

**‘For everything a season’:  
Theology through the church year  
Session 1: Advent - ‘Watch out!’**



‘We celebrate Advent ... in the certainty of the Lord who has  
already appeared to us, for whom we must prepare our souls’  
(Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship*, p. 68)

### **1. ‘In the beginning was the deed’**

**Theology:** ‘talking about God’— from *theos* (God) and *logos* (word)

**Liturgy:** connected to *laos* (people) and *ergon* (work/action/deed)

These talks will explore our ‘deeds’: the customs and practices of the liturgical year, as a lens through which to understand our beliefs. The cycle of the church year has a ‘forwards movement’: like a wheel that goes round and round but is going somewhere. This reflects the Christian belief that time is linear (McGrath, p. 464).

### **2: Advent**

The beginning of the church year, starting four Sundays before Christmas. From the Latin ‘veni’ (come) or ‘adventus’ (arrival). Advent originated in the Western church in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries as a preparatory season for Epiphany. From the 7<sup>th</sup> Century onwards Advent became linked with the Second Coming, and its character became more penitential. This talk will explore two customs of the season: the ‘colour’ and the ‘wreath’ as a way to unpack some deeper themes.

### **3. Liturgical Colour**

The colour of the season is usually purple, although some churches use blue or dark purple as a way of marking it out as distinct from Lent. Blue was used in parts of medieval England; as late as the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, Advent was considered festal enough for white vestments (Cobb, p. 468).

Deeper theological question about the mood of the season: is Advent penitential or preparatory? Is Advent a ‘little Lent’, a parallel season of fasting and self-examination? Or is its mood one of joyful expectation, as we wait with hope and anticipation for the coming saviour? The answer is somewhere in between: penitence is part of our preparation. We omit the Gloria (as in Lent) but keep the ‘Alleluia’. In Lent we also prepare for the joy of Easter, so the distinction between penitence and joyful preparation is not so clear-cut.

## 4. Advent Wreath

Originates in the Lutheran churches in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century; only becomes widespread in other churches during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A visual symbol of the Advent themes of 'watching', 'waiting' and 'light', set alongside the eternity of God (the circle). Biblical characters and themes have been associated with the candles, connected to the lectionary readings for each Sunday:

**Candle 1 (Purple/Red):** The patriarchs; Hope

**Candle 2 (Purple/Red):** The prophets; Peace

**Candle 3 (Pink/Purple/Red):** John the Baptist; Joy

**Candle 4: (Purple/Red):** Mary, mother of Jesus; Love

## 5. Watch out!

*There are three Advents*

St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) spoke of a 'threefold' coming of the Lord: the first and second comings, but also an 'intermediate coming', which is a 'road on which we travel from his first coming to his last'.

*The end of the world?*

Advent preaching and spirituality has traditionally focused on the four 'last things' (*ta eschata*): death, judgment, heaven, hell. Not as an occasion for apocalyptic scaremongering, but in order to say something about Christian hope (Polkinghorne, ch. 11).

*A season of paradox*

Ends and beginnings; backwards and forwards; light and darkness; waiting and fulfilment. These tensions are best held in the 'deeds' of liturgy rather than words of theoretical explanation. 'We are looking for the wrong thing if we are looking for the whole thing right now' (Richard Rohr, *Preparing for Christmas*, p 59).

**Next talk, 17<sup>th</sup> December: 'Why are we waiting?'. What Advent can teach us about time.**

## References

Cobb, P. 'The history of the Christian year', in Jones, C. et al, *The Study of Liturgy* (SPCK, 1992), pp. 455-472

Gordon-Taylor, B. and Jones, S. *Celebrating Christ's Appearing* (SPCK, 2008)

McGrath, A. *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2007)

Polkinghorne, J. *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (SPCK, 2002)