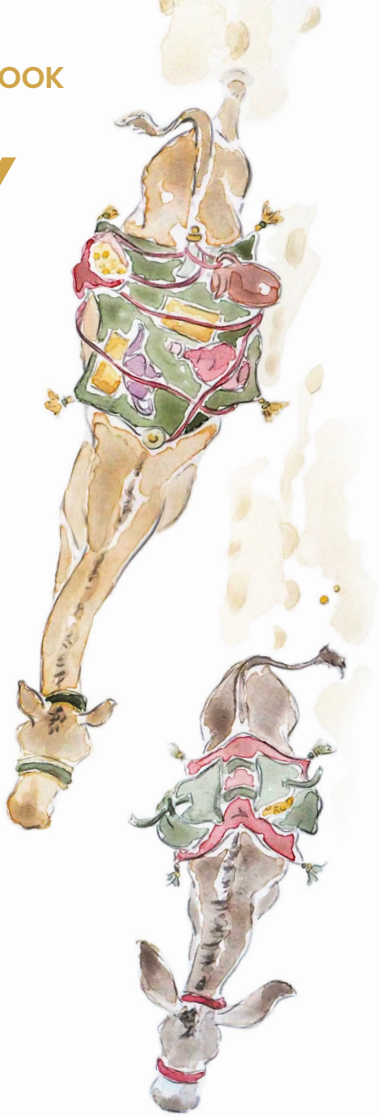
BRF ADVENT BOOK

DONKEY ROADS AND CAMEL TREKS

A pilgrim's guide for Advent



GEMMA SIMMONDS

A wonderful, witty and deeply pastoral journey through Advent.
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A pilgrim's guide for Advent

Gemma Simmonds

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To my wonderful brother-in-law, Anthony Gibbons, a resolute and understatedly faithful Anglican amid a gaggle of off-the-wall Catholic in-laws, who died just before Advent 2023. He would have been the best companion to come along with me on a donkey road or a camel trek. Travel disasters would have been calmly overcome, inns booked far in advance, animals cared for meticulously and food and drink relished, whatever their provenance. His Advent is over, the dawn has come and his God is truly with him now.

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Acknowledgements

I always approach writing, especially spiritual writing, with a mixture of excitement, reluctance and terror.

The excitement is because writing is a way of working out what I actually think, deep down, when I take sufficient time to look, and of understanding what God is up to in the world and within those who share their faith, doubt and searching questions with me.

The reluctance is partly because it awakens a level of imposter syndrome in me – why would anyone want to spend time and hard-earned money reading what I have got to say – and what have I got to say on this particular subject that is remotely new or interesting?

Writing inspires terror because, unlike Douglas Adams, I don't love the whooshing noise that deadlines make as they go by.

But if I can summon up the courage to get going, then I couldn't be in better hands than those of BRF Ministries, who take encouragement to a whole new level. So, thank you to Olivia Warburton, Felicity Howlett and Rachel Tranter, who, in their different capacities, have been immeasurably patient and kind, as well as superbly professional. You and BRF Ministries have done me great honour by inviting me to write these reflections.

And thank you to my colleagues past and present on the BBC Daily Service, especially Philip Billson and Claire Jaquiss, whose comments and consummate skill as communicators over the years have taught me so much about trying to speak of spiritual matters in accessible terms.

Finally, thank you to Sister Mary Richard Prendergast and the late Sister Francis North of the Congregation of Jesus, two consummate

teachers who, at primary and secondary school level, taught me to love the written, read and spoken word in English and Latin and guided me through innumerable nativity plays, Christmas carols and Advent reflections to my huge enjoyment.

Introduction

I tend to approach Advent with mixed feelings. It is my favourite liturgical season, and I usually begin to feel a delightful sense of anticipation somewhere in mid-October. But as my time is ruled by the academic term, I also approach it with a certain dread. The beginning of December and the weeks that follow are among the busiest of the year, and I know before I have started that I am likely to miss out on the riches of the readings, antiphons, carols and prayers because I have so little time to stop and relish them. There's always something of a sense of opportunity missed, of time ill spent and of invitation not fully enjoyed and celebrated.

