers. Members of a regular congregation have gone away: the young to their parents and the elderly to their children, as well as those who have gone in search of relief from the winter cold and darkness. The loss of regulars is often compensated for, however, by visitors to local families, and perhaps even to local hotels. So we might think of advertising our Christmas services in these places, and ensuring that the Christmas Eve and Midnight services are not designed just for the initiated.

Finally as Christmas approaches we need to remember that there will be those for whom it holds hard memories. A Christmas bereavement is somehow always more readily remembered. In the book that has been written as a companion to *Times and Seasons (Together for a Season, Church House Publishing)* there is a 'Blue Christmas' service available to offer where there is a need in the community for something to help those who find Christmas a difficult time. We remember, too, that in the days after Christmas we commemorate some who remind us that the Christian journey does not stop at the birth of a baby.

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