

'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.



Oh come all ye faithful: The Choir of Jesus College, Cambridge prepares for Christmas. © 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 endless festival lasting for most of November and December.

But, strictly speaking, Christmas Day is only the **beginning of Christmas**, not the end. The season that precedes it is Advent. Several well-known "Christmas" hymns, such as *O come, O come Emanuel* 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.

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".

Traditionally, it has also been a season of austere denial, in sharp contrast to the rush of **consumerism** greeting the weeks before Christmas. French children are taught that Advent is *le petit Carême*, "little **Lent**".

For many people, the anticipation of Advent, with its chilly, candle-lit cathedrals, is not only more enriching than Christmas but also makes the true festive season even better.

The waiting game

The slow procession through an Advent calendar, gradually edging towards 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.

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 December 2.

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 popular, as seen by campaigns like Dry January.

YOU DECIDE

Is Advent better than Christmas itself?

ACTIVITIES

In pairs, agree to give one thing up until Christmas Day, and keep track of each other's progress.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'The journey is always better than the destination.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?



WORD WATCH

Beginning of Christmas – Christmas is reckoned to last for 12 days, from December 25 to January 6.

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.

Consumerism – The average British family

spends more than £800 on Christmas.

Lent – The period of about 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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