

# FAMILY ADVENT and CHRISTMAS PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS

## THE ADVENT WREATH

Most Churches nowadays have an Advent wreath on the altar and families too can make their own. At home it would be used at family meal times when saying grace, or night prayers. It is not just a decoration but a symbol of our awareness of this time of preparation.

Its origin is in Scandinavia and pre-Christian Germany where the people gathered to celebrate the return of the sun after the winter solstice.



The wreath must be round. Circles have no beginning and no end and it is meant to remind us that God too has no beginning and no end.



The wreath must have evergreens, symbolising God's everlasting love and also that those who love God will have everlasting life with Him.



The wreath has four candles, three purple and one pink. Purple symbolises the time of preparation and pink of rejoicing. Each day during the 1st week one purple candle can be lit, during the 2nd week two purple candles, the third week two purple and the one pink and during the last week all four candles are lit at family prayer time. Candles give light and warmth. The candles on the wreath therefore symbolise the light and the love that Jesus brought into the world.

The themes for the four weeks are :

Week 1: Expectation

Week 2: Hope in the face of an apparently hopeless situation

Week 3: Rejoicing at God's faithfulness

Week 4: Acceptance, as Mary did in saying Yes to God.

There are many ways to make an advent wreath but as the evergreens need to stay fresh, the simplest is to use florist's OASIS, either a ring or blocks formed into a ring. Cover with foil or plastic and stand on a plate. Cover the ring completely with evergreen twigs and leaves. Insert candle holders, which can be bought or made from clay or dough, and decorate with pine cones, jacaranda pods, purple and pink ribbon florists' ribbon, etc, but not with red and gold and silver streamers which are reserved for Christmas when the Advent wreath can be converted into a colourful table decoration. Other ways are using netting wire, or a coathanger and covering it with leaves and twigs. Purple candles especially are often difficult to find. Either use white candles and wrap ribbon around them or melt some purple (and pink) wax crayons in a tin on the stove and dip white candles into this to dye them.

There are no set prayers. Some suggestions are given but the wreath can also be used with the readings of the day, or in conjunction with other advent activities, e.g. the advent calendar. Meal time grace and night prayers can be incorporated.

### **A READING FROM ISAIAH 60:19-20**

No longer shall the sun be your light by day, Nor the brightness of the moon shine upon you at night; The Lord shall be your light forever, your God shall be your glory. No longer shall your sun go down or your moon withdraw, For the Lord will be your light forever, and the days of your mourning shall be at an end.

### **BLESSING PRAYER:**

God bless our wreath and be with us as we prepare for the coming of Christ in our hearts and in our home. As we light the candles each day, help us to remember to keep our hearts and lives lit with your love. Amen.

**WEEK ONE:** Holy Father, we light this first Advent candle, a symbol of our preparation for the birth of your son at Christmas. We pray for our children, that they may be happy, healthy, safe, loving and excited about life, and we ask you to remember all those children who have been hurt and neglected by others, who are lonely and in need of your love. Bring your healing light into their world.

**WEEK TWO:** Holy Father, as we prepare for the birth of your son this Christmas, we light this second Advent candle and we pray for the elderly people in our family, that they may be happy, healthy, joyful and fulfilled, and we ask you to remember all those elderly people who have been neglected and isolated by their friends and families, who are lonely, despondent and anxious, and who are in need of your love. Bring your healing light into their world.

**WEEK THREE:** Holy Father, as we light this third Advent candle, we pray for all the members of our family, that they may achieve their life goals, be fulfilled and happy both within themselves and in their relationships. We ask you to remember all those people who are isolated and afraid, those who have been hurt and are lonely, despairing and in need of your love. Bring your healing light into their world.

**WEEK FOUR:** Holy Father, as we light this fourth Advent candle, we pray for ourselves that we may always be aware of the needs and hurts of those around us, and that we may have the strength to reach out to others. We ask you to remember all those people who have dedicated their time to reaching out to the lonely and the sad. We rejoice in their giving, and pray that your healing light may continue to shine through them.

