

# Celtic Advent

40 days of devotions to Christmas



David Cole

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# Introduction



Christmas! For many of us, Christmas is a wonderful time of year where we see those we love and share in jollity, mirth and the giving and receiving of gifts. (We may even venture out to church!) All this is right and good; God is a God of fun and celebrations! When God first spoke to the Hebrew people after the exodus about becoming a people of YHWH, there were over a dozen feasts and celebrations as part of it. More have been added over the years, such as Hanukkah, the Jewish winter festival. Feast, celebration, joy and happiness have always been a part of God's plan for the people who make up the body of followers and believers.

However, when we read the Old Testament, it is clear that the feasts didn't just happen; there was a time of preparation beforehand as well. In the time leading up to the feast or celebration where the people would get themselves ready to celebrate, they would prepare themselves inwardly as well as outwardly for the focus of the feast. This is exactly what Advent is. The word itself comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means 'arrival'. Like the arrival of any other baby, the waiting for the arrival of the birth of Jesus was not, and is not, idle anticipation, but active waiting.

Advent has two traditional start dates, depending upon your understanding. There is the traditional church date of the fourth Sunday before Christmas; and then there is the first day of December, when you open the first door of your Advent calendar. But in the ancient church of Britain and Ireland (commonly referred to today as the 'Celtic church') there was another date – 15 November, the eve of 15 November in fact. The reason for this date was because 15 November is 40 days before Christmas (including Sundays,

unlike the 40 days of Lent), and the Celtic church believed in the same significance of numbers as the Jewish faith. The Celtic church referred to the period of Advent as the 'lesser Lent' and believed that the period for preparation was important, just like the preparation of Lent leading up to Easter.

It is traditionally believed that the Celtic church, during this 40-day Advent, focused on what is called the three comings of Christ. The first was the incarnation, which is what Christmas is all about; the second was the coming of Christ into our own selves. This was not just a single event for the Celtic Christians, what the modern church may call 'conversion' or 'becoming a Christian', but it was a continual activity in every part of our lives on a daily basis. It might even need to happen multiple times a day, and in every decision that is made. This isn't about eternal salvation; this is about Christ being intrinsically involved and interwoven in every part and aspect of our everyday lives. The third coming is the return of Christ at the end of all things as we know it, as described in the book of Revelation.

Over the 40 days of Celtic Advent, following in the tradition of the ancient Celtic church, we will discover what it means to prepare for the coming of the Christ by focusing upon the three comings of Christ.

We will begin with five days looking at the concept of Advent; then we will spend ten days looking at the coming of Christ incarnate as a baby, as described in the gospels. After that, we will spend ten days on the coming of Christ into our lives, both the first time it happened and the continual need for it to happen throughout our lives. Moving from here, we will look at the coming of Christ at the end, what Christians often call 'the second coming.' Finally, we will spend five days looking at Christmas itself as a celebration.

As Celtic Advent began on the evening of 15 November, it is suggested that you use these devotions in this book in the evenings. This means that your first reading will be on the evening of 15 November

and your final reading will consequently be on the evening of 24 December, leading you right into the night vigil or midnight mass before Christmas day.

As you journey through this book over Advent in the lead-up to Christmas, I pray that you will be drawn closer to God and that, consequently, as it says in James 4:8, God will draw close to you, so that this Christmas you will have a close encounter with Christ and know the joy of God in the celebrations which surround us all.

**David Cole**



## **The concept of Advent: preparations for the arrival**



## 15 November



Advent is a time of waiting: not an idle waiting, but an active and pragmatic waiting. For the Celtic Christians, it was a time to look both towards the coming Christ and also within themselves. It was a time to ‘prepare the way for the Lord; make straight... a highway for our God’ (Isaiah 40:3), both within themselves and also in the world in which they lived.

Preparation is an important part of any planning. When Celtic Christians were to do anything, they would spend time (often a period of 40 days) in prayer and preparation before they began. They did this when monastic centres were to be planted, when missions were to be undertaken or even when they were to go out on adventures!

Brendon the Navigator, for example, the sixth-century Irish monk, before he set off on his most famous voyage from the north coast of Ireland to arrive in what is now called America, spent 40 days in prayer and preparation, along with other monks. Brendon had been so inspired by Barinthus in his tale about the ‘Island of Delights’<sup>1</sup> that he decided he would venture there. So Brendan chose seven monks from his community and, in a closed meeting, said to them:

My most beloved fellow-warriors, I look to you for advice and help, for my heart and all my thoughts are united in a single desire. I have resolved in my heart, if only it be God’s will, to seek that Promised Land of the Saints, of which Barinthus has spoken. How does this seem to you, and what advice do you wish to give me?<sup>2</sup>

The monks all agreed together that they would follow Brendan in whatever he believed was right. So ‘Brendan and those who were with him completed a 40-day fast, in three-day periods, before they set out.’<sup>3</sup>

Over the next few days, we will be looking at the concept of Advent as a time of preparation, leading us into the following weeks where we will look more deeply into the three comings of Christ.

