

Christmas and Epiphany

It may be difficult to tell in our secular society but Christmas does not begin until, at the earliest, Christmas Eve. The twelve days of Christmas then take us to the Eve of the Epiphany. The actual period of time called “Christmastide” continues until the Eve of the Baptism of the Lord (which is always the first Sunday after the Epiphany).

Christmas is a very special time for Christians. It marks the day when we celebrate that God – in the person of Jesus the Christ – was made flesh and dwelt among us (i.e. the Incarnation). Jesus is fully human and fully divine – a paradoxical mystery that Christians accept as truth. In the Son, God is present to humanity, the fullness of the divine love is revealed and available, and this love draws everyone and everything to itself. Heaven and earth are forever bound together in Jesus Christ. We are given the hope of reunion and restoration of communion with our Creator. In Jesus’ perfect humanity, we regain what was lost through Adam. But, this is not a repair of the old – this is a new creation. As a human, in his perfection Jesus died for us – to defeat sin and death. We are joined to Christ in our baptism and continue to receive God’s grace through partaking in “Christ’s body and blood” – the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist.

We don’t know the actual date of Jesus’ birthday and so the date of December 25th was likely an appropriation of a pagan day of celebration. In the fourth century, the birth of the sun god was celebrated on December 25th. The term “Christmas” is a slight alteration of “Christ’s Mass” and is a good reminder of the importance of baptized Christians celebrating Jesus’ death and resurrection through the Eucharist.

Epiphany comes from the Greek word epiphania meaning the manifestation of divine power in a person or event. Epiphany originated in the East and included the celebration of Jesus’ birth. The Western Church began celebrating Jesus’ birth on December 25th and then separately celebrated on January 6th the arrival of the Magi to see the infant Jesus. This is seen as evidence that the Jewish messiah came also for the salvation of Gentiles. In the East, Epiphany is primarily a commemoration of Jesus’ baptism and celebrates the revelation that the incarnate Christ was both full human and fully God.

Sundays are counted as “after the Epiphany” until the Sunday immediately preceding Ash Wednesday.