

Christmas is coming

You cannot help but notice that things are looking a little different in Hong Kong at the moment. It all started a few days ago and will pick up speed over the next three weeks. I'm referring of course to all the Christmas decorations that have suddenly appeared in shopping centre arcades and along the streets from Causeway Bay to Central. Shop windows are being adorned with Christmas decorations; tinsel, glitter, bells, angels, holly, Father Christmas, reindeer, the list goes on. In the first days of Christmas decoration time it can be quite hazardous walking around town, with sections of footpaths and walkways roped off as workmen on cranes carefully hang the larger displays from arcade ceilings and along the street frontages of shops. In fact, as I was walking through Pacific Place on Saturday morning I came face to face with a snowman; complete with hat, scarf and bright orange nose. He was being transported on a trolley, destined no doubt for a prime position outside one of the larger stores. The message is well and truly out there; Christmas is coming.

There have also been preparations for Christmas happening here at school. Last Friday evening we turned on the Christmas lights above the main entrance on Bonham Road; a Christmas tree in green and yellow lights, topped with a golden star and framed with blue and red snowflakes. Off to one side is a 155th anniversary banner, tastefully written in red lights. Furthermore, boxes of St. Paul's College Christmas cards, designed this year by Au Kwong Yu in Form 5D, have been delivered to the College Office. At some stage during the next two days, the Christmas tree will arrive here in the Hall, to be decorated by members of the Christian Union. I've no doubt that many of your teachers will also be looking at ways of bringing the Christmas story to your classrooms. The message is well and truly out there; Christmas is coming.

You would have also noticed some significant changes in Church yesterday. The colour of the robes worn by the priests has changed from red to purple. The congregations have started to sing Christmas carols and the children attending Sunday school have been making Christmas presents. In churches across Hong Kong and around the world, everyone is gearing up for the big event. The message is well and truly out there; Christmas is coming.

The beginning of December is the start of the New Year for the Christian Church. Yes, the Christian Church has a calendar year. Rather like a school year, the Christian year is divided into four terms, referred to as; Advent, Death, Resurrection, and Heaven and Hell. Indeed, you might be tempted to draw some parallels between the four parts of our school year, First Coursework, Mid-Year Examination, Second Coursework and the Final Examination, with Advent, Death, Resurrection, and Heaven and Hell. The Church New Year has commenced and yesterday was the first Sunday in Advent.

The word Advent is derived from the Latin word 'adventus' which means 'arrival'. Put simply, it means that Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Saviour, is about to arrive. Advent is a time of waiting for the arrival of Christmas, the coming of Jesus to Earth when he was born as a baby at Bethlehem a little over two thousand years ago. During Advent we

recall the history of God's people and reflect on how the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament were fulfilled.

Advent is a time to celebrate light in the midst of darkness. During Advent, some people make or buy Advent calendars as a way of counting the days to Christmas. Usually these calendars have twenty-four 'windows'. Traditional calendar windows open up to show a picture of something linked with this time of year. One may show an angel or one of the shepherds who visited baby Jesus. Others may show pictures of Christmas presents, a candle or anything else to do with Christmas. The last window to be opened on Christmas Eve usually shows Jesus himself, lying in a manger.

There are many ways to make Advent calendars. If you buy a coffee at Starbuck's over the next three weeks you will see their Advent Calendars sitting on the counter, comprising of 24 little boxes arranged in the shape of a Christmas tree. Each day, one box will be turned around by the staff to show part of a picture that is painted on the back. The complete picture will be revealed when the final box is turned around on the 24th of December.

We also have special songs that we sing during Advent. The songs of course are known as carols and they are about when Jesus was born. The most famous Christmas carols were written in Europe about 150 years ago, around the time that St. Paul's College was founded. Indeed, I imagine that these new songs were very popular amongst the first students at SPC. We will be singing Christmas carols during Advent, particularly at our Carol Service, with the most popular carols for young people being *Away in a Manger*, *Silent Night* and *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

Another tradition to emerge in Europe around 150 years is the Christmas tree. This tradition is believed to have started with Queen Victoria in England who transported a large fir tree from Germany and placed it in Windsor Castle, her home on the outskirts of London. It soon became popular for families across England and Europe to buy a Christmas tree for their home, to decorate the tree with tinsel, lights and small ornaments hanging from the branches, and to place the Christmas presents underneath. At the very top of the tree is placed an angel or a star. Cities around the world put Christmas trees in public open spaces. The most famous Christmas trees are the ones in London's Trafalgar Square and at the Rockefeller Center in New York. In Hong Kong there is already a large and heavily decorated Christmas tree in Chatter Square.

Advent is a journey through the Christmas story. The nativity scene is an ancient way of telling that story, coming from a time when most people could not read and needed the story of the birth of Jesus to be depicted visually. As Christians, we also use Advent candles to celebrate this period with one candle lit every Sunday of Advent. Candles symbolise the light of God coming into the world through the birth of His son. The four outer candles represent the period of waiting during the four Sundays of Advent. The first candle is the Candle of Hope, the second the Candle of Peace, the third the Candle of Love and the fourth the Candle of Joy. Traditionally, the fifth and central candle is lit on Christmas Eve to signify Jesus the Light of the World. We will be lighting the candles at

assemblies during Advent, with the fifth candle to be lit at the Carol Service on the last day of term.

We must not forget, however, that the symbols that we use at this time of year, the carols, the candles and the decorations, are secondary to the big event. Advent is a time of preparation for the arrival of Jesus Christ. Advent allows us to prepare ourselves and to focus our thoughts on the true meaning of Christmas, that is, the arrival of the infant Jesus, our Lord and our Saviour. While the message is well and truly out there, it also needs to be well and truly inside each of us. Christmas is coming.