

**A curious case of inculturation?
Advent becomes the new Christmas
and Justin Welby becomes the new Archbishop of Canterbury.
Is there more to come?**

The Roman Catholic Church has a long and developed understanding of inculturation, by which is meant the way in which the Church adapts itself to non-Christian cultures and correspondingly the influence those cultures have on the teachings and life of the Church. This phenomenon is not restricted to the Latin Church but appears in other denominations as well, not least within the Anglican Communion.

A challenging but interesting example of this can be found in Anglican missionaries and their position regarding the practice of polygamy in African mission situations, culminating in the Lambeth Conference of 1888, which formally endorsed the refusal by missionaries to allow men in polygamous relationships to become Christians¹. This was reversed by the Conference held one hundred years later.² Somehow the Church seems to have addressed a seemingly intractable problem.

There are many other examples of the Church adjusting to times and circumstances but as Christmas approaches it may be noted that this, the second most important season of the Christian Church, itself owes its origin to a process of inculturation. In somewhat obscure circumstances it appears that the old and debauched Roman season of Saturnalia from 17th – 25th December was ‘Christianised’, cleaned up and sanctified by giving the otherwise unknown birthday of Christ a date coinciding with the end of Saturnalia in order to metamorphose it (not altogether successfully, as it lingered in various forms for centuries) into something holy. By way of further sanctification and preparation the season of Advent emerged as a pre-Christmas time of penitence, fasting and reflection on the last things and the final return of Christ.

Today new pressures for inculturation are emerging where, since about the middle of the last century, growing commercial pressure has manifested a change in the way in which Christmas is now celebrated. Less emphasis is laid on the day (and following twelve days) and more on the anticipation of the festival. Anecdotal and often amusing evidence of this lies in stories of summertime Christmas card sales and early appearances of decorated Christmas trees - themselves a result of inculturation.

Advent is therefore under increasing pressure as a penitential season, mutating slowly into an extension of the Christmas season. Candlelit Advent Carol Services are hard to distinguish from their Nine Lessons and Carols counterparts, which in any case themselves proliferate throughout

¹ Resolution 5 1888 Lambeth Conference.
See: <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1888/1888-5.cfm>

² Resolution 26 1988 Lambeth Conference.
See: <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1988/1988-26.cfm>

December. For example, in December 2012 St Paul's Cathedral in London, England, will host no less than nineteen carol services for various organisations, all before Christmas and all during Advent. Arguably, and despite heroic rearguard actions by some clergy, Advent is the new Christmas.

Correspondingly, a new season of penitence and reflection has emerged that effectively replaces Advent with a novel form of Advent-like reflection. The Kingdom Season is one that has had its most recent developments in the 'need to do something about November'. Closely shadowing the end of Roman Catholic 'Ordinary Time' and with a backward glance at the old Protestant 'Kingdomtide', since the beginning of Anglican Common Worship in 2000, the contemporary Kingdom Season has flowered. This season not only embraces All Saints and All Souls-tide but also the formative acts of Remembrance that are associated in penitential ceremonies that had their origin in the futility and destructive consequences of the First World War. Remembrance has further developed throughout the twentieth century to include observations and commemorations associated with a variety of other subsequent conflicts and wars.

This is also a month memorably described by Thomas Hood in his poem November:

No sun - no moon!
No morn - no noon -
No dawn - no dusk - no proper time of day.
No warmth, no cheerfulness, no healthful ease,
No comfortable feel in any member -
No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees,
No fruits, no flowers, no leaves, no birds! -
November!³

As such November is ideally suited, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, to be a sombre and reflective period where the Revised Common Lections frequently carry Advent and apocalyptic references. In this respect arguably the Kingdom Season is the new Advent.

Whether an inadvertent and acculturated drift as hypothesised above will lead to a sharper and more effective mission engagement between the beleaguered Western Church and its increasingly secular environment is debatable.

Anglicanism has in the past addressed a wide spectrum of nations and cultures. It has offered examples of successful engagement between the Christian Faith and widely different social norms. Nevertheless, the current Anglican malaise, which may be parodied in the twin headings 'women'

³ *November* (Thomas Hood 1844). See also the longer 'No!'

and 'sex', has led to a *raison d'être* that appears more dialectical than consensual and has failed lamentably to engage with an increasingly secular environment. Consequential tension between conservative and liberal elements perhaps most acutely and ironically in that most advanced of nations the United States of America have spilled over into most of the Anglican Provinces of the Communion.

It is nevertheless worth speculating whether what we are seeing is a new world order process of inculturation with the Anglican Communion in the vanguard of change? Thanks to modern forms of communication societies and their corresponding faith claims now have to adjust themselves to new scientific understandings of human nature both regarding sexuality and gender. The response is currently mixed, varying between denial and accommodation, hence the tensions as epitomised in the divisions within the Anglican Communion, which in turn gave the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury such a torrid decade.

By next Christmas, Advent or even Kingdom Season, we should know more precisely the measure of Justin Welby, currently the Archbishop of Canterbury designate and the next titular leader to be of the Anglican Communion. As a relatively unknown figure he comes with a metaphorical blank sheet of paper upon which different factions will wish to make their predictably tribal marks. Whatever Bishop Welby says or does in response will essentially be inculturation in the making, although the final outcome, as ecclesiastical history teaches us, could take centuries.

Nicholas Henderson
Advent or Christmas 2012