



THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS

For the first two centuries or more of Christian worship the early churches felt no great need to hold a feast of the birth of the Lord, nor did they have agreement as to the date on which Jesus was born. This comes at a great surprise to us, since we are so used to celebrating a December birth for the saviour as a clear historical fact. Rather the ancient world was not so interested in that level of historical accuracy. While the New Testament record and the first generations of the faithful were indifferent to the actual date of Jesus birth, they were committed with their lives to exploring the meaning of the incarnation and the salvation it brought them. It is out of this commitment that the third and fourth century Church began to celebrate the nativity of the Lord. Of course to do this it had to settle on a date.

Settling on a date for Christmas

There are two competing theories setting out why December 25th and January 6th were eventually settled upon as the days of celebration. One approach is based in the ancient Jewish rabbinic thinking that the date of the birth and death of a patriarch were the same. When churches applied this to the life of Christ, they did so with an interesting variation. Following an even more ancient Christian custom of setting the death of Jesus on March 25th, theologians saw that as also the day of his conception rather than his birth. This meant that the celebration of the actual birth of Jesus was set on December 25th, a full nine months later. Other Churches, more particularly those in the Eastern realms of the Roman Empire, held that Jesus died on April 6th, and so calculated his birth as of January 6th.

The second theory for the date of Christmas is that Christians quickly transposed a pagan devotion to the 'Sun-King' into a Christian feast of 'Christ the light who had come into the darkness of our world'. By the early fourth century the grounds for this had already been laid. While the faithful celebrated the first day of the week as the feast of the resurrection, in pagan quarters that day came to be named after the Sun. Across the Roman empire a feast grew to the deity of the 'unconquered Sun', and was well established by the end of the third century. Naturally the festival was celebrated on the day of the winter solstice, signaling the close of the longest night and the gradual return to dominance of the sun. In parts of the empire this was celebrated on December 25th, while in the East the festivities were held on January 6th. The major difficulty with this

theory is that the early Christians were very resistant to allowing pagan elements to influence their own worship. Nevertheless, while this view does not account all that well for situating the date of Christmas, it gives impetus to importance of holding the feast and emphasizing the understanding of Christ as the 'light'.

The celebration develops

Over the period from the fourth to the sixth century Christianity became the dominant religion within the empire. The celebration of the incarnation was situated within the dates of December 25th and January 6th, and a feast to the Motherhood of Mary put in place. The theological need to counter movements that denied the humanity of Jesus meant that these feasts gained in stature. In an added quirk some churches had thought that the incarnation really took place when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. While this position did not gain currency the final effect was that the baptism of Jesus became incorporated into the Christmas liturgies, and Epiphany became a day for baptisms. Another tradition was to relate this period to the miracle of the wine at the wedding feast of Cana, the first revelation of the power of the Lord (Jn 2:11).

A liturgical theology of the feast of Christmas

The season of Christmas takes its current shape from the adaptation of this whole set of ideas. The time is closely linked to the paschal mystery, and leads the baptized to ponder the fragility of human existence and the mystery of salvation. The prayers and readings for the Masses of Christmas focus on the coming of the light, and so closely align with the northern hemisphere winter. The breadth of salvation is celebrated on the feast of the Epiphany on January 6th, highlighting the manifestation of the saviour to the pagan world symbolized in the three Magi. The following Sunday, the final one in the season, is given over to the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. By ending with this celebration we can see that the season has covered the 'hidden' life of Jesus up until the first appearances in his ministry.

[For a comprehensive discussion see Susan Roll's, *Toward the Origins of Christmas*, Liturgia Condenda 5, Pharos (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995)]

Gerard Moore
Director (Research)
Sydney College of Divinity