My sense of anticipation before Christmas is also countered by the knowledge that Advent and Christmas are not universally part of everyone's feel-good factor. Many find that Christmas increases any sense of loss or isolation they may already be feeling. Domestic violence always goes up over the Christmas period as families have more time together. Where alcohol, pent-up tensions and simmering anger are in close proximity, this can turn into a powder keg of violence that can explode at any time. Consumer pressure also pushes debt up within families when it's believed that love is proved by spending, so that parents feel obliged to spend money they don't have on presents their children don't need. This consumer pressure fills me with feelings of outrage when I begin to see mince pies, Christmas puddings and Advent calendars on supermarket shelves in September.

For me, at best, times and seasons are welcome opportunities for marking the wonderful variety and rhythms of the year. When they are hijacked, by-passed or ridden roughshod over by the demands of consumer consciousness gone mad, it fills me with disgust. I post enraged photographs of these ill-timed items on WhatsApp and Facebook and make Grumpy Old Woman comments to my patient friends,

while ranting about the pointlessness of so-called Advent calendars, which, instead of being a means of increasing anticipation of Christmas through delayed gratification, are simply another excuse to turn the season into a bloated consumer fest.

I have a sense of God rolling divine eyes at me every year. 'Not on about that again, are you? Do you still not understand that I'm willing to take anything I can get on the part of humanity, even if it's the barest remnants of Christian folk memory?' The fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich claimed remarkably that God is grateful when we remember him. This seems a shocking thing to assert. It sounds as if God is somehow content to take the crumbs off our table. Surely that can't be true?

Yet we have ample evidence from the words and behaviour of Jesus, the Word made flesh, that this is exactly how God is with us. He takes the clumsy faith of a tax collector hidden up a tree, the reticent hope of a Roman centurion unsure of his welcome, the thanks of the one grateful leper and the despairing prayers of a woman outcast and shamed by her defiling illness, and transforms them into life-changing gifts of grace. Prayer and faith are never performance-related activities, nor are they things that we do for God. They are in themselves gifts that God gives and does for us.

We may think that our own or other people's approach to Christmas covers the bare minimum, but the Christmas story, as it unfolds, is all about God's lavish generosity encountering the meagreness of our poverty and transforming it into gift. Most of the characters in official positions are gloriously unaware of their own limitations. Think of Zechariah, Herod, Caesar Augustus and even the Magi. They are all men of power, but they have no idea or fail to recognise what is happening right beneath their noses. Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and the shepherds manage rather better, but, like the Magi, each of them also has to undertake a journey that consists in relinquishing set notions of who God is and how God acts in human affairs, accepting that, in this case, they are dealing with the God of surprises.

In nativity plays and Christmas liturgies where real sheep and donkeys appear, they are usually clean, well-behaved, soft-pelted and enchanting. My own experience of riding a donkey or a camel for any length of time is an entirely different matter. During a sabbatical visit to the Holy Land in 2019, I had the great privilege of spending a term at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, which stands above the checkpoint into Bethlehem. We travelled to St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert and were offered the opportunity to trek up the mountain and watch the sunrise. It seemed a wonderful idea at the time, but I knew my physical limits, so I agreed to ride up the mountain on a camel. I don't think I have ever had a more agonisingly uncomfortable journey, well-padded in the rear though I am. I don't know if, like T.S. Eliot's camels in 'The Journey of the Magi', they were galled and sore-footed, but they were certainly refractory. I came to have a healthy respect for the Magi themselves and an equal respect and sympathy for the heavily pregnant Mary journeying from Nazareth to Bethlehem on her donkey.

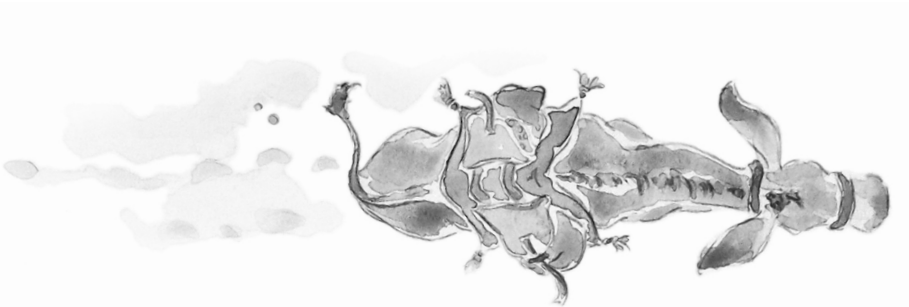
It all looks so calm and beautiful on the Christmas cards, but the reality is far harder, more uncomfortable, tedious and painful. I suspect that Advent and Christmas themselves are rather like this for many people. We love the idea, but getting down to it can be daunting for all sorts of reasons. Family dynamics can be tense, financial or social challenges can make what we offer seem paltry in light of the yearly expanding Christmas extravaganza pressed on us by the advertising industry. We want to exhibit faith, hope and love, but they can all waver before the bitter realities on the daily news. Yet I remember a moment, halfway up Mount Sinai, when we got off our camels with distinct relief and crowded into a little bivouac where local people plied us with herbal tea and vastly overpriced snacks. It was so cold that we shivered even though we were packed in like sardines, but there was a real sense of communion and of fellowship as we snatched a few minutes of comfort from one another while the camels groaned and snorted on their knees on the edge of the mountain outside.

