

Witney Way Advent and Christmas 2011

A Joyous Christ Mass

In 1742, whilst contemplating Eton College, Thomas Gray famously wrote, “*Where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise.*” Now for you and me this might be true, but not so for the likes of David Cameron, George Osborne and Boris Johnson. On the other hand, it has also been anonymously suggested that, “*If you are not confused, you are ill-informed.*”

So where shall I start? Have you ever thought how an event which took place before the birth of Christ was dated? After all, they didn’t know when Jesus was going to be born! Well, before the adoption of our present calendar, years had been expressed as AUC (Ab Urbe Condita – “*From the foundation of the city*” – Rome) that would be 753BC on our present “Gregorian” Calendar.

A Russian monk, by the name of Dionysius Exiguus (the Little), moved to Italy in 533AD and started to refer dates to the birth of Christ, based on Matthew’s Gospel, “*Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king*”, who died in March AUC750. So the date was probably three years earlier. Scholars are still undecided, but they suggest it could have been as early as 8BC; indeed it has been hinted elsewhere, that it could have been as early as 15BC. So Jesus was born in 3 or 8 or 15BC – Before Christ! Or as it is now often referred to as BCE – “*Before the Common Era*”, or as I prefer, “*Before the Christian Era*”. However, the newly appointed governor of Syria, Quirinius, apparently called a census, which would take place in 6AD, or were there two Quiriniuses as some suggest?

And what date in the favoured year? Well, take your pick. There is no mention of a date in the Bible, and no directive that the birth of Jesus should be celebrated, and no mention in the writings of the early Church Fathers during the first two centuries. In fact, at that time, celebrations of birth anniversaries were regarded as “pagan” practices.

Let us pause for a moment and consider the New Testament of the Bible. Four Gospels had been chosen for inclusion, from a dozen or more. Of the four, the second, Mark’s, is really the first, being the earliest, and makes no mention of the incarnation. The Epistles of Paul, which come later in the Bible, but were written earlier than the Gospels, also make no reference to Jesus’ birth. Matthew and Luke, writing later to differing

audiences, give differing accounts of the nativity, but neither mentions a date ... lambs on the hillside? ... suggests spring.

Eventually around 200AD (or as we are now encouraged to write CE – “*Common Era*”, I prefer, “*Christian Era*”) Clement of Alexandria comments that several dates had been proposed by various Christian groups. “*Some said, ...it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in (sic) the 25th day of (the Egyptian month) Pachon,*” that would make it 20th May on our present calendar. “*Others say that He was born on 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi,*” that would be 20th or 21st April.

Hippolytus of Rome (170-235AD/CE) calculated that Jesus was born on December 25th, as did Tertullian of Carthage in 200AD/CE. Both of them showed that Christ was crucified on 25th March – (so why isn’t Easter a fixed date like Christmas?) now recognised as the Feast of the Assumption, and nine months before December 25th, so Jesus was believed to have been conceived and crucified on the same day of the year.

In 274AD/CE, the Roman emperor Aurelian, established 25th December as a feast day for the birth of Sol Invictus, the sun god, or Chirshna, or Mithra (Mithras), or Horus, or ...what’s in a name?

A mid fourth century almanac provides the first published date: “*December 25th ‘natus Christus Betleem Judaea’ – ‘Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea’.*”

It has also been suggested that Emperor Constantine declared 25th December as Jesus’ birthday, when he declared Christianity to be the state religion in the mid-fourth century.

Augustine of Hippo writes in around 400AD/CE, “*For he is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day he also suffered...*”

Apparently Pope Julius 1 in 394 AD/CE decreed 25th December to be a public holiday to coincide with the winter solstice. (c.f. Aurelian 274AD/CE)

A prior in a monastery in Rome, Augustine, not to be confused with Hippo, was sent to Britain by Pope Gregory 1st in 595AD/CE to convert King Ethelberg and his subjects. On Christmas Day (25th December 598AD/CE), Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, converted thousands of subjects at a mass baptism. The same Pope Gregory in 601AD/CE wrote to Augustine suggesting that he should adopt the old

pagan festivals and customs of the Brits, and to give them new Christian meaning. Whence cometh many of our present-day obscure customs associated with Christmas, mid-winter, darkness to light and fertility.

