Celebrating Advent: More than a Countdown to Christmas

The Meaning of Advent

For many people, Advent means counting down to Christmas. It is a time for practising carols before visiting homes to sing them, and for Sunday school children to present Nativity plays. Yet Advent is more than a countdown to Christmas. It invites the Church to remember Christ's coming in the flesh, recognise his presence among his people today, and prepare for his promised return. Advent therefore shapes not only our worship but also the way we live as Christians in the world.
What does Advent mean to you?
Advent lasts four weeks in the Christian calendar. During this season, Scripture readings and hymns prepare us to celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas while also pointing towards his promised return.

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin adventus, meaning "coming" or "arrival". John 1:14 gives a biblical foundation for the doctrine of the Word becoming flesh.

In the Anglican liturgical calendar, Advent marks the beginning of a new Christian year. The First Sunday of Advent falls between 27 November and 3 December, and the season comprises the four Sundays leading up to Christmas.

Advent differs from Lent. Although it has a reflective and penitential character, its distinctive emphasis is on hope, watchfulness, repentance and joyful expectation of Christ's coming.

The Early Church Fathers help us understand Advent as more than preparation for a festival. Their teaching on the birth of Jesus presents the Incarnation as God's decisive entrance into human life: the eternal Word became flesh to redeem and renew humanity. Advent invites Christians to contemplate both the humility of Christ's first coming and the hope of his coming again.

The Early Church Fathers and the Development of Advent

The teachings of the Early Church Fathers provide important theological foundations for Advent. Saint John Chrysostom taught that Christ's Nativity cannot be separated from the whole work of salvation. In becoming human, the eternal Word did not merely appear among humanity; he assumed human nature to teach, sanctify and save. Christmas therefore points forward to Christ's ministry, cross and resurrection.
Saint Athanasius similarly emphasised that God sent the Saviour at the fitting time. In the Incarnation, Christ confronted the power of death and renewed humanity. For Athanasius, the birth of Jesus is not simply the beginning of a biography; it is part of God's decisive work of restoration.

Leo the Great shows how preparation for Christ can shape daily life. He associated prayer, fasting and almsgiving with faithful Christian living. Christians do not merely wait for Christmas; they prepare their hearts and communities to receive Christ through prayer and practical care for others.

In the Western Church, Advent preaching increasingly held together thanksgiving for Christ's first coming in humility and sober preparation for his promised return in glory. This double focus remains central to Christian Advent observance.

The Fathers provide important theological foundations for Advent, especially the Incarnation, redemption, repentance and hope. However, the four-week Western Advent season developed gradually rather than appearing fully formed at once. Historical evidence for a distinct period of preparation before Christmas becomes clearer between the fourth and sixth centuries. John Dowden's historical study identifies the later sixth century as an important stage in the development of a more established season.

Pope Gregory I (Gregory the Great, d. 604) is often associated with the shaping of Advent in the Western Church, including its liturgical texts and readings. The precise development of the season was gradual, and practices have differed across Christian traditions and provinces.

How Does the Church Prepare for Advent?

Many Christian traditions, including Anglican churches, observe a four-week season. Each week may be linked with a biblical theme and the lighting of an Advent wreath. The wreath is a

customary devotional aid adopted by many Anglican churches, although its use and the themes assigned to each candle are not universal. One popular arrangement is: Week 1, Hope; Week 2, Peace; Week 3, Joy; and Week 4, Love.

Week 1: Hope

Hope means trusting God to fulfil his promises. Romans 15:12–13 points to Jesus, the promised descendant of Jesse, in whom the nations will hope. This week reminds us to place our confidence in God and his faithfulness.

Week 2: Peace

At Jesus' birth, the angels proclaimed peace on earth (Luke 2:13–14). This week reminds us that Christ's coming brings God's peace and invites us to live peacefully with others.

Week 3: Joy

The angel announced "good news of great joy" because the Saviour had been born (Luke 2:10–11). This week celebrates the joy of knowing that God has come to save his people through Jesus.

Week 4: Love

God revealed his love by sending his Son so that we might live through him (1 John 4:9–10). Christmas celebrates God's self-giving love, expressed in Jesus' coming and his sacrifice for our sins. Leo the Great's call to almsgiving reminds us that Advent love is not merely a feeling; it is expressed through sharing resources, hospitality and care.

Creating an Advent Rhythm at Home

Families can establish a simple Advent rhythm as a practical devotional practice:

- Place a wreath with four candles where the family gathers, perhaps on the dining table.
- Light one additional candle each Sunday before dinner, as a sign of growing hope while preparing for Christ, the Light of the world.
- Keep the devotion simple: read a short passage of Scripture, say a prayer, and invite each person to share a hope or concern.
- Use the languages spoken at home so that children and older relatives can participate fully.
- Hope: Light the first candle and share one hope for the family and community.
- Peace: Pray for unity in the home and nation, and among people of different backgrounds.
- Joy: In the third week, use a rose-coloured candle, if this is part of your tradition, to express the growing joy as Christmas draws near.
- Love: Carry out a practical act of service or hospitality together.

Strengthening the Wider Church Family

The Church can also organise activities that deepen relationships across the congregation. Programmes may be arranged for different age groups or language communities, while ensuring that everyone is welcomed and included. Thoughtfully planned activities can help the whole Church experience Advent as a season of hopeful preparation for Christ's coming.

Liturgical Colours and Worship

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation. Although it calls Christians to repentance, prayer and spiritual discipline, its distinctive emphasis is on watchfulness, hope and the anticipation of Christ's coming. Purple is the traditional liturgical colour in many Anglican churches. Rose may be used as an alternative on the Third Sunday of Advent, known as Gaudete Sunday, to express joy as Christmas draws near.

Gaudete means "rejoice" and echoes Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always." The change from purple to rose signifies a joyful pause in Advent preparation. It reminds Christians that their waiting is filled with hope, not sadness. In traditions that follow this custom, a rose-coloured candle may be lit on the Advent wreath, and the priest may wear rose-coloured vestments instead of purple.

The Gloria in Excelsis: Preparing for Christmas

In many Anglican churches, the Gloria in Excelsis is omitted during Advent as part of the season's more restrained character. By setting aside the angels' hymn, "Glory to God in the highest", the Church reserves its full joyful proclamation for the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas.

This practice creates a deliberate contrast between Advent's spirit of expectation and the exuberant praise of Christmas. The Gloria may therefore be sung with renewed eagerness at Christmas. However, authorised liturgical practice can vary between provinces and rites, so clergy should follow the liturgical provisions of their own church. The omission of the Gloria in Advent is a practice in many Anglican settings, rather than a universal rule for every province.

A Concluding Reflection

Advent invites the Church to hold together remembrance, expectation and faithful living: Christ has come, Christ is present with his people, and Christ will come again.

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Resources

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