My hope is that these reflections might be of use not only for individuals once more setting out on the yearly road to Bethlehem, but also

for groups journeying together in the global caravan of half-believers, dogged hopers and random fellow travellers. The themes behind the Christmas story have never seemed as relevant as they do at the time of writing. The political regime in the United States triumphed at the polls with an anti-migrant, us-and-them rhetoric which has distinct echoes of the refusal of hospitality at the inn of Bethlehem. Legislation that would make it easier to kill the unborn, the terminally ill, the frail elderly and the disabled sits uncomfortably well within the story of Herod and his massacre of the innocents, as do the disastrous wars currently raging between Israel and Palestine, Russia and Ukraine, and in Sudan, Myanmar, Yemen and beyond. The failure of many religious leaders to listen to critical questions and to the voice of experience among the faithful is akin to the perturbation felt by 'the whole of Jerusalem' as those on the outside arrive with a message from God whose implications overturn all the comfortable assumptions of those on the inside about how God acts within the world and how religious systems should function. Once again, in our own time, it is the poor, the disregarded and the dispossessed who so often see more clearly than those in power, both secular and sacred, whose privilege can blunt their capacity to see things as they are and imagine how they could be.

Here and now, this Advent, we are invited to saddle up our camels or our donkeys and begin the journey anew. Even if we only get to spend a few minutes a day or a few snatched moments during the general Advent mayhem, God is more generous than we could ever ask or imagine. The scriptures, songs and themes of Advent and Christmas are so rich that we cannot escape being reminded that if we give God a millimetre, then a mile will be taken. Jesus, who fed 5,000 with a few loaves and two fish, will take what crumbs of faith, hope and love we can gather and will make a feast of them. That's why it's worth setting out with our companions and becoming Advent pilgrims in whatever way we can.

WEEK 1



FROM CAPTIVITY TO RECON-CILIATION

Liberated captive

1 December

Isaiah 52:1–2, 7–10

Awake, awake,
put on your strength, O Zion;
put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city;
for there shall no more come into you
the uncircumcised and the unclean.
Shake yourself from the dust, arise,
O captive Jerusalem;
loose the bonds from your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion…
How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice,
together they sing for joy;
for eye to eye they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you waste places of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

I am an unashamed, absolute lover of Christmas and anything seasonal between Christmas and Candlemas. I remember visiting Oberammergau in Austria some years ago and finding there a shop that sold nothing but Christmas decorations all year round. It was definitely my sort of place.

But much as I love Christmas itself, it's completely overshadowed for me by Advent, even when that season engenders the anxiety that I'm not going to be able to dig out enough time to get the most out of it. Even despite those fears, somehow the anticipation is better than the event itself. This is unusual, as I'm not a particularly patient person, and don't in general take kindly to waiting. But the waiting of Advent is a very special process. The more we inhabit that waiting time and space, the more our capacity grows for receiving what we're waiting for. The wonderful Advent scriptures, hymns and carols speak not only of people but the whole of creation waiting in joyful anticipation for Emmanuel, God with us.

The prophet Isaiah calls on the 'captive daughter of Zion' to wake up as a powerful metaphor for Jerusalem's restoration, redemption and renewal after the disaster of the Babylonian exile. It's a call to spiritual and national renewal, urging Jerusalem to wake up from the despair and inertia caused by suffering and to recognise that God's salvation is coming. Isaiah's encouragement to the daughter of Zion to put on her strength and her beautiful garments is a promise of the renewal of her dignity. Jerusalem will no longer be shamed but, in shaking herself from the dust, will rise from humiliation and reclaim her honour.