## **A JESSE TREE**

This activity is named after Jesse, the father of King David. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the Messiah as the shoot of the stock of Jesse.

The activity focuses on the ancestors of Jesus and the message that each brings to us. Scripture passages about many different Old Testament characters are read and a symbol for each character is hung on the tree. Characters can include Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob and his 12 sons, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, the prophets Elijah and Isaiah, Daniel.

A Christmas tree without any of the Christmas decorations can be used. On Christmas eve the brightly coloured Christmas decorations can be added. simple such as Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob and his 12 sons,

## **PREPARING A CRIB**

The crib or a whole Nativity set is a central symbol for the Christmas event. St Francis of Assisi is believed to have made the first Christmas crib and there is even a story of a miracle surrounding this. It is said that when he made the crib a live baby miraculously appeared. Through this he showed people that Jesus was born poor, homeless, without even a bed of His own.

A crib at home can act as a reminder of the real meaning of Christmas. Nativity sets are expensive to buy but last a life-time, ours, in the Rowland family, is over 50 years old. Another possibility is to put up a beautiful picture of the Nativity scene and maybe make a little crib to stand in front.

At the beginning of Advent the crib is empty but as family members do good deeds they add a piece of straw for each good deed and then by the end of Advent these should form a comfortable little bed of hay for the baby Jesus to lie on. The empty crib can be a part of the Advent setting together with the Advent wreath and/or Jesse tree. Cribs can be made from ice-cream or other sticks, and a small baby doll used for the baby Jesus.

## **A PROMISE BRANCH**

Advent is also a season of promise. We come to know God's promises through the promises we make and keep to one another. On December 16<sup>th</sup> in South Africa we also celebrate the Day of Reconciliation which used to be known as the Day of the Vow. We could consider what making a vow or a promise really means.

**REQUIREMENTS.** A bare branch in a pot. Paper or symbols.

Family members make promises to one another about specific acts they will do and add symbols depicting those promises. For example - I promise to write a long over-due letter so hang up a pen. A price tag can be a promise to take younger members of the family shopping, a sock to show a promise to do the family washing, etc. Members can write down their promises and hang the papers on the tree. The promises can be made and shared within a short time of prayer or built into a prayer meal.

## **SHELTER SEEKING**

Shelter seeking is an old custom that probably originated in Austria and has been brought to South Africa by the Schoenstatt Family Movement. Shelter seeking is a novena in preparation for Christ's coming. For nine days the statue of the Blessed Mother is brought to different homes. On the final night of Shelter Seeking those families who are interested are invited to come together at a Shrine of Our Lady of Schoenstatt or other suitable place.

Shelter seeking reminds us of Mary and Joseph looking for shelter when Jesus was about to be born. At Bethlehem "there was no room for them in the inn." Shelter seeking also reminds us of Christ's coming into our world today. Will he find shelter, and with us? It is particularly apt at this time of preparing for the great jubilee of the year 2000. In Biblical times a jubilee year was celebrated every 50 years as an opportunity for the people to begin anew. Debts were cancelled, slaves set free and land restored. In our society there are millions of homeless and displaced people and this practice of shelter seeking invites us to a response to those in need.

### ***WHAT TO DO:***

1. Prepare a place of honour for Our Lady and her Child and decorate it with flowers and candles.
2. The statue arrives. The hosts from the previous home bring the statue and knock at the door. Welcome Our Lady and her Son with a welcoming prayer of your own choice. Try to involve all members of the family.

