**Times and Seasons**

**Part 1 - Advent to the Presentation of Christ**

**Section 1**

**A Pastoral and Liturgical Introduction**

The two great pivots of the liturgical year are set around the Incarnation and the Resurrection. The first of these is the season which draws us most deeply into the mystery of God, who, in the words of John’s Gospel, came and ‘pitched his tent amongst us.’ But, just as we cannot celebrate the Resurrection with no sense of the incarnation, we also celebrate the Incarnation with the knowledge of the forthcoming Passion and Resurrection.

Advent was traditionally the season for the consideration of the ‘Four Last Things’: Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. This made it a sombre season of reflection and set it within the context of preparation, not only for the celebration of the coming of Christ into the world at Christmas, but for his coming in glory at the end of time. The sense of anticipation is one of waiting for God’s revelation to us in Jesus – hence the strong symbolic use of light at this season – but also one of waiting for justice. Although many churches still no longer have flowers in church during Advent, many use greenery as a sign of the life which God’s justice comes to bring. Advent wreaths are a part of this greenery and remind us of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), the Prophets, John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary, who are particularly honoured at this time. Advent Carol Services, which set out the themes of Advent, are an appropriate reminder of a season which, outside the Church, may appear to be lost. The tradition of the Jesse Tree, which explores the genealogy of Jesus and his Jewish roots, can be a visible reminder of Advent as a season of preparation. Celebrations of Saint Nicholas and Saint Lucy, too, emphasise the need for a preparation of heart and mind as we anticipate Christmas. In the week before Christmas, the sense of anticipation is increased by the use of the Advent Antiphons (the great ‘Os’) which are an ancient form of prayer which explore daily, from 17th December, the nature of Christ and weave into the Incarnation the story of Redemption.

Christmas is steeped in traditions of many kinds and is possibly the time of the year when liturgical form meets pastoral need in its widest sense. As schools and community organisations are welcomed for Carol Services and Christingle celebrations, the Church finds many who are seeking God, yet less familiar with corporate prayer. Through Nativity plays and scenes, Crib services and blessings, as well as the singing of carols, the Incarnation comes close and the stage is set, not only for the story, but for the encounter with Christ. The First Eucharist of Christmas on Christmas Eve often has a different character from the morning Eucharist, but reflection on the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation provide an opportunity for all to recognise Jesus Christ amongst us. Plygain services are a Welsh tradition particularly common in welsh speaking areas. Although few now occur at 3 o’clock in the morning, when the Mass of the Shepherds was traditionally celebrated, the oral tradition of the plygain carol continues and provides a vital link between liturgy and culture. The turning of the year coming in the middle of the Christmas season is a good opportunity to examine the meaning of that Incarnation in our lives, and so prayers and resources are provided for the new year.

Epiphany, for the Anglican Communion, is an extended season which begins with the visit of the Magi and goes on to explore the ‘manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.’ It includes the Baptism of Christ, the healing miracles and the miracle at Cana in Galilee, where water was changed to wine, and provides an emphasis on the transforming love brought by the presence of Jesus. The traditional blessing of chalk, for writing a blessing on the house at the doorway of the home, and blessing of calendars, are examples of how liturgy meets daily life in the reminder given of God’s presence in the ordinary.

Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ, marks the end of the Christmas season and provides a link between the season of the Incarnation and the season of the Resurrection: ‘one last look back to Christmas, and now turn towards the cross!’[[1]](#footnote-1) This link is shown in the welcome Simeon gives the Christ child and the warning Anna gives to his mother (‘…a sword shall pierce your own heart also.’). The candles and lights used for Candlemas are taken to the place of our baptism, the font, where we celebrate Christ as the Light of the world, pledge ourselves to remain true to that light, and begin to prepare for Lent and our entrance into the deep mystery of Easter. The font reminds us that we have died and risen with Christ in baptism, but the light reassures us of his constant presence with us.

1. *The Promise of His Glory*: London, Church House Publishing, (1999), 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)