Although this prophecy has a particular historical context in the return from long exile, Christians see it as foreshadowing Jesus, the Messiah who would bring spiritual renewal to Israel and the whole world in his gift of ultimate redemption to God's people. When Jesus began his public ministry in his hometown of Nazareth, he read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue:

> 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovering of sight to the blind,
> to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
> to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.'
> LUKE 4:18–19

This carries strong echoes of Isaiah 52, with its invitation to loosen the bonds of captivity and embrace a new life and righteousness through faith in God. The prophecy depicts God purifying the holy city, and we remember Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple and promising to raise up the destroyed temple of his body in three days (John 2:13–22). Both the prophecy of Isaiah and the proclamation of the good news by Jesus are also summed up in the book of Revelation:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.'
> REVELATION 21:1–4

With the Daughter of Zion, we are invited during Advent to make the journey from captivity to glory, as the coming of Jesus invites us and the whole world to wake up and seize the spiritual freedom and renewal that he promises, of which the New Jerusalem is the final, glorious fulfilment of the whole purpose of creation. Advent seems to reconnect us with the material world, the cosmos itself, in a constant state of hope for a fulfilment that's yet to come. The fact that it hasn't come yet isn't bad news of frustration, or blighted promise, but good news of our capacity for growth. That capacity is what fuels our desire for God, and the waiting can actually increase our capacity.

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas denied the role of the divine, but he spoke of this desire for something beyond ourselves as being 'a distance more precious than contact, a non-possession more precious than possession, a hunger that nourishes itself not with bread but with hunger itself'.[1] How can being hungry be better than being satisfied, or distance be better than contact? Perhaps because it's only when we receive the grace truly to know our need of God that a space gets hollowed out in our lives that only God can fill.

Most of us don't see or experience ourselves as captive, but there's a huge industry out there offering to help people overcome bad habits like smoking, overeating, overuse of alcohol and other substances. There are life coaches and therapists by the thousand offering support for those who want to realign their lives, their relationships, their attitude to work, sleep, social media use and other aspects of life that feel out of kilter. Christmas mirrors this for us. It can get full of stuff – presents we don't want or need, rituals that have got tired, family tensions that flare up when we are all corralled together. Advent reminds us of how God can fill the tired and empty spaces within us or help to empty the overfilled ones, if only we are willing to empty them of the junk that often fills them.

Christmas advertisements ask: 'What do you give the person who has everything?' The only answer can be 'Nothing.' It can be a significant liberation to let go of the insecurities that lead us to cling to status, material success and other markers of having made it in life. Christmas is a time of paradoxes and apparent contradictions, the king of kings born in a stable, the greatest news in human history brought to the least important people. In Christmas terms, the best way to become rich lies in learning how to be poor by discovering how to long for what we can never fully grasp. The greatest gift we can ask for is a longing for God and the wisdom to recognise our captivities, great and small, and to learn the courage to let go of our fears and insecurities and embrace the glorious freedom of the followers of the Christ who became poor so that we could be enriched.

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REFLECTION

- If Isaiah's prophecy were addressed to you personally, what would waking up mean specifically?
- Is there anything in you that feels captive that you long for God to set free?
- Can you name any particular hopes or longings within your heart for yourself or for the world? Take time in whatever way works best for you to share these with God.

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PRAYER

Loving God, your saving power sets us free from all that holds us captive. Help us this Advent to wake up to the grace you offer and put on the strength that is your gift, so that we can prepare in joy for the coming of your Son. Amen.

Becoming reconciled

2 December

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God will help her right early.
The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has wrought desolations in the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,
he burns the chariots with fire!
'Be still, and know that I am God.
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!'
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The image in the Sistine Chapel of God creating the sun and moon is not for the faint-hearted. God points authoritatively in both directions, patriarchal beard bristling and a look of wrathful determination on his face that could melt the flesh off our bones. Trying to create planets might well give one a rather concentrated cast of countenance, but this portrait looks like the God of judgement that many inwardly believe in while paying lip service to the God of kindness and mercy. This is God the lawmaker who watches and judges our every thought and deed, punishing every infraction, however small. The idea of this God coming close to us is not a happy one, and few people would find the idea of taking refuge here a comforting thought.