## Contemplation

As we begin this journey into Advent, start by setting your heart in the right direction. Spend a few moments just sitting quietly and focusing on the coming season – not on all the busyness of what needs to be done, but on the spiritual significance of what is coming up. From the very depths of your inner self, commit this time into God’s hands and into the divine flow.

## Reading

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”’

## Prayer

**God of all gods, as I begin these 40 days of preparation, I commit my life to you. I commit the path ahead to you. I commit myself to be open to whatever change you call me to make. Amen**

## 16 November



In the story of Brendan, we discovered that he had a great desire: something burning in his heart that he wanted to do. He tells his monks that 'my heart and all my thoughts are united in a single desire'. This single desire was the great sailing adventure across the unknown waters into the distant nothingness which lay beyond (as far as they knew). This desire had caught Brendon's imagination and he was off in a flow of enthusiasm about this great adventure. I wonder if you have ever had such an experience, where something has caught your heart in such a way that you go off in an almost (or sometimes fully) uncontrollable flow of 'this is what I want'. Enthusiasm and passion for something, especially if we feel that it is a call from God, is not a bad thing. Perhaps there needs to be more of that kind of passionate desire for things within the body of Christ.

But let us pause for a moment and take another glance back at the statement of Brendon to his fellow monks. After saying that his heart and thoughts were united in this single desire, expressing this passion which dwelt within him, he then says, 'I have resolved in my heart, if only it be God's will...' Let us just pause a moment and look at this. This is such an important moment in all things, especially when we have a desire that is overwhelming our heart with a passion. It is great to have a passionate desire for something, but it is equally important that we pause, take a moment and just check that we go ahead 'if only it be God's will'. This is the time to gently lay down our passion and desire, and to dwell quietly in God's presence to discover whether this desire is something of our own self-induced will or ego, whether it is something which we feel pushed into by other people or whether it is truly something which is divinely inspired.

The story of Brendon tells us that he did two things to discover this. Firstly, he asked others what they thought, and then they all spent time in prayerful consideration. Both of these actions are good, sage advice as part of our preparations when we are at the cusp of something new that we have an uncontrollable desire to do. Ask advice from others; then spend time in prayer about it.

## Contemplation

When you begin something, or when you approach a significant project or venture, how much time do you put into prayerful preparation? Do you just launch straight into something, hoping that God will be with you and bless it? Or do you sit and prayerfully consider what the divine plan might be? And do you ask the advice of others too?

Spend time dwelling with God over what significant aspects of life might be coming up in the future. Then just spend time dwelling in the divine presence over them.

## Reading

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.

COLOSSIANS 3:15–16a

## Prayer

**Gracious God, thank you for giving me the passion to do great things. Thank you that you desire for me to follow your will. In all that lies before me in the future, in all that excites me, cause me to pause to check that the path I am about to step upon is the one you lay before me. Surround me with those who will give wise counsel, and may I be drawn into great things for you. Amen**

## 17 November



In our dining room at home, we have a small framed blackboard with a tray of chalk at the bottom. More often than not, the blackboard has a list on it: a list of what needs doing; a to-do list. We all have these lists. The likelihood is that you have one for all the preparations you have to make before Christmas. But how do you order the priorities on these lists? And do you have prayer on your to-do list? Or is that something which gets squeezed in at some point in the midst of all the busy preparations?

The physical everyday tasks seem to dominate the priorities in our preconditioned society over those things which we might deem spiritual. To 'get on with things' is the way of western culture. But this can often be detrimental to the outcome of what we do.

When Aidan first arrived in the kingdom of Northumbria and King Oswald gave him the island of Lindisfarne as a base, there was a great deal to do: preparing the land for building, grazing and crops; building shelters and houses; building a chapel; creating a working farm to enable them to be self-sufficient; and a great deal more. All the practicalities of setting up a monastic centre lay ahead of Aidan and his twelve monks who had recently travelled from Iona, let alone the expectation from the king and those still on Iona to get out and take the gospel to the people. That's what they had been called here to do, after all. They needed to prioritise.

Aidan, as bishop in charge, was the one to make the to-do list in priority order. The monks waited to see what would be the first and most important task. The chapel? Surely that would be the first thing. But what about the cells for the monks to live in? That was

also important. What would Aidan do? What would be the first thing on the list? Aidan looked at his monks as they waited in anticipation of his word and instruction. He looked around at the place they were standing, knowing all that needed to be done. Aidan made a choice.

