

# **A Celebration For Advent**

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Few things dishearten me as much as seeing the Christmas tat appear on the supermarket shelves earlier every year - unless it's the trite, canned Christmas musak that accompanies it. When my children were small we had friends so appalled by the sickly, secular, sentimentalism that they refused to celebrate Christmas at all - and ended up making their children resentful and odd. The real challenge is to reclaim this lovely Christian festival, creating our own meaningful traditions that are not saccharine, unreal, or untrue to the tenets of our faith.

Children love slow build-up, and Advent is a wonderful opportunity to explore what Christmas really means, so that nativities and carol services make more sense. That can be done in a family, or extended family group, or in a special Advent home group where children are welcome. Children are brilliant at inviting their schoolfriends, and getting them to bring their parents, opening the family or home group door to all kinds of people who may not usually go to church - particularly Muslim or Hindu families, who love the chance to participate in other traditions.

How can we do it? Here are some suggestions that might help.

### **Ideas for Families or Home Groups**

Each Week:

Start with an ice breaker. Arrange yourselves in alphabetical order by your first name, or in birthday order (by months not years), or in height order.

Tell or show a Christmas story (resources below).

Intersperse the entire evening with Christmas food.

Have a joint activity like making cards or presents or tree decorations, or doing a Christmas jigsaw puzzle.

Create a nativity scene - with lego, playmobil or by making the characters out of pipe cleaners and fabric and glue, or even plasticine.

Play charades with a Christmas theme. Or act out the Christmas story. Take it in turns to dress up as John the Baptist and tell his story, stopping at a reasonable point and passing on the costume to the next person, as they pick up the story. Then discuss how we can prepare our hearts for the coming king. Or perform the story of the annunciation to Mary. What did Mary feel, and what you would have done, had you been Mary? How do we say yes to God?

Enjoy Christmas music - on a CD, or make your own music. Last year we managed to get our hands on eight tiny flutes, each producing one of the eight notes of the scale. On Christmas night, thanks to a conductor with a sheet of directions, and with some people playing two notes, we managed to play a passable carol or two - when we weren't on the floor with laughter.

Give a small present to each of the children. The Jews give one present a night during the 8 days of Channukah - not all at once as we do.

Light the Advent candle and spend some time in prayer

## **The Advent Wreath**

Buy a circular piece of florist's oasis with a hole in the middle. Push in four red, long and fairly thin candles, evenly around the wreath. Fill the gaps with holly, ivy or any other greenery, plastic or real. You can even use shiny red apples. In the middle of the wreath place a large, fat white candle - the Christmas candle. Explain:

The circular wreath reminds us that God is eternal, without beginning or end.

The greenery speaks of our new life in Christ and hope of eternal life.

The candles symbolise the light of God coming into the world.

Each candle has a specific meaning. Light one the first week, two the second and so on, until all five are lit on Christmas Eve itself, creating your own prayers and liturgies, based on the themes below.

1. The candle of hope.  
"Hope is like a light shining in a dark place. As we look at the light of this candle we celebrate the hope we have in Jesus Christ in what is often a dark world."  
Who walks in darkness and needs our special prayers at this time?
2. The candle of Peace  
"Peace is like a light shining in a dark place. As we look at this candle we celebrate the peace that Christ came to bring."  
Which countries are at war and need our prayers tonight?
3. The candle of Love  
"Love is like a candle shining in a dark place. As we look at the light of this candle we celebrate the love Christ gives us - even for those we don't always like."  
Which "enemies" do we want to bless tonight?
4. The candle of Joy  
"Joy is like a light shining in a dark place. As we look at this candle we celebrate the joy we find in Jesus Christ that is so much deeper than mere happiness."  
Who is sad, oppressed or persecuted tonight and needs to know real joy?
5. The Christ candle represents the birth of Christ.  
"The flame reminds us that Christ is the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out. If we follow Christ, we will never walk in darkness, but will have the true light of life. Let the light of His coming fill this home and all who come to it."

## **Additional Ideas**

### **The Jesse Tree**

This is based on Isaiah 11:1. "A shoot will spring forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots".

Bring in a large branch from the garden. It must have lots of smaller branches on which to hang decorations. Paint or spray it white or silver, trim it with tiny Christmas lights and fix it in a vase or pot, filled with pebbles or scented pot pourri.

The Jesse Tree helps everyone see how the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah were fulfilled. Each person is given some card, and a pair of scissors, so that they can cut out a "decoration" for the tree, based on the promises of God's coming, and as they hang it, they tell the story it represents. Here are some examples:

Abraham's descendants are chosen by God to be a light to the nations.

Noah - God's promise of redemption

The deliverance from slavery in Egypt, as a picture of the deliverance to come.

Ruth becomes Great Grandmother to King David and the Messiah's line.

The prophets tell of a coming Messiah: Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, Zechariah - how many references can you find? (Someone will need to prepare this in advance).

## **Advent Boxes**

For engaging children in the Christmas story, I don't think this ingenious idea from Barbara Hulme can be beaten. Her children are now teenagers, and still love it.

Twenty four small boxes are filled, individually wrapped and numbered. They can then be strung together to make a decoration and hung against a wall.

In each box place:

A figure from the nativity scene (playmobile, olive wood or cardboard) - or the materials with which to make them (pipe cleaners, doilies, fabric, glue etc)

A mini book telling the Christmas story, or appropriate Scripture verses

An instruction card and basic components for a task eg glitter and card to make Christmas cards for relatives and friends, sticky paper to make paper chains to decorate a room, Christmas biscuit cutters and recipes for biscuits or truffles for the school Christmas fayre.

A small communal present - a Christmas jigsaw or CD of Christmas music, a £20 note with the instruction to go and buy a turkey or Christmas tree, chocolate coins.

Each day of Advent one box is opened, a nativity scene is gradually created, the Christmas story told during a fun, family time. In fact, it worked so well for the Porteous family that they agreed to a 'no telly during Advent' policy. Instead of switching on the box after school, they opened the Advent box - and there is plenty of entertainment, and anticipation. This is the essence of the season. We know the story, but eagerly await the day when God took the form of a child and broke into human history.

## **Resources**

The Lion Storyteller Christmas Book - Bob Hartman (Monarch)

The Lion Book of Five Minute Christmas Stories - John Goodwin and Richard Johnson

The Heavenly Party - Michele Guinness (Monarch)

A Stable in Bethlehem - Juliet David (Lion)  
Making the Most of Christmas books (£5 from [www.cpas.org.uk](http://www.cpas.org.uk)).

## **A Gluten Free, Low Calorie, Christmas Recipe**

### **Fizzy Red Berry Jelly**

Around 1lb (500g) of mixed berry fruits - fresh or frozen(defrosted)

1½ packets gelatine or veg equivalent

2 fl oz hot water

15 fl oz sparkling wine (If using frozen fruit make juices up to 15 fl oz with the wine)

2 fl oz cassis

1oz (25g) sugar

Dissolve the gelatine in the hot water and leave for 3 mins. When it is fully dissolved add all the other ingredients. Pour into a mould and set in the fridge.

To remove from mould dip it into hot water for approx 10 secs.

*First published in Families First Magazine, November 2008.*