3. Scripture Reading. Use the reading of the day or an appropriate Advent reading from the Sunday or weekday missal. Have a short meditation and sharing on the scripture passage.
4. Prayer. Spend time in prayer, using prayers of your own choice, possibly saying the Rosary or a decade only, and include spontaneous prayer.
5. Read an appropriate Advent or Christmas story.
6. Sing. Hymns or carols of your choice that are appropriate can be used.
7. Our Lady in your home. The statue then stays with you for the day or the week and the family prays together in front of the statue and pays little visits during the time the statue is in the home.
8. On the next night scheduled for shelter seeking together take the statue to the next home.

### **CAROL SINGING** - *Carol Service, Nativity Tableau or Play.*

We are inclined to reserve carols for listening to in shopping centres while we do our Christmas shopping, school concerts and parish services or a general "Carols by Candlelight" Often by the time Christmas arrives we are sick of hearing carols, but in fact Advent hymns should really be sung before and carols after Christmas.

Families can have their own "Carols by candlelight" either singing, making music with home-made instruments like bells, shakers and clappers, or listening to Christmas music both before but especially at Christmas and in the days after Christmas once the baby Jesus has arrived and we can sing to Him and His family.

### **BLESSING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE**

There are many legends about the Christmas tree but in essence the fir tree being an evergreen tree symbolises God's everlasting love. The snow resting on the branches of a fir tree in winter and sparkling in the moonlight is a reminder of Jesus, the light of the world. When decorated the tree is ablaze with light and colour.

A simple blessing prayer contains these thoughts.

"Heavenly Father we ask you to bless this tree, a symbol of everlasting life and of the light that Your Son Jesus came to bring into the world. May our Christmas be an experience of love and unity and may we bring the light of Jesus to others."

## **DOING IT TOGETHER**

### **BAKING:**

As a family do some baking or cooking together. Make Christmas cookies, cup cakes, gingerbread men, Father Christmas cookies, mince pies etc.

### **PLAY DOUGH/FLOUR CLAY:**

3 cups of flour, 1cup salt, about 1 cup of water. Mix flour and salt and add water gradually until the dough holds together without being crumbly or sticky. This dough can be used in the Jesse tree activity, to mould the shape of the family tree, some of the symbols, or to make shapes and figures to use as decorations.

**PUZZLES.** Make a CHRISTMAS WORD PUZZLE

Use squared paper, write the word CHRISTMAS in the middle. Let each family member add words.

### ***MAKING CARDS, TAGS AND DECORATIONS.***

Use paper, glue, crayons, corks, paint, wrapping paper, old Christmas cards, ribbons etc. Examples, paper chains,

### ***MAKING CHRISTMAS STORY BOOKS:***

A wonderful Advent activity is for a family to use their last year's Christmas cards, cut them out and paste into home-made story books for distribution to hospitals, children's homes or other needy children. The text below can be used and illustrated. Cut up the sections or rewrite next to the pictures.

## ***A CHRISTMAS STORY***

A long time ago in Israel  
began the story that we now tell.  
Mary, a maiden young and fair  
was talking to God one day in prayer  
when He sent His angel to that place  
and the angel said "Hail Mary, full of grace  
the Lord is with thee, I'm sent to ask  
if you will please fulfil the task  
of being mother to God's own son."  
Said Mary, who loved God-"Your will be done."  
She began to prepare for the coming event  
to welcome the baby whom God would send.

A few months later the emperor of Rome  
said every family was to go home  
to the town where they came from and write  
down their name.  
Joseph and Mary from Bethlehem came,  
so they set out to make the long journey there  
and Joseph helped with most tender care.

They came to Bethlehem late in the day  
and stopped to enquire at each inn on the way  
for a place to eat and a place to rest  
but all were full up from the worst to the best.  
Eventually when they were near to despair  
they found an old stable cold and bare.

Mary lay down on a bed of hay  
and the night seemed suddenly as bright as day  
for angels were everywhere praising and singing  
and it seemed as if thousands of bells were  
ringing  
for God's own Son was born that night  
to bring peace to earth and make all things right.

A star shone above in the midnight sky  
and shepherds awoke and wondered why  
till angels appeared and called out to them  
to come and adore the babe of Bethlehem.