In the East, particularly Egypt and Asia Minor, the dates of Jesus' conception and crucifixion were also linked, but *they* used the Greek calendar and arrived at April 6th. So nine months later Jesus was born on January 6th, which is also the Feast of the Epiphany, when traditionally the Magi arrived 12 days later in Bethlehem - or four years later in Egypt! But not in the Armenian church, that is January 7th!

Mormons however still believe that Jesus' birthday is 6th April, since their founder, a 24 year old farmer by the name of Joseph Smith, received the information in a revelation. So conception, birth, and death now occur on the same day!

As the mighty Bard might have written,

“A myth, on any other date, would mean the same.”*

But we haven't finished yet! Martin of Tours was born around 315/316AD/CE into a non-Christian family. He yearned to become a monk, but was forced into the Roman army aged 15, because his *father* was - in the army that is, not aged 15. Eventually he *did* become a monk - Martin that is, not his Dad - founded a monastery, was made a bishop by the people, performed many miracles, and is now the patron saint of soldiers. He died at the age of 80 and was buried in a cemetery for the “poor” on 11th November, year unknown, but I'm sure you can work it out. The day is now celebrated as the Feast of St Martin, or Martinmas as it is known in Britain. His Festival coincides with the end of harvesting and preparations for winter, and the readiness of new wines for quaffing. In many countries, celebrations traditionally begin at the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month. Was it deliberate, that the date and timing of the armistice between the Allies and the Germans signed in that railway carriage in 1918, was chosen so that there could be double celebrations? Armistice Day now rather overshadows Martinmas, at least in Britain, but not so in Germany, where they still celebrate St Martin's Day.

Anyway, from St Martin's time until sometime in the Middle Ages, the day *following* Martinmas was the first of 40 days of fasting, in preparation for Christmas - not unlike Lent - hence the word *quarantine*. The first recorded reference to Advent was made at the Synod of Lerida (Spain) in 524AD/CE. Later, and it seems no-one knows when, the idea of fasting was dropped and Advent was reduced to the four Sundays before

Christmas; unless you buy an Advent candle or calendar, and then it starts on December 1st: or as one source puts it, "... according to 1907 usage ... beginning with the Sunday nearest to St Andrew's Day, 30th November." Of course in the Eastern church it starts on September 1st and is known as Nativity Fast.

The word Advent comes from the Latin "adventus" meaning "coming", or "adventure" - to come to. Now I was excluded from Latin classes after two years, but I like to think of Advent as "ad" meaning towards, and "vent" - "wind", a wind blowing towards me, may be a breath of fresh air. Anyway it puts *me* in mind of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is a time of waiting, expectation, longing and personal preparation, in readiness for the celebration of the nativity of Jesus. It also reflects the anticipation of the return of Christ at his second "*...coming in glory to judge both the living and the dead.*" But of course, it is importantly the beginning of the Church's New Year. Personally, I regard Advent as three-fold, the coming of Christ for our salvation, anticipation of his coming again, but also his continuing coming into our lives, here, and now.

Oh, and by the way; modern biblical scholars dispute Bethlehem as being the birthplace of Jesus, it was probably Nazareth; and the stable wasn't a wooden shed in a field, it was more likely to have been a cave; and there is no mention in the Gospels of any animals being present at Jesus' birth; it was Francis of Assisi who staged the first live nativity scene using people and animals, in a cave near Greccio in Italy in 1223, Pope Honorius III gave his blessing to the project!

Confused? You should be! Maybe ignorance *is* bliss after all.

Ah well ... I wish you:

A Very Happy Liturgical New Year

* "A myth is a work of imagination and therefore a work of art." G.K.Chesterton

Howard Brayton