

## **MAKING THE MOST OF ADVENT CELEBRATIONS**

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Traditionally the season of Advent marks the four weeks before Christmas. The former Anglican *Alternative Service Book* listed the traditional focus of the four Sundays as follows: Advent 1 - The Advent Hope; Advent 2 – The Word of God in the Old Testament; Advent 3 – The Forerunner; and Advent 4 – The Annunciation. Although *Common Worship* now suggests that the last Sunday of Trinity (which this year is 24 October) be celebrated as Bible Sunday; there is a lot to be said for keeping the traditional themes and celebrating Advent Sunday (Advent 1), Bible Sunday (Advent 2), Ministry Sunday (Advent 3) and Christmas Sunday (Advent 4).

Advent Sunday is when God's people focus on the Second Coming of Christ. Particularly for those churches who do not normally recite the creeds as part of their Sunday worship, it is good to be reminded of the truth that 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end' (Nicene Creed). In our church we always hold an eight o'clock early morning communion service followed by breakfast on Advent Sunday: it's a great way to prepare for Christmas.

Bible Sunday is a day for preaching on the Word of God – as also for encouraging people to read the Scriptures regularly and systematically by signing up to receive Bible reading notes in the coming year. On Bible Sunday we always present children who have reached their eighth birthday with a copy of the Good News Bible. Another possibility is to set up a bookstall for the day – many Christian bookshops will offer books on a sale or return basis – and in this way encourage people to buy Christian books for Christmas.

Ministry Sunday, with its focus on John the Baptist, became associated with the 'ministry' because of the preparation for ordinations, which used to take place on Advent 4. This can be turned into an occasion for the church to remember those who it has sent out into ministry as also former pastors. But for this to be meaningful, the people concerned have to be contacted in good time and asked to send news for sharing on this Sunday.. Hopefully too churches will remember to pray for those preparing for ministry – as also for those who have retired from ministry.

Strictly speaking the Sunday after Christmas should bear the name of Christmas Sunday. For it is not until Christmas Day that the Christmas season actually begins. Hence, in the more liturgically correct churches, Christmas carols are not sung until the clock has struck midnight on Christmas Eve. However, most churches tend to hold their main carol services on Advent 4. Indeed, we hold two services of 'Carols by Candlelight' – a short service at 5 pm for young families, and another at 7 pm for everybody. In the morning, after a 30 minute service, we all go into the local shopping mall and sing carols, while the children distribute invitations to our services to passers-by.

Advent is a great time. Let me encourage you to make the most of it!

Paul Beasley-Murray.