Though there were many tasks, 40 days were set aside for prayer and for the dedication and preparation of the site as a 'city of God'. During this time silence was often stronger than words and stillness more powerful than action. An area was marked out which would surround their future [monastic site]... the monks were not just clearing the land, but cleansing it from its past... Once the foundations of prayer had been laid, the monks built their own cells.<sup>4</sup>

In this action of setting aside a time for prayer first, Bishop Aidan ensured that everything they were going to do in the future, both the practical work of keeping a monastic centre going and the time spent in mission, as well as time spent with God, was set upon the foundation of prayer and guided by the Holy Spirit. The foundations we set our practical activities and everyday chores upon can have a significant impact on how these things turn out.

## Contemplation

When you create your to-do lists, when you prioritise what you are going to do and how you will structure your day, do you begin with a time of prayer?

Do you consider God as a part of all the things which fill your lists of practical activities and necessities? Or do you just get on with it yourself?

Draw to mind any such lists which you currently have or might be about to make. Pause for a short time and draw God into the list. Ensure that God is a part of your day's practicalities, and in all the

preparation which you have listed for the coming season leading up to Christmas.

## Reading

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

COLOSSIANS 3:17

## Prayer

**Holy God, as I step into all that I have to do today, and over the days which lay ahead, remind me that you are there with me, and that you desire to be a part of my everyday life. May I begin all things by focusing on you, to set the ground; may I continue through all things focused on you ensuring you are at the centre of all I do; and may I end each task focused on you, knowing that I have completed it with you. Amen**

## 18 November



For the last two days looking at Advent, or the preparation leading up to Christmas, we will look at something from the beautiful Celtic and Anglo-Saxon illuminated scriptures: a particular page from both the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels. We will look at the ‘Chi-Rho’ (Key-Roe) pages, sometimes known as the ‘Incarnation Initial’.<sup>5</sup> In both of these beautifully created gospel books, the Chi-Rho page appears at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, the first gospel. In some sense, this artwork was an entranceway, a doorway, into the gospel – a contemplative and meditative way into the story of the life of Christ.

The Chi and the Rho are the first two letters of the Greek spelling of Christ (the ‘Ch’ and the ‘R’). The ‘Ch’ is shaped a little like an English ‘X’. It is, in fact, this Chi which adorns some modern abbreviations of the word Christmas, the Greek letter X representing the whole word ‘Christ’. So, when you see, or write yourself, ‘Xmas’ instead of the full ‘Christmas’, you are, in fact, drawing on a very ancient concept which is celebrated in the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels, from the pages which are perhaps the most elaborate in the books and which had the most time spent upon them. Writing ‘Xmas’ is not ‘crossing out Christ from Christmas’, as I have heard it put by some folk, but it is actually writing exactly the same thing (some may even argue writing it more intelligently, using Greek).

The Chi Rho page in both of these gospels contains beautiful artwork which would have been painstakingly meditated upon. We see beautiful swirls and elaborate knotwork. We see people, faces and angels, as well as other creatures such as moths, cats, rats and birds. The inside of the Chi in the Lindisfarne Gospels is an unbroken

collection of many interwoven birds with bodies and legs as Celtic knotwork. It is worth stopping and spending some time looking carefully and contemplatively at these pages, either by getting a book with them in or by pulling up the pictures on the internet.

With the Chi Rho pages preceding the first gospel, with them being like an entranceway, a doorway, into the story of the life of Christ, I like to think of these pages from these books (and there are numerous other such books, such as the Gospel of Chad for example) as perhaps the Celtic understanding of the 'Cosmic Christ'; that is, that although Christ became incarnate at the birth which Christians celebrate at Christmas, he had always existed within the godhead, as part of the infinite Trinity from before the creation of the world and time.

## Contemplation

Get hold of a picture of the Chi Rho page from either the Book of Kells or the Lindisfarne Gospels. As you spend time gazing upon it, contemplate the concept of the Cosmic Christ: the fact that Christ existed, uncreated, before all things as part of the Trinity godhead.

Follow the flow of the knotwork and swirls and allow your imagination to feel what it may have been like for the Cosmic Christ to flow into human form from the supernatural realm.

As you gaze upon the creatures and faces within these pages, imagine the Cosmic Christ becoming a part of the creation he had been a part of producing.

## Reading

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

JOHN 1:1-14

## Prayer

**Cosmic Christ, as I prepare to enter the story of your incarnation, may I know the sense of your presence with me. As the beauty and intricate details on the Chi Rho pages flow, may I know a sense of your Spirit flowing within me. Draw me into the beauty and detail of creation. May I see as you see. May I feel as you feel. May I love as you love. Amen**



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