

**‘For everything a season’:
Theology through the church year
Session 3: Christmas – ‘Tis the season**



Almighty God, who wonderfully created us in your own image and yet more wonderfully restored us through your Son Jesus Christ: grant that, as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity ... (*Collect for the First Sunday of Christmas*)

1. Historical Background

Pagan festivities or historical birthday?

A standard view is that the dates of Christmas and Epiphany were fixed to provide continuity with existing pagan festivals. In Rome, December 25th had been fixed as the date for observing the birthday of the sun (*Natalis solis invicti* in 274), and celebrations of Christmas in Rome began in 354. Likewise, in the East, January 6th, was connected with legends of epiphanies in which gods had made themselves known. Another tradition connects the dates of the two festivals with attempts to fix the date of the Lord's passion (25th March or 6th April, see Cobb, p. 467).

Later traditions

Traditions relating to nativity plays and the Christmas crib scene originate from St Francis of Assisi's tableau in Greccio in 1223. Carol-singing is a medieval tradition, developed further in the 19th Century and culminating the festival of 'Nine Lessons and Carols' in the late 19th Century.

One single season?

Christmas originated in the West, and Epiphany originated in the East, but by the Fifth century both festivals had been combined, albeit with different emphases (in the West, Epiphany is associated with the adoration of the Magi; in the East, Epiphany became a celebration of Christ's baptism and the miracle of Cana when Christ 'first manifested his glory'). All three 'wonders' of Epiphany are drawn out in the lectionary readings during the season.

Anglican tradition now allows for a '40 day' season of the incarnation from Christmas through to Candlemas, with the 12 days of Christmas celebrated at the beginning. The '12 days' begin with three important festivals in the Sanctorale (calendar of saints): St Stephen (26th Dec), John the Evangelist (27th Dec) and Holy Innocents (28th Dec).

2. Christmas: Incarnation of the Word

By the fourth and fifth centuries, doctrines about the 'incarnation' and the 'two natures of Christ' had become formulated and fixed down (the Council of Chalcedon, 451, stated that Christ is 'fully divine and fully human'). Alongside these debates, and partly to underscore orthodoxy, Christmas and Epiphany become more widely celebrated.

The collect for the First Sunday of Christmas gets to the heart of the mystery of the incarnation which we celebrate at Christmas: God our creator became human, shared our human nature and inhabited our messy, human world, so that we and the whole of creation may share 'the life of his divinity'. This phrase is an echo of the theology of St Athanasius (296-373), a fourth century theologian and bishop of Alexandria, who wrote one of the first developed works on the incarnation, stating that the incarnation is a remaking of human nature (*On the Incarnation of the Word of God*).

3. Epiphany: The Light of Revelation

Epiphany derives from a Greek word meaning 'to show' or 'to make manifest', and is associated in particular with divine 'showing'. The season of Epiphany enables us to focus more specifically on the glory of God revealed through Christ's incarnation. Christ is understood to be the light of God which enlightens all people and nations (the legend of the Magi; Simeon's prophecy in Luke 2: 30-32). In recognition of this we celebrate the feast of the conversion of St Paul, 'Apostle to the Gentiles' (Jan 25th), and dedicate a week of prayer for Christian unity.

The story of the Magi offers an opportunity to think about the nature of God's revelation. The 'star' is a symbol of God's revelation open to all, universal as the stars above us; but also hidden (it disappears at various points during the story, and vanishes completely at the end). This may also be read as revealing that, through Christ, God's light is not just *with* us, but *within* us; a truth revealed through our baptismal commission to 'shine as lights in the world, to the glory of God'.

Next talk: Sunday 21st January, 'Dream on ...': Can we really believe in miracles?

References

Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* (available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>)

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