

On the Eighty-Sixth Day of Christmas . . .

The footpaths are muddy, the days are short—in the fifth century Saint Maximus of Turin wrote that the depressing shortness of the days itself testified to the imminence of some event that would bring about the betterment of a world urgently longing for a brighter sun to dispel its darkness—and he lived in Turin, a lot further south than Turvey. Why not try to ‘better the world’ with interiorly illuminated penguins, rabbits, robins, Father Christmas, anything into which an LED can be fitted?

Christmas Day is on the horizon, but Christmas seems to have been going on since the beginning of October. Here at the Abbey we do our Christmas shopping, send our Christmas cards, etc. etc. and try to do it all with time to spare and no last minute rush—but in our chapel we are keeping to a different timeframe.

The Liturgical Year begins with Advent. We ring the bells before the First Vespers of Advent Sunday, 30 November this year, to mark the start of the new Liturgical Year. Advent is the liturgical season of preparation for Christmas, in the chapel we read of Christ foreshadowed in the Old Testament, of John the Baptist, forerunner of Christ. The liturgical colour is purple. For each of the four weeks of Advent we light another candle, slowly the Light appears on the horizon.

From 17 December to 23 December during Vespers at the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) we sing the ancient Latin ‘O’ Antiphons—the hymn ‘O Come, O Come Emmanuel’ is based on them. Christmas is getting nearer, but it hasn’t arrived yet, we still sing and pray ‘Come’.

We used to set up our Christmas crib on 17 December, but in recent years as the name ‘Christmas’ has slowly, or not so slowly, vanished from the commercial Festive Season, we have set it up earlier—Pete our plumber says that when he sees our crib he knows it really is Christmas. Last year we took our turn to host the beautiful knitted village Christmas Crib, as it was raining heavily the Holy Family had to leave in a plastic bag.

The morning of Christmas Eve arrives, and still no sign of Christmas in the chapel, some visitors are puzzled. Mass combined with Lauds is like Advent, but with much looking forward to ‘tomorrow’, and Midday office is similar, but by now the chapel is a somewhat incongruous mixture of Christmas and Advent. By the First Vespers of the Nativity of the Lord the chapel has been transformed to Christmas, and so has the Abbey . . . but it’s still not quite Christmas. A bit later in the evening we celebrate the Christmas Vigil, followed by and combined with the Mass of the Nativity of the Lord—the celebration of the birthday of the Child who will bring about the ‘betterment of the world’.

Christmas has arrived—The First Day of Christmas!

Sr Benedict, Turvey Abbey