Three eastern wise men also came from afar  
and travelled to Bethlehem led by the star.  
They brought with them gifts to offer the King.

Now we too our offerings to Him want to bring.  
We give you ourselves,  
please take us, please do,  
for in making You happy, we'll be happy too.

To everyone, in every place  
of every colour and every race  
the Christmas message of love and joy  
is a sign of hope to each girl and boy.

# FAMILY PRAYER MEAL

This is a chance to deepen our awareness that when we are together sharing a meal as a family God is present with us in our little Church of the Home. This format is based on the Jewish weekly Sabbath meal and can be used at different times during the year. It could be celebrated to end a family fast day or with a simple soup and bread meal as a sacrifice. Money saved can then be donated to the poor.

## **REQUIREMENTS:**

For the prayer part: Bread or matzos, wine or grape juice, a candle, writing material.

For the meal: Family's choice.

## **THE PRAYER TIME.**

All begin by making the sign of the Cross.

The leader holds up the piece of bread and says:

*BLESSED ARE YOU LORD, GOD OF THE UNIVERSE. THANKS TO YOUR GOODNESS WE ARE GATHERED HERE AND HAVE THIS BREAD TO SHARE. BY SHARING THIS MEAL MAY WE BE UNITED IN LOVE AND READY TO SHARE WITH OTHERS.*

The leader breaks up the bread and shares it with all present and then continues, holding up the wine or grape juice:

*BLESSED ARE YOUR LORD, GOD OF THE UNIVERSE. THANKS TO YOUR GOODNESS WE ARE GATHERED HERE AND HAVE THIS FRUIT OF THE VINE TO SHARE. MAY WE WHO SHARE KNOW THE JOY OF YOUR PRESENCE AND SHARE THIS JOY WITH OTHERS.*

Everyone has a sip. A family member then lights the candle and all are invited to offer a short prayer. These may be prayers of praise, thanksgiving or intercession for a special need for the family.

After the prayers the leader continues:

*AT THE LAST SUPPER OF JESUS WITH HIS FRIENDS HE WASHED THEIR FEET AS A SIGN OF SERVICE. WE ARE ASKED TO SHOW A SIGN OF OUR WILLINGNESS TO SERVE EACH OTHER IN MEMORY OF HIM. LET EACH PERSON MAKE A SIGN OF THEIR PARTICULAR COMMITMENT TO SERVE THE FAMILY AT THIS TIME.* (If this is done together with the PROMISE BRANCH let the promises be hung on the branch)

To conclude all join hands and the leader says:

*GOD OUR FATHER, LOOK KINDLY ON OUR FAMILY. MAY WE WHO ARE GATHERED TOGETHER AT THIS TABLE, ONE DAY BE REUNITED WITH THOSE MEMBERS WHO HAVE DIED BEFORE US AS WE GATHER TOGETHER IN THE JOY OF YOUR KINGDOM. AMEN.*

After the prayer time enjoy the prepared food together.

# A FAMILY PENITENTIAL SERVICE

At Christmas time it is helpful and even necessary to consider what it means to be human; to accept the holiness of our ordinary life and also the fact that we make mistakes. Failure does not last forever. God is ready to forgive and we should ask for His forgiveness. At the same time probably the greatest need for forgiving and for being forgiven is within our families and we can and should ask each other for forgiveness and grant each other forgiveness.

LEADER: In the name of the Father..... ALL: Amen.

LEADER: Let us turn to God and offer him all the good things we have done and ask him to forgive us for the things we have done wrong to Him and to each other.

Let us pray..... Lord, we are sorry that we have not loved enough. We know you love us. Teach us to love one another and to forgive as you forgive us. We ask this through Your Son Jesus who lives with You and the Holy Spirit.

ALL: Amen.

