

## Christmas tidings

*By a slightly grumpy Deacon John wearing his historian's hat not his deacon's stole...*

The Victorians were not only good at being sentimental; they were very good at inventing sentimental things that looked and felt very old from the time they invented it. Almost all our “royal ceremonial” is Victorian invention. And so is our Christmas. Christmas trees (and home decorations generally), the ingredients of our Christmas dinner (except for the turkey which has usurped the position of the goose), present-exchanging, the office party, and much Christmas worship - crib services, services of lessons of carols (actually post-Victorian) and so on. If we go back 500 years, the period up to Christmas was a period of fasting and abstinence (and Christmas Eve a day of complete fasting): the celebration began on 25 December lasted for the 12 days of Christmas season proper (up to “Epiphany”, the festival that recalls the visit of the wise men) and more generally for the 40 days up to Candlemas (2 Feb). The churches not the homes were richly decorated; the community gathered together to feast; gifts were exchanged not on 25 December but on 25 March (the Feast that commemorated the Angel's Visit to Mary to ask her to bear the Son of God), and that was New Year's Day until 1753. St Nicholas (Santa) was not in the frame. Christmas - the celebration of Christ's solidarity with our humanity was strictly second to the feast of Easter, the celebration of our solidarity with his divinity; and it was at Easter not Christmas that most people made their annual communion. If we go back to the very early centuries we find all the experts agreeing that Jesus was born on 20 April or 20 May. There was no support for a December birth until Roman Emperors made the empire Christian and the Church decided to take the pagan festival of the Winter Solstice (thought by Egyptian astrologers to be either 25 Dec or 6 Jan) and christianise it. Perhaps the best thing the churches could do would be to discover an ancient papyrus proving conclusively that Jesus was born on July 25<sup>th</sup>. Then we could reclaim Christmas for Christ. (Only joking - have a very happy and joyful modern Christmas!)