



On your marks

The season of Advent helps us as Christians to prepare not only for the celebration of the birth of Christ but also his return. Between those two events lies the mystery of the cross and resurrection, which have of course been there since the beginning of time. The cross reveals the depths of God's love for his creation and is God's unique signature over all that he has made. If we do not recognise this, it is possible to sentimentalise the Christmas story and to sanitise the impact of the second coming.

With this in mind the following outline offers a way to link a particular cross into the cycle of Advent with activities that help unpack its themes.

The Tau cross has the shape of a capital T and is sometimes described as an incomplete cross. It is used as a symbol of the Old Testament prophets who looked forward but never saw the completion of what they wrote about Jesus. It is an anticipatory cross, which picks up the theme of Advent.

Get set

This outline is built around information linked to the Tau cross (see below). You will also need some general craft materials to make your own version of this cross.

Go!

1 Here are some background information and theories about the Tau cross:

Tau is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet and in the past some Jewish scholars have attached a theological meaning to this, namely that this letter represents the fulfilment of the revealed word of God.

The letter can be written as an 'x' or a '+' or a 'T'. The prophet Ezekiel in chapter 9 uses the imagery of this last letter as a way of urging people to remain faithful to God. He symbolically seals God's chosen people with the mark of a Tau on their foreheads.

Although the last letter of modern Hebrew is no longer cross-shaped as described, the early Christian writers commenting on the Hebrew scriptures used its Greek translation, in which Tau was transcribed as a T. For Christians this T represented the cross of Christ, which is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises.

During the Middle Ages the religious community of Anthony the Hermit, with which St. Francis was familiar, was very involved in the care of lepers. These men used a Christian cross, shaped like a T. After his conversion St. Francis worked with these people and he accepted this T as his own crest. For St. Francis the T stood for lifelong fidelity to Christ and it was a symbol of his pledge to serve the least and the last, like the lepers, who were the outcasts of his day.

The imagery of the Tau was also picked up by Pope Innocent the third in 1215 when he exhorted Christians to be those who should be known by the mark of the Tau on their foreheads. He was alluding to Ezekiel's prophecy mentioned earlier. St. Francis often told his brother Friars that they should stretch out their arms and make the shape of a Tau cross as a way of saying they were committed to being Christ-like people, who would model the compassionate love of God in Christ to their dying day. Followers of St. Francis today, both lay and religious, often wear this Tau Cross as an exterior sign of their loyalty to the way of Jesus.

2 The Tau cross also looks a bit like a footpath signpost. Develop this image further by using it as a focus for the meaning of Advent with children. The two arms of the cross at the top could be labelled 'the past' and 'the future', while the main post of the sign represents 'the present'. Advent is a time that both looks back and looks forward. Back to how the Old Testament prophets had caught glimpses of what God would do one day, when he sent his special rescuer, the Messiah; forward to the arrival of Jesus as a baby who was to grow up to become the man who died on a cross at Easter and rose again. This signpost idea for the Tau cross clearly shows how the path from the past to the future is continuous and how what happens at Christmas and Easter is directly linked to what is described in the Old Testament. Indeed it is a path that stretches back to the beginning of time and forward to the end of the world.

3 As a group make a large version of the Tau cross. You could use a tall carpet roll painted appropriately and through slots cut at the top, slide a plank of wood to become the cross piece, sticking out equally left and right.

In groups create symbols in different colours to represent the stories that are reflected on both sides of this Advent cross.

To the left, where the Old Testament prophets are represented, hang from the sign images of the different ways in which Jesus was predicted to come. A second set of similar images should then be hung on the opposite side as fulfilment, each of them linked to something that happened at Christmas or in the life of Jesus. For example, here are some of the Old Testament images and their New Testament fulfilments:

- A crown (a new King was prophesied by Micah)... balanced by the crown of thorns which Jesus wore at Easter
- A branch (a Righteous Branch was prophesied by Jeremiah)... balanced by the cross which is made from the branch of a tree, where Jesus was crucified
- A baby (a child named Immanuel is prophesied by Isaiah)... balanced by Jesus as the baby in the manger in Bethlehem
- A dove (God's special Messiah according to Isaiah would be the Prince of Peace)... balanced by the Dove which represents the Holy Spirit, who came upon Mary and then later on Jesus at his baptism
- A sheep (in the second part of Isaiah the special Messiah is described as a sheep that had to be slaughtered)... balanced by the sheep and shepherds who visited the baby Jesus; Jesus himself was called the Lamb of God by his cousin John and of course Jesus later described himself as



the Good Shepherd.

- A special Man (Daniel saw someone like the Son of man coming from heaven)... balanced by Jesus himself who became human just like us.

4 The Tau cross shape is probably the shape of cross on which Jesus was actually crucified. There would have been one upright post and one cross piece, which is the part Jesus had been forced to carry on his way to execution.

5 The Tau cross reminds us not only of Advent but also why Jesus was born. He had been given the name Jesus, which means 'rescuer' by the Angel and that rescue was finally accomplished at Easter. This cross shape reminds us that the Old Testament prophets, the birth of Jesus and his death are all of a piece. It is what God had planned from the foundation of the world.

6 As a way of remembering this cross in Advent, here is a special verse for this time of year, which picks up these themes. Print this off for the children but note that all the T's are written as capitals. These could be coloured in by the children to help them remember the message of the Tau Cross.

The PropheTs spoke of The grace ThaT would be yours.

They were wriTing noT for Themselves buT for you.

This is The sTory of Jesus ThaT has been passed on To us by Those who have shared The good news.

1 Peter 1:10-12