

Christmas Extra - 2020

Let's not miss the meaning...



In *The Four Quartets* T.S. Eliot says 'we had the experience but missed the meaning'. This can happen so easily. As an illustration - somewhere in the north of Holland there is a Church where all who entered would bow reverently in the direction of a whitewashed part of the church wall before sitting down. Nobody quite knew why. Then one day the parish decided it was time to clean the walls. While doing the cleaning one of the parishioners discovered some traces of a painting under the whitewash on the wall. Very carefully they peeled away the plaster and paint and discovered a painting of Jesus on the Cross, which was centuries old. Finally they knew why they had been bowing in the direction of the wall, the sign was there all along but the meaning had been forgotten! Let us not fall into that same trap.

As we come to celebrate the Feast of Christmas we see our towns covered in lights, work stops, carols are sung everywhere. It is as if our society were still bowing its head toward a whitewashed wall, the meaning at the heart of the celebrations either forgotten or only half remembered. We are called to see and give witness to what lies at the heart of our celebration. The Lord of heaven and earth, the maker of the stars has become a child for us! We can give witness to this by not celebrating Christmas too early, but when it does come, let us celebrate it fully, let us reclaim the whole of Christmas Season, all the time keeping Christ at the centre. One way we might begin is to light a candle and put it in the window (safely!) on Christmas Eve evening – this is just a reminder to the world that we are celebrating the birth of Christ, the Light of the World. Another way, perhaps, is to make a point of saying grace together as a family and some suggestions are given below. Perhaps, too, we could make a feature of Epiphany, rather than just think of it as the day that the Christmas decorations come down.

We might also remember that the Church gives us a Christmas Octave (eight days, from 25 December to 1 January). Many of us want to go to Mass on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day but this year, for whatever reason, it may not be possible. However, if we do want to celebrate Christmas liturgically we could always attend Mass on any of those eight days in order to enter into the Mystery of the Incarnation. Each day of the Octave is in itself a 'Christmas Day'. There's more on Octaves below and we thank Catherine Christmas of Arundel & Brighton Diocese for her contribution to this.

The Christmas Octave

How many times over the years have we found ourselves saying "Christmas is a season, not just a day!"? The commercial signs of Christmas arrive in our shops and on our TV screens predictably early every year and, against this background, we try to keep our resolve to celebrate the Advent season fully in our homes, schools and parishes, waiting in stillness and joyful expectation, preparing our hearts to welcome Christ our Redeemer.

As this challenging year draws to a close, many people have put up their trees and decorations earlier than ever as an antidote to the gloom and despondency of the pandemic and the most recent

lockdown, to bring cheer, lift spirits, brighten the darkness; so the world around us will probably be even more ready than usual to move on as soon as Christmas Day is over. The government has allowed us a five-day Christmas exemption from restrictions, but the Church is ever-generous and gives us the great gift of an Octave to celebrate and enter into the mystery of the Incarnation – the Word made flesh who came to dwell among us – and the season of Christmas Time to celebrate Christ's first manifestations – his Epiphany, incorporating the visit of the Magi, his baptism in the Jordan, and his first miracle at Cana (not just the twelve days of Christmas in the carol).

So what are octaves (from the Latin *octo*, meaning 'eight')? Centuries ago, the Church understood the human need for more than a single day to contemplate the mysteries celebrated in the greatest solemnities of the liturgical year: the empty tomb, and Christ's birth, which marks the beginning of the paschal mystery of our salvation. After the initial wonder, we need time to ponder and reflect on these mysteries and what God is revealing on these holy days, and to enter more deeply into the experience – a period of *mystagogia*. And so began the custom of extending the celebration of certain major feasts, including Easter and Christmas, across eight days. The feast day itself is the first day of the octave, followed by six 'days within the octave'. The eighth day is called the Octave Day and is kept with greater solemnity than the 'days within the octave' but lesser than the original feast. ('Octave' can refer both to the eighth day and to the period of eight days.)

Since the 4th century, when the date of Christmas was established and it became widely celebrated, the days immediately following have been dedicated to companions and earliest witnesses of Christ: members of his family (especially his mother), holy men and women, and the early martyrs. Still in our calendar from those early centuries are St Stephen, the first martyr (December 26th), St John the Evangelist (27th) and the Holy Innocents (28th). The Sunday within the octave (or December 30th if Christmas falls on a Sunday) is the feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In 1969 it was linked with the Christmas Octave and provided with a three-year cycle of readings - priests, deacons, readers and musicians – remember to check which set will be used! The weekdays of December 29th, 30th and 31st have proper Masses, though St Thomas Becket (29th) is a Feast in England and Wales, and the Missal provides a Collect for St Sylvester on the 31st.

Ironically, the pandemic which has had such an effect on the lives of our parishes, has provided us with an opportunity to reclaim the Christmas Octave. In a year when attendances may need to be spread over several days because we simply can't fit everyone in on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and some may wish to go to Mass on a day when the church is likely to be less crowded, how good it is to be able to say that every day of the octave is Christmas Day. It offers us a renewed chance to reflect deeply on the holy exchange, whereby 'we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity,' and to be 'caught up in the love of the God we cannot see.' And maybe it will help us to celebrate the whole Christmas season anew this year, and to have a better sense of the whole period of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany as a season of the Manifestation of Our Lord as we are called to rediscover, to celebrate and to live the gift of salvation as part of the process of transformation in Christ.

Epiphany

When it comes to Epiphany, the celebration of the revelation of Christ to the world - the wise men encounter the child Jesus and are changed - instead of just taking down the decorations and forgetting all about it, why not celebrate this too. In the gospel according to Matthew, the wise men offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matt 2:11). The gifts were symbolic of the importance of Jesus' birth, the gold representing his royal standing; frankincense his divine birth; and myrrh his mortality. We could perhaps make a 'Galette des rois' (a kings' cake) to celebrate the day – there are plenty of recipes available on the internet. Or perhaps we could have an Epiphany blessing of our

home: using blessed chalk, a parent can mark the inside of the main door of the house with the initials of the Magi and a code of the current year connected with crosses: 20+C+M+B+21. Another explanation of the initials (C-M-B) are the first letters of the blessing: *Christus mansionem benedicat* ('May Christ bless the house').

Prayers of Intercession

Each Sunday the Prayer of the Faithful can be found on our website and, in a time when they are not being used at Mass, they might also be helpful as an aid to private prayer. This year we have included Intercessions for each day of the Christmas Octave and you can find these [here](#).

Grace

In our busy lives it can be very difficult for families to eat together, the more so when Covid is thrown into the mix. However, we have a short respite from restrictions over Christmas so perhaps, as we gather together, we might wish to say grace before our Christmas meals – but which one ? Here are a few suggestions:

'Father in heaven,
we give you thanks for this meal on Christmas Day.
Bless us as we gather here today,
and may we live happily in your love.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.'

or

'You, God, are creator and re-creator of our universe.
Thank you for the food before us.
Help us to understand our world
and give us the grace
to share more generously in the coming year.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.'

or

'Father of all,
this meal is a sign of your love for us:
we ask you to bless us and bless our food.
Help us to remember in love and charity
all those who will not eat today
and may we strive to give you glory each and every day.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.'

or,

the more traditional grace, which many of us said as children:
'Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts
which we are about to receive from your goodness,
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.'

or,

if you are really brave..... here it is in Latin !
'Benedic, Domine, nos et haec Tua dona
quae de Tua largitate sumus sumpturi
per Christum Dominum nostrum. Amen.'

With best wishes and prayers for a very blessed Christmas Season