Introduction

The Jesse Tree is an ancient Christian tradition, dating back to the eleventh century. It is a kind of family tree for Jesus. A branch is decorated with the symbols of his ‘ancestors’, beginning with Adam and Eve and working forward through the centuries to Mary and Joseph. It is called a Jesse Tree because of a verse in the book of Isaiah:

'A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.' (Isaiah 11:1)

Isaiah's hope was that a king (literally a 'Messiah') would come from the royal line of King David (who was Jesse's son) and rule the people with justice. In Isaiah's time, this seemed like a forlorn hope, but it was his vision for the future. It would be as if a tree which had been cut down suddenly sprouted a new shoot and began to grow again. Christians believe that this Jewish hope for a Messiah is fulfilled in Jesus, so all the stories of the Old Testament become the stories leading to his birth. Traditional Jesse Trees can be wall paintings, carvings or illustrations in stained glass. The number of Old Testament characters represented varies, as do the symbols used for them.

Why have a Jesse Tree in school?

It gives Jesus a 'family tree' – setting the Christmas story in a much wider context.

It retells some of the accounts (Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, etc.) which are common to Christians, Jews and Muslims.

It highlights some of the traditional Christian themes for Advent, such as hope for the world and a longing for justice.

It stops Advent simply being a countdown to Christmas, making it a season in its own right.

Creating a Jesse Tree

This Jesse Tree needs to have room for 15 symbols. It could be a two-dimensional frieze, or a three-dimensional natural branch anchored in a pot. Place a purple background or cloth near the tree, as purple is the liturgical colour for Advent. The symbols could be made on paper discs and stuck or hung on the tree, or they could be three-dimensional models made of a medium which air dries or oven bakes. You could even have a large tree and have a multiple group of symbols for each story made by a number of children. Photocopiiable images of the symbols are included at the back of this book. You can reproduce these onto card or paper, rescaling them to your requirements. They can be hung straight onto the tree, or used as guidelines for modelling or collage work.

Aim to display the tree throughout Advent – in the hall or entrance hall or classroom – then it can become a focus for the children’s ongoing reflections. (Tip: have a look at the outline for the Christmas assembly at
the end of the book. If you want to use this assembly, you will need to be able to make your Jesse Tree the focal point that day, so bear this in mind if you are going to attach it to a noticeboard.)

If you can display the tree throughout Advent, make paper or card leaves and give each one a stem of soft florist’s wire or stick a piece of double-sided tape on the back, so that it is easy to attach it to the tree. Ask the children to use these leaves to write or draw their own responses, thoughts, questions or prayers, and to attach them near the symbol for the story they refer to. (If your ‘tree’ is a collage on a noticeboard, you may prefer to have a box for children to post their ‘leaves’ into, so that you can attach them in appropriate positions. If your tree is an actual branch, it will be much easier to reposition any stray leaves!)

Square brackets round a text indicate that it may be omitted if you are not using the tree but using the story as a one-off.

This book provides 15 assemblies, each one based on a character from the Jesse Tree. There is also a Christmas assembly. Each outline contains:

- a description of the symbol to hang on your tree (e.g. a rainbow, stars, etc.)
- a story about the biblical character
- a suggestion for further reflection (A moment to wonder)
- a prayer.

The 15 stories are arranged in three groups: Beginnings, Keeping Faith and Reaching to the Future. Each of these groups is prefaced by an additional resource called Links to the modern world. For instance, the stories in Beginnings (Adam and Eve, Noah, etc.) are linked to present-day green issues.

The projects and individuals mentioned are simply suggestions for further study; many others would also be appropriate. You could cover one project throughout the week, linking all five stories to it, or mention a different one each day. You may find that you can make a direct link to work you are already covering in another curriculum area (History, Geography, RE or PSHE). If so, this would be an excellent way of showing the relevance of these ancient stories. The Links to the modern world are designed to provoke thought about the state of the world today; the Jesse Tree stories come from the distant past, but Christians use them to inform their vision for the future.

These assemblies are designed to work in sequence to take you through the school days of Advent, and to build into a tree with 15 symbols attached. However, they will work as individual stories; they will also work without a physical tree in which case those sections in square brackets should be omitted. A moment to wonder can be posed as a question, reflected on silently, or used as an introduction to related classroom activities. The prayer can be used as it stands, expanded or omitted altogether, as suits your context; the Links to the modern world section can similarly be adapted.