

## Can we sing some Seasonal Music?

One of the most contentious issues, in my experience over 37 years working in three different parishes, is the choice of hymns and at Christmas, the choice of carols. It sometimes stirs emotions and some people have spoken to me with real anger in their eyes because of some choices they perceived to be inappropriate. When it comes to Christmas, people can get very shirty if they come to a Christmas service and don't sing one of their favourite carols. I have had complaints and whilst I sympathise, there are lots of issues to consider as well as the musical taste or needs of individuals.

The problem for a Vicar is about spreading the carols over a sustained period of time. Neither he nor any other regular member of the congregation wants to sing *Away in a Manger* at every service, so the spread of carols can mean that those who just attend one service rather than the whole series of services in any one season, might well not sing their very favourite carol, which was sung last week, as it were!

In the life of the Church, the seasons are more defined than they are in the world at large. In the world of commerce, the preparation for Christmas spending arrives at the end of the summer holiday when we are still in August. And just as strangely, Christmas ends on Christmas Eve when it is time to advertise the January sales. In the church, Advent precedes Christmas for 4 Sundays and four weeks and Christmas starts on Christmas Day and lasts for 12 days when it is then Epiphany until the approach to Lent and Holy Week.



I am generally responsible for choosing the hymnody at Holy Cross and in the approach to Christmas, I have to consider the three related seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, which in 2011, stretch from Sunday 27 November to Sunday 22nd January, that is seven Sundays with all the mid-week and evening services, school services, nativity plays and all the rest as extra. It can be very difficult to get it right.

The Advent season, from 27th November to 18th December will see among others, the following seasonal hymns - O come O come Emmanuel, The advent of our God, Lo he comes with clouds descending, The kingdom of God is justice and joy, Of the father's love begotten, This is the truth sent from above, Gabriel's message, Hail to the Lord's anointed, Hark a herald voice is sounding, From heaven you came, The Lord will come and not be slow.



The words represent the theme of judgement and assessment of how well we have been in managing our earth and ordering our society in the light of Christ. It can be devastating to contemplate the reality in the light of our aspirations. This, as you can see, is a very different mood to that which expect at Christmas.

The season of Christmas in the life of the Church is a celebration of the love of God in coming down to earth to sort us out and save us. It is all packed into the well-known story found in the Gospels and with all the warm and loving issues which motherhood and new babies may offer us.

For Christians, the story is one of Joy to the World, but only because we now see the whole picture, the way this new life will develop and grow and the manner in which he lived his life, his teaching, healing, including, challenging and loving way of life. It is how this young life will end and the implications for our world which is all part of the Joy to the World, and at the Midnight Mass, we celebrate his birth and his death, and through the mystery of his Incarnation, we see the hand and work of God, unmistakably and firmly leading us.



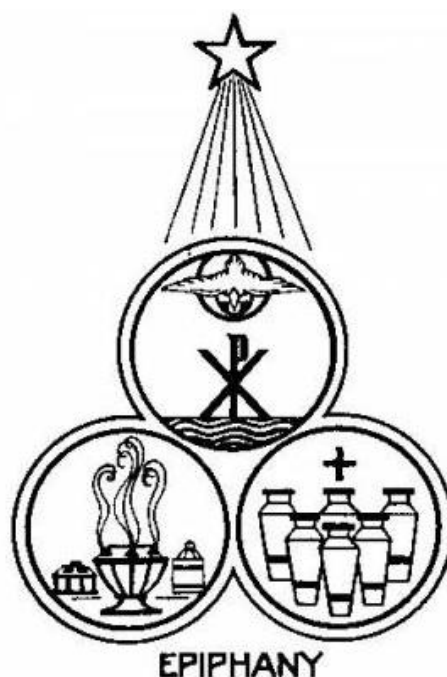
During the Christmas season, from 25th December to 1st January, we will be singing the following carols:

O little town of Bethlehem, Silent Night, A virgin most pure, Rejoice and be merry, He smiles within his cradle, Hark the herald angels, Once in Royal Davis's city, See amid the winter snow, On Christmas night all Christians sing, O come all ye faithful, The holly and the ivy, Little donkey, Away in a manger, Unto us a boy is born, While shepherds watched their flocks, A great and mighty wonder, Good king Wenceslas, God rest you merry gentlemen, Infant holy, infant lowly. (19 carols sung over 5 different services)

The Epiphany got a bit lost from view during recent years but there has been a strong revival recently with the start of celebrating mid-week festivals on Sundays, as we do at Holy Cross. The Epiphany helps us because it interprets the life and work of Jesus in the light of the Incarnation and the salvation which we long for and desperately need. It leads naturally from Nativity to Passiontide and points via Candlemas towards the coming suffering of Jesus which we ponder during Holy Week.

The Epiphany season which this year stretches from 8th January to 22nd January, will see us singing As with gladness men of old, Songs of thankfulness and praise, We three kings of orient are, O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, Brightest and best, In the bleak midwinter, The first Nowell, Hail to the Lord who comes.

In the Epiphany illustration, you see the Baptism of Jesus, the Gifts of the Magi and the water-into-wine miracle in Cana in Galilee. It is topped by the star which led the Magi to Bethlehem.



I hope that the three contrasting seasons, now almost invisible outside the confines of the church in their unique and separate identities, will be clearer to you and therefore more enjoyable for you as we travel through the winter sharing the festivals of light and hope. Make the most of it by being there and feeling the weight and purpose of each season in turn.

Neil Richardson