READER: MARK 11:25

Jesus said," when you stand and pray, forgive anything you may have against anyone, so that your Father in heaven will forgive the wrongs you have done." (Pause for a short personal reflection)

*Not everyone may have failed in each of the ways listed. The leader could read them out and members could respond as they believe it applies to them. Members could also mention their own personal failings.*

LEADER: Let us now ask God to forgive us.  
For not being kind and helpful.....

REPONSE: Forgive me, Lord.

LEADER: For not always telling the truth.....  
For quarrelling, fighting and teasing.....  
For not controlling my temper.....  
For wanting everything for myself and not being willing to share.....  
For not being kind to the people I don't like.....  
For not doing what I was asked or told.....

.....

Let us now also ask each other for forgiveness.

*Prayerfully think about something you have done that hurt another member of the family and for which you are sorry. (Optional: You are then asked to go to that person and say, "Please forgive me for hurting you by ..... " The person is asked to listen carefully, think about the situation and could then respond " I forgive you." )*

This process may take some time. When everyone is ready and after some quiet reflection all together say "Our Father....."

LEADER: Thank you Heavenly Father for the gift of our family and the gift of forgiveness that can bring us back to closeness with each other again.  
Help us to serve each other with love and to do your will here on earth.

ALL: Amen.

A song could be played or sung to conclude the service.

# THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

Even though the shops clear away their Christmas goodies the very next day, the Christmas season actually lasts until the feast of the Ehipany, also known as 12th Night which is celebrated on the Sunday after New Year's Day, so that the time is usually not a full 12 days. Suggestions for celebrating the twelve days:

## **December 25th - Christmas Day.**

This is the special day on which more people go to Church than on any other day of the year and many go to more than one Mass as in Catholic churches three different Masses are celebrated, Midnight Mass, Mass at dawn and Mass during the day. Each Mass focuses on different aspects of the mystery of the incarnation and the passage from Isaiah read during the 3rd Mass "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, announcing peace proclaiming news of happiness, OUR GOD REIGNS" is the core of the Christmas message.

**December 26th.** Feast of St Stephen the first Martyr. In the Acts of the Apostles the story is told how while he was being stoned to death he prayed, rejoicing and praising God. The Christmas carol Good King Wenceslas belongs on this day. He gave to the poor and we having enjoyed all the food and sweets at Christmas could do something special for the poor.

**December 27th.** Feast of St John, the beloved disciple. Remember those who loved us by giving us presents and write your thank you letters as a token of appreciation.

**December 28th.** Feast of the Holy Innocents. Read the story in Matthew chapter 2 of king Herod, and his jealousy and how he ordered innocent babies to be killed. Pray for all the innocent children who are killed, and pray too for their parents. Pray for the many children who are refugees as a result of war. Remember especially the unborn babies killed through abortion and pray too for their mothers and fathers.

**Holy family Sunday.** Each family is called to be a Holy Family like the family of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. If possible spend the day together as a family, pray for each member of the family individually and thank God for them and their specialness.

**December 30th.** Help with the shopping and preparation for New Year.

**December 31st.** Together review the old year thank God for all the blessings received and make some New Year's Resolutions. Be conscious too of the negative, unhappy or sad things that have happened and pray for acceptance and healing.

**January 1st New Year's Day and also the Feast of Mary, the Mother of God.** Honour Mary by making the mothers in the family feel special. It is also the World Day of prayer for peace. Pray especially that Mary will be an inspiration to mothers to be the bringers of peace into the world.

**January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>,** Rest, tidy up and keep up your New Year's resolution. If this is still holiday time spend it with friends or family members you haven't seen sharing on of the good times you have had.

**Feast of the Epiphany,** the manifestation of Jesus. Jesus revealed Himself as God of all humankind. Pray especially for religious tolerance among the different Christian and non-Christian religions. Tidy away all the Christmas decorations until next year. Keep the Christmas cards out to make Christmas story books for next Christmas.

Toni Rowland. Christmas 2002