

## ADVENT & INCARNATION

We are used to preparing for Christmas well in advance, too far in advance many would say. I hate to come home from a holiday in September, full of the joys of summer, to be assailed by pleas to book early for Christmas Dinner! That aside, Christians today have the whole of Advent to think about and prepare for Christmas. It regarded mainly as preparation for the coming of God into the world in the person of Jesus. We believe it happened, we celebrate it each year and are joined by millions across the world.

But that hasn't always been the case. Advent only become a fixture in the Christian calendar about the fifth century and it was not until the Middle Ages that it became firmly linked to Christ's first coming at Christmas. Prior to that it was more about looking forward to his second coming. That is an element still included today, more in some traditions than others.

But how different it was at the first Christmas. Throughout the Old Testament a Messiah was expected and looked forward to (**Isaiah 9: 6 – 7**) to chose just one of dozens of references.). But Jesus did not match the job description and his arrival was hardly noticed. There was no widespread preparation for an imminent event. A few shepherds were made aware of it and told others (**Luke 2: 16 - 20**) and still fewer Magi travelling from the East had wind that something momentous was happening (**Matt. 2: 1 - 12**). Others were Elizabeth and Zechariah (**Luke 1: 17 & 42**) and, of course, Mary the mother of Jesus (**Luke 2: 30 - 33**) That's about it. Herod, infamously, had his suspicions aroused by the Magi and exacted a terrible price on the infants of Bethlehem (**Matt. 2: 16 - 18**), but that seems to have been driven by the fear of a rival for his kingship rather than any recognition of the infinitely more significant intervention of God into our world.

It was not until after the crucifixion of Jesus that the full significance of his birth, life and death came to be recognised (**Luke 24: 25 – 27**) and for centuries afterwards the number of people who identified as Christian was pitifully small, perhaps 250,000 or 0.36% of the population of the Roman Empire in A.D. 200, according to some estimates.

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God does not always do things with a flourish and we may not be immediately aware that he is present with us and active. We need to be alert to his presence and to the possibilities, difference and opportunities that brings to our lives and to those whose lives we touch.

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