

Christian Prayer: December

Maranatha

The season of Advent runs from the 4th Sunday before Christmas until Christmas Eve. Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas - which does not begin until December 24th.

If we start to celebrate Christmas during Advent, both seasons lose something of what is particular to each. We miss out on something of the spiritual help we are offered by the one, and something of the particular joy of a Christmas for which we have carefully prepared.

Advent itself has a twofold character: first, as a time to prepare for the solemnity of Christmas when the Son of God's first coming to us, in the flesh, is remembered; and secondly as a season when we recall that Christ will come again at the end of time, a time of judgement – as well as mercy. The season is a time for an examination of conscience and fresh commitment to conversion and spiritual renewal as we try to prepare ourselves for both events.

Advent is not simply a preparation to commemorate the historical event of Christmas nor is it primarily an expectation of the end times. Indeed it is even more than both of those things. It is best understood as an anticipation or a beginning of the celebration of the integral mystery of the incarnation, the advent and the epiphany of the Son of God in flesh and in majesty. In this season the Christian community reminds itself that it lives in an "interim" time between two historical events: the coming of Christ in the flesh and his coming in glory at the end of time. The Church is called to be strong in faith "as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ."

Commonly during Advent Catholics will celebrate the sacrament of Confession as one of the ways in which they resource themselves for living more faithfully during these interim times.

The Church has from the earliest times prayed the word 'Maranatha' during these days – a word which appears at the end of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

The word Paul quotes is in Aramaic (the everyday language of Jesus). אתאנרמ

Transliterated into Greek (which is the language of the New Testament) it becomes Μαράνα θά. And when it is transliterated into Latin it becomes Maran-Atha.

There is an ambiguity in the word in Aramaic and Greek. The one word is made up of two words which mean Lord and Come. If it is read as Marana-tha, then in Aramaic it means 'Come Lord. However it is read as Maran-atha it means 'The Lord has come'! There is no conclusive evidence which Paul meant, and who knows maybe he enjoyed the ambiguity!

The word is well suited to be used as a mantra in Advent, perhaps as part of a breathing exercise, to feed a time of quiet prayer.

Maranatha.

