

'Why austere Advent beats cheesy Christmas'

Is Advent better than Christmas? The season of Advent has officially begun and will continue until midnight on Christmas Eve. Some say the anticipation trumps Christmas Day.



Twenty-one days to go: The Choir of Jesus College, Cambridge prepares for the holiday season. © PA

From the decorations in your local supermarket to the early sighting of a tree in a living room, it can seem like Christmas is an interminable period of festivity lasting for much of November and December. The Thanksgiving Day turkeys have barely disappeared before the holly and the mistletoe are out.

But, strictly speaking, Christmas Day is only the beginning of Christmas, not the end. The season that precedes it is Advent, and although the two are often seen as synonymous, they are quite different festivals. Several well-known "Christmas" hymns, such as "O come, O come Emanuel" and "The Angel Gabriel" are in fact Advent hymns.

For Christians, Advent, which starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, is a time of waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is a time of deep thought when they reflect on the enormity of the birth of God incarnate.

The word "advent" comes from the Latin for "the coming." Since medieval times, Christians

have spoken of three comings, all of which are central to Advent: "In the flesh in Bethlehem, in our hearts daily, and in glory at the end of time."

It is the last of those appearances, when, Christians believe, Jesus will return to judge humanity, that gives Advent its darker, more serious edge. Dr. John Hall, the dean of Westminster Abbey, says that the themes of Advent are death, judgment, heaven and hell. It is a contemplation of our own mortality and our own morality.

Traditionally, it has also been a season of austere denial, in sharp contrast to the rush of consumerism that denotes the holiday season. French children are taught that Advent is "le petit Careme," or "little Lent." Like Lent, it is a time of patience before a great celebration.

For many people, the sober anticipation of Advent, with its candlelight in chilly cathedrals, is not only more spiritually enriching than Christmas but also makes the holiday season even better. Do periods of self-restraint make

celebrations more valuable?

The waiting game

Yes: The slow procession through an Advent calendar, gradually edging toward the day itself, is, for some people, one of the most memorable things about the winter months. Nothing can beat the gradual accumulation of presents under the tree. Without periods of austerity, pleasure would be meaningless. As Albert Camus put it: "We need the sweet pain of anticipation to tell us we are really alive."

No: What nonsense, reply others. Advent traditions were invented in a time when a shortage of luxuries meant enjoyment was hard to come by. But now our societies are rich and plentiful. Why is it seen as virtuous to live a life of monotony and boredom? We should chase as much pleasure as we can.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: Many believe that Advent simply starts on the first day of December. In fact, it is the fourth Sunday before Christmas, which this

year is Dec. 2. We know that, historically, the seasons of Advent and Christmas were very different, with Advent being a period of denial and austerity before the celebrations of the 12 days of Christmas.

Q: What do we not know?

A: We do not know whether modern society's blending of Advent and Christmas will last forever. And while Lent itself has dwindled in popularity, self-denial is still a popular urge, as seen by campaigns like Dry January.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is Advent better than Christmas itself?
2. Is materialism a force for good?

ACTIVITIES

1. In pairs, agree to give one thing up over the holiday period, and keep track of each other's progress.
2. Pick a religious festival from any origin that teaches self-restraint, and talk about it in front of your class.

SOME PEOPLE SAY ...

"The journey is always better than the destination."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Holly – The prickly leaves represent the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when he was crucified. In pagan times, holly was seen as a male plant and ivy a female plant, hence the carol, "The Holly and the Ivy."

Beginning of Christmas – Christmas is reckoned to last for 12 days, from Dec. 25 to

Jan. 5.

Advent hymns – Any hymns paving the way for the birth of Christ count as Advent hymns, whereas those celebrating the event itself, such as "Once in Royal David's City" or "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," are Christmas carols.

The end of time – Every major religion has its own version of the end of the world. In Christian eschatology, Jesus Christ will return

to earth in fulfillment of the prophecies made about him.

Consumerism – The average American household spends over \$1,000 during the holidays.

Lent – The period of approximately six weeks between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, during which some Christians commit themselves to fasting or to giving up luxuries.

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