



**DECEMBER 2020**

*Revd John writes:*



## ***Christmas Trees***

As a child one thing I always looked forward to was the appearance of the Christmas tree which my father would never allow to be decorated until the weekend before Christmas in order to observe Advent.

In the Western Christian tradition, Christmas trees are variously erected on days such as the first day of Advent or even as late as Christmas Eve depending on the country; customs of the same faith hold that the two traditional days when Christmas decorations, such as the Christmas tree, are removed are Twelfth Night and, if they are not taken down on that day, Candlemas, the latter of which ends the Christmas-Epiphany season in some denominations.

A Christmas tree is a decorated tree, usually an evergreen conifer, such as a spruce, pine or fir, or an artificial tree of similar appearance, associated with the celebration of Christmas, originating in Northern Europe.

The tree was traditionally decorated with "roses made of coloured paper, apples, wafers, tinsel, and sweetmeats". In the 18th century, it began to be illuminated by candles, which were ultimately replaced by Christmas lights after the advent of electrification. An angel or star might be placed at the top of the tree to represent the Angel Gabriel or the Star of Bethlehem, respectively, from the Nativity.

Modern Christmas trees originated during the Renaissance in early modern Germany. Its 16th-century origins are sometimes associated with Protestant Christian reformer Martin Luther, who is said to have first added lighted candles to an evergreen tree.

Although the tradition of decorating churches and homes with evergreens at Christmas was long established, the custom of



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decorating an entire small tree was unknown in Britain until some two centuries ago Queen Victoria as a child was familiar with it and a tree was placed in her room every Christmas. In her journal for Christmas Eve 1832, the delighted 13-year-old princess wrote; 'After dinner... we then went into the drawing room near the dining room ... There were two large round tables on which were placed two trees hung with lights and sugar ornaments. All the presents being placed round the trees ..

After Victoria's marriage to her German cousin Prince Albert, by 1841 the custom became even more widespread as wealthier middle-class families followed the fashion. A boost to the trend was given in 1848 when The Illustrated London News, in a report picked up by other papers, described the trees in Windsor Castle in detail and showed the main tree, surrounded by the royal family, on its cover. In fewer than ten years their use in better-off homes was widespread.

Their use at public entertainments, charity bazaars and in hospitals made them increasingly familiar however, and in 1906 a charity was set up specifically to ensure even poor children in London slums "who had never seen a Christmas tree" would enjoy one that year. By the mid-1920s the use of Christmas trees had spread to all classes. In 1933 a restriction on the importation of foreign trees led to the "rapid growth of a new industry" as the growing of Christmas trees within Britain became commercially viable due to the size of demand. By 2013 the number of trees grown in Britain for the Christmas market was approximately eight million and their display in homes, shops and public spaces a normal part of the Christmas season.





Christmas trees appear in profusion in December, and this year even earlier, as people try to bring joy and light into the darkness of Covid lockdown restrictions.

But there is an earlier Christian tradition involving trees at this time of year; one that began in medieval times.

The **Jesse Tree** was used to help tell the story of the Bible from the Creation to the Christmas story. Throughout Advent the tree would be decorated by symbols and ornaments representing key moments from the Old Testament stories of God's people. The Jesse Tree was a forerunner of the modern Advent Calendar in providing a countdown to Christmas.

The term Jesse Tree comes from this verse in the book of Isaiah:

***'There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD'.***

Jesse, was King David's father. In this verse, Isaiah predicts the coming of Jesus. He is telling the people that, one day, a great ruler will rise up from the descendants of the great King David. This was exciting news to the people of Isaiah's time. Many of the kings who ruled after David were poor rulers. They lead their people away from worshipping God. Eventually David's kingdom split in two and then faded away. Isaiah's prophecy of a stump shows how the family of David had been "cut down". Jesus would be like a new growth and a new hope for the kingdom that was once strong and worshiped God as one.

At Christmas, the Christian church recognises the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. In that stable behind the inn in Bethlehem, a scene with which many of us are familiar, God comes down to earth in the vulnerable form of a baby to share in our humanity and to grow up to be the Saviour of the world.



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In our modern world Christmas has increasingly become a time for community and family celebration, rather than a religious festival. This year many of us will not be able to celebrate with our families and communities as much as we would like – which leads us to our final tree.

There is a long history of local communities planting trees to commemorate people or events which mark historic events or memorials. In our churchyard there is a 'Millenium Yew' and of course the 'Virgo Oak'.

A **Community tree** – offers a place for reflection, celebration and remembrance. So it seemed a good idea that there might be a tree dedicated for the use of the wider community this Christmastide. So in the churchyard there will be a tree that combines the Christmas tree and the Jesse tree with the needs of church and village families. Where symbols of the Christian story, seasonal decorations and prayers may be brought and visited throughout the season.

This year our Covid Christmas will be very different to normal with restrictions imposed on our church and family lives. The good news of a viable vaccine offers hope of salvation from the ravages of a cruel pandemic. The Gospel story of Jesus' birth offers the hope of salvation from the ravages of the many 'sins' that mar the peace, welfare, justice and beauty of our world.

May the love of Christ fill you with peace, hope and joy now and always.

Wishing you a Happy Christmas and a Good New Year.

Yours in Christ

*Reverend John.*