

Saint Mary's Newsletter: December

Vicar: David Smithson 027 4213200 Fridays

07 8492761 Afterhours

Peoples Warden: Sally-Ann Riddell 07 8243850

Vicars Warden: John Heaton 07 8243996



SERVICES FOR DECEMBER

Sunday 6th:

10am Advent 2 Holy Communion

Refreshments: Trish Smithson

Readings: Trish Smithson

Intercessions: Trish Smithson

Sunday 13th:

10am Advent 3 Holy Communion & Bishop's visit

Refreshments: Katy Cockerton

Readings: Katy Cockerton

Intercessions: Katy Cockerton

Sunday 20th:

10am Advent 4 Holy Communion

Refreshments: Sally-Ann Riddell

Readings: Sally-Ann Riddell

Intercessions: Sally-Ann Riddell

Thursday 24th:

11pm Midnight Mass

Friday 25th:

9:30am Christmas Day Holy Communion



DEC 27th 2020 to JANUARY 24th 2021:
Please note that there will be no services on and between these dates. Services will resume Sun 31st Jan 2021.



For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

What did December 25 originally celebrate?

For some time before the coming of Christianity, December 25 was a time of pagan celebration. The pagans knew that at this point in their calendar the shortest day and longest night had passed, that little by little the sun would rise higher and remain longer in the sky, bringing with it the promise of spring. Prior to this day occurred the week-long Roman feast called Saturnalia (December 17-24), held in honour of the deity Saturn. This festival brought hopes for peace, happiness, and goodness that supposedly occurred during Saturn's reign.

How did December 25 gain its Christian emphasis? For more than 300 years after Jesus' time, Christians celebrated His resurrection but not His birth. Evidently, sometime during the early fourth century, Christians began searching for the proper day to celebrate Christ's birth. Some churches had been celebrating Jesus' birth on January 6, others April 20, May 20, March 29, and September 29. Finally so much confusion reigned that Saint Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, about the middle of the fourth century, inquired of the Roman bishop, Julius, regarding the correct date.

Julius wrote Cyril and reported that he personally favoured December 25. Obviously refusing to accept this date as valid, Cyril and the Jerusalem church continued celebrating the event for many years on January 6.

In A.D. 354, two years following the end of Saint Julius' reign, the new Roman bishop, Liberius, ordered all his people to celebrate December 25 as the correct day of Christ's birth.

With the passage of time this date became the more popular and was soon adopted by most of Christendom.

Much about Christmas remains veiled and puzzling. It harbours a mystery of faith and has a rather checkered history. For instance, we know neither the day, the month, nor the year Christ was born.

We know Christ's birth was not in the year 1 A.D., as our calendar would suggest with its division of time into B.C. and A.D. Scholars have calculated that Jesus' birth was about 6 or 7 B.C. The revised time was determined partly by the fact that Herod the Great ruled Judea when Jesus was born and history records that Herod died in 4 B.C.

We also know that Christ's birth almost certainly was not during the month of December. At least two observations lead us to this conclusion.

First, in the Middle East, December is not a month when the shepherds or sheep of the Christmas story would be in the open fields at night. Winters in the mountain regions of Judea are not a time for flocks to be long exposed to the elements of nature. Because of the cold weather and the chilling rains, it is most unlikely that they would have been outdoors. Possibly, then, Jesus may have been born sometime after the rains of April and before those of November – the season sheep would be found in the open fields at night. Although of this we cannot be certain. Second, December is not a likely month for a governor to call for the census mentioned in Luke's Gospel. Since it was necessary for everyone to make his way to his own town, it is unlikely that a governor would choose winter when travel would be difficult.

In spite of all this mystery, the biggest mystery of all that we need to keep in mind this Advent/Christmas season is that God, out of love, entered the human race as the Immanuel – as God with us and for us. It's generally accepted that early Christians adopted December 25th as the day of Christ's birth to co-opt the pagan celebration of the winter solstice. Some believe this fact undermines Christianity. But according to Professor William Tighe, this "fact" may actually be a myth. Based on his extensive research, Tighe argues that the December 25th date "arose entirely from the efforts of early Latin Christians to determine the historical date of Christ's death." He also goes so far as to claim that the December 25th pagan feast of the "Birth of the Unconquered Sun"... was almost certainly an attempt to create a pagan alternative to a date that was already of some significance of Roman Christians."

Tighe explains...

In the Jewish tradition at the time of Christ, there was a belief in what they called the "integral age"—that the prophets had died on the same days of their conception or birth. Early Christians spent much energy on determining the exact date of Christ's death. Using historical sources, Christians in the first or second century settled on March 25th as the date of his crucifixion. Soon after, March 25th became the accepted date of Christ's conception, as well. Add nine months—the standard term of a pregnancy—to March 25th, and Christians came up with December 25th as the date of Christ's birth.

It is unknown exactly when Christians began formally celebrating December 25th as a feast. What *is* known, however, is that the date of December 25th "had no religious significance in the Roman pagan festival calendar before Aurelian's time (Roman emperor from 270-275), nor did the cult of the sun play a prominent role in Rome before him." According to Tighe, Aurelian intended the new feast "to be a symbol of the hoped-for 'rebirth,' or perpetual rejuvenation, of the Roman Empire.... [and] if it co-opted the Christian celebration, so much the better."

As Tighe points out, the now-popular idea that Christians co-opted the pagan feast originates with Paul Ernst Jablonski (1693-1757), who opposed various supposed "paganizations" of Christianity.

Of course, to Christians, it really doesn't matter that much whether or not they co-opted December 25th from the pagans, or vice versa. The Christian faith doesn't stand or fall on that detail. But it's nevertheless valuable for all of us to give closer scrutiny to shibboleths—such as that of the pagan origins of Christmas—which are continually repeated without being examined.

A Prayer for this month:

Lord, in this holy season of prayer and song and laughter, we praise you for the great wonders you have sent us: for shining star and angel's song, for infants cry in lowly manger. We praise you for the Word made flesh in a little Child. We behold his glory, and are bathed in his radiance.

