

CHRISTMAS

Christmas is the one church season that is widely observed in society. This brings a great opportunity to tell the Christian stories, but also brings some clashing priorities:

- ◆ For the Church the true Christmas season lasts twelve days, starting at midnight on Christmas Eve and continuing until Epiphany (January 6th).
- ◆ However, in the commercial and secular world Christmas starts around the beginning of November, intensifies in December and comes to an exhausted climax on its final day - Christmas Day.

When was the first Christmas?

Nobody knows the real date of Jesus' birth - it wasn't important. The Church's main annual festival was Easter Day until around the 4th/5th centuries when Christmas caught on, with many borrowings from Roman and pagan midwinter feasts. Many of our 'traditional customs' only date back to the Victorian era, often being borrowings from continental Europe. So it's pointless to try to re-discover an 'authentic' Christmas celebration; what we can do is engage with today's times and culture while still trying to keep the sense of awe at the idea of the incarnation - the coming of God, as a human baby, into the world.

Dealing with 'Christmas in Advent'

In terms of the Christian Year, we find a lot of our Christmas celebrations actually taking place in Advent. To many it seems wrong to be celebrating the Nativity (and even the Epiphany) at the beginning of December. How can we deal with Christmas celebrations, such

as school end-of-term carol services, while still keeping some of the flavour of Advent in December? Some possibilities are:

- ◆ to try to ensure that carol services in Advent have a forward-looking feel, concentrating on John the Baptist, the Annunciation, Joseph's story, and Mary's visit to Elizabeth rather than shepherds and wise men;
- ◆ to resist the pull of Christmas until Advent 4;
- ◆ to keep crib services, the blessing of the crib and carol services to Christmas Eve;
- ◆ to consider the possibility of holding the Christingle service late in December or in the New Year, when people are less busy.

A Mexican tradition is becoming more common in this country. Starting on Advent Sunday a crib is taken from house to house, and Mary and Joseph ask for a bed for the night as they travel to Bethlehem. The crib is set up in the host house, and taken on to another house the following evening. On Christmas Eve it reaches its final destination, in church, and all who have hosted the crib are invited to the service. For ideas and liturgical resources to help you use this tradition you have only to put 'travelling crib' into a search engine on the web.

Liturgy

Colours

While Advent is Purple, the Church turns bright and celebratory again on Christmas Eve. The colour for the Christmas Season as a whole is White, while Christmas Night and Christmas Day themselves are Gold.

- ? Could you make more of the gold and white theme when choosing Christmas flowers, or decorations for the Christmas tree?

Readings

Christmas is possibly the only season when no minister is likely to want to use readings that are too far from lectionary provision, but the proliferation of services means that a bigger choice of readings than the usual three for a principal service is needed.

So for Christmas Day there is no Year A B or C; instead three complete sets of readings are given, each with its own emphasis. Any may be chosen for any of the services, although the set containing John 1 should be used at least once. In many churches there will be more than one service at Christmas that counts as the principal one for a significant number of people (such as midnight, the early communion service, or a mid-morning all-age service). It is possible to use the same set of readings at all of them, or to choose different sets according to the theme and style of each service.

Music

We all know the huge contribution which music makes to celebrating this season; the difficulty is that by the time Christmas comes we're almost tired of carols, having heard them in the shops for weeks. It is important to spread the diet in a helpful way throughout December and January, and not to get the Christmas Carols leaflet out too soon. Look carefully for those which are best kept for Christmas Day itself (eg the 'Yea, Lord, we greet thee' verse of 'O come all ye faithful'). And don't stop singing carols and Christmas hymns before Epiphany!



Remember that children are often learning a new set of 'traditional carols' at school and that even if these are unknown to many of the older generation they will make children feel at home in the service.

Some settings of the Gloria using Christmas tunes work well, and many canticles are based in the Christmas story. Even if traditional Anglican chant is beyond us there are many metrical versions of these scriptural passages, often sung to well-known tunes.

Christmas offers a good opportunity to put together a singing group or choir, even in a church where there are not usually enough people. It might be possible to draw in singers from the local community as well as the church.

- ? Could the musicians explore some of the relevant publications listed on the resources leaflet?
- ? Could we build on connections with local schools, by bringing in some of their instrumentalists to make the music even more festive?

All-age Christmas

Christmas is a time that often turns our experience of church upside-down. It is not that our services are not child-friendly; rather it is that the services of blessing the crib, or the nativity play, or the carol service, focus on children without necessarily engaging with the adults who have brought them to church.

And so we tend to reinforce the feeling that church (and faith!) is for children, but not for people who think. And although Midnight Communion on Christmas Eve may not have young children present, there may well be adults who are not familiar with the real

significance of the Christmas story, or with the shape and words of the liturgy. It is important that all services are designed to assist those who do not normally come to church - not only to follow the service, but also to find Emmanuel, God with them.

This can be done by the sensitive use of symbol and movement, by carefully-chosen music, by the welcome, and by easy-to-follow service sheets which include all the words that the people need and make no assumptions.

- ? How could we involve everyone and all ages in decorating the church for Christmas? Could we turn it into a party or the start of the celebrations?

Joining up the stories

It is helpful to see Advent, Christmas and Epiphany as part of one story each year. What elements of the story will be told at which service, and how will they be told? If a Jesse Tree is used in Advent, maybe it can be added to at Christmas and at Epiphany. If a crib or nativity scene is used, it could be kept in church and added to even as late as Candlemas.

There are publications that help with this planning: not only official Church of England resources such as *Times and Seasons*, *New Patterns for Worship*, and *Together for a Season* but also Wild Goose (Iona Community) resource books, or publications by Canterbury Press. For details see the resources leaflet in this series.

- ? How can we make the Christmas morning service really special for everyone?
- ? How can we encourage people to come to church on Christmas Day?

The Christian Year



Christmas

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