

2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT

St. Matthew 3:1-12

One of the most recognisable symbols of Advent is the Advent wreath. It is part of our long-standing Catholic tradition, but where the idea of the wreath came from is uncertain. Before Christianity people in northern Europe—modern day Germany would make wreaths of green leaves and light them with candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and sunlit days of Spring. In Scandinavia during winter, lighted candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn “the wheel of the earth” back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth.

By the Middle Ages, Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas, as a symbol of Christ, “the Light that came into the world” to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (*cf. Jn. 3:19-21*).

The wreath itself is filled with symbolism. It is usually made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. Even these evergreens have a traditional meaning which are symbols of the Faith: the laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine, holly, and yew, mean immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: the prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells us that the cross on which Christ hung was made of holly. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolises the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. All together, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, who entered the world becoming man and who was victorious over sin and death through His passion, death, and resurrection.

Even the poinsettia flower itself is a symbol of Christmas. The shape of the flower formed like a star reminds us of the star of Bethlehem that guided the three kings to our Lord. The red poinsettia symbolise the blood of Christ, and the white poinsettia the purity of Christ.

The four candles that light the wreath represent the four weeks of Advent. A tradition is that each week represents one thousand years, totalling the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the Birth of Christ. Three candles are violet and one is rose. The violet candles in particular symbolise the prayer, penance, and sacrifices and goods works undertaken at this time. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, when the priest also wears rose vestments at Mass. Even the week by week lighting of the candles symbolises the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead.

Some also attach a further symbolism to the candles so that the candles themselves tell the history of our salvation. The first candle represents the patriarchs; Abraham, and his son, Isaac, and his son, Jacob. The second candle represents the prophets; those who foretold of the coming of the Messiah. The third candle represents St. John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, who showed him to be the Lamb of God. The fourth candle represents the most Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. Through each of these candles we follow the history of the coming of God into the world—from the Old Testament and revelation of God to the patriarchs, through the prophecies of the prophets, to the New Testament and St. John the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

As with all of the prayers and rituals of the Mass we draw on the rich tradition of the Church to make known to generation after generation the one true faith revealed to us in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. And with the Advent wreath, as we light candle by candle, week by week, we are reminded that it is not yet Christmas but to truly celebrate what is to come we must prepare ourselves now.