After an extended and brutal period of conflict in Gaza and beyond, some may find it uncomfortable to read the psalmist's confident words about God's sovereign power emanating from Zion, the city of God. The Sistine image seems to express this exercise of power to maximum effect, but while Psalm 46 sings of the sovereignty of God over the whole earth, it is not a sovereignty of brutality and force. God is portrayed as ruling with a power which arbitrates definitively between warring nations – the kind of power many of our modern-day populist leaders can only dream of. But God rules according to a criteria of peace rather than aggression, and it is a peace which is not manipulative and based on self-interest, but a transformative power aimed at changing the fundamental dynamics of human relationships. We are invited to be still and know God. It's an invitation to know who it truly is that has creation in hand, an invitation to move from the enthroning of the ego or of one particular nation, culture or ideology to the confident acknowledgment that God is at the heart of everything. This puts into perspective human plans of petty conquest and leads to true freedom.

St Augustine of Hippo, who knew what it was to struggle with his inner demons, writes frequently about true freedom being found in obedience to God's will. He argues that human will is only truly free when it aligns with God's righteousness, because sin corrupts the will and leads to enslavement, whereas serving God in righteousness leads to true freedom: 'A man who is the slave of his passions is not free. But

when he begins to serve God, he lays down the yoke of servitude and takes up the yoke of freedom.'[2] This is the inner freedom that gives us confidence whatever is happening in the world or in our own lives. Jesus does not promise that his followers will have an easy life – quite the opposite, in fact. But as he himself faces a cruel death and the apparent failure of his entire ministry, he reassures his disciples, 'I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (John 16:33).

This confidence in God, despite trial and tribulation, is central to the vision of the Rose Castle Foundation in Cumbria in the north of England. It houses a remarkable community dedicated to interfaith peace-making. Young people from nations and faith communities in conflict from all around the world come to learn the 'twelve habits of a reconciler'. Reconciliation is one of those glib religious terms which rise easily to the lips but often fail to land firmly in our hearts and find expression in our daily interactions. The Rose Castle habits are: hospitality, curiosity, generosity, empathy, vulnerability, humility, forgiveness, lament, gratitude, hope, stewardship and creativity. The idea is that learning to internalise and practise these virtues, or habits, helps us as individuals to bring about reconciliation within society.

The daily practice of any one of these virtues on a personal, let alone an international, basis is a daunting challenge. But the psalmist has no doubt that the bedrock of God's law is the gift of grace given to each one of us to become a practitioner of reconciliation, to learn to be still and to become an instrument of peace. *Hospitality* entails embracing whoever is other with openness and generosity, recognising our shared humanity despite differences. *Curiosity* encourages us to cultivate a deep desire to understand differing perspectives and experiences, so that we can become more open to them. This and all the other habits require the *generosity* on our part to be open-minded and open-hearted without expecting anything in return. We learn *empathy* when we step into another's experience so as genuinely to come to understand their feelings and viewpoints. All of this requires of us a level of *vulnerability*, a willingness to open ourselves emotionally, accepting the possibility

of discomfort for the sake of genuine connection with the other. We begin this from a basis of *humility*, maintaining a balanced sense of self while acknowledging our own strengths and limitations.

One of the aims of these habits is to come to a place of understanding and *forgiveness*. Some of those who come to Rose Castle come from places of agonising conflict and have suffered personal loss and trauma. Forgiveness doesn't come easily to any of us. It's a lifelong process, part of which is *lament*, recognising and mourning injustices and suffering, both personally and in the wider world. That truthfulness is a necessary step towards letting go of grudges and resentment and fostering healing and restoration. The fruit of this healing is *gratitude* in which we learn to appreciate the goodness received from others and from God. This experience leads us to learn and nurture within ourselves and our societies the virtue of *hope* as we come to believe in the possibility of positive change and strive towards it.

The final habits of a reconciler are *stewardship* and *creativity*. Creativity enables us to engage in imaginative processes to develop new solutions and expressions that promote reconciliation. We do all this because of our fundamental belief that God has made us partners with all creation, so that we can learn responsibly to manage our gifts, resources and environment for the benefit of all.

The 1972 song 'Peace Will Come', by protest singer Tom Paxton, includes a call for peace to start 'with me'. We tend to prefer thinking that it's others who need to change rather than ourselves, but, like most things, peace is built brick by brick, step by step in the hearts and lives of ordinary people. The psalm makes a direct correlation between our own inner stillness and the breaking of patterns of aggression throughout creation. What happens in the depth of our hearts has resonances beyond our own small sphere. During Advent, God invites us each year to take a few small steps in whatever transformative mind set and practice we are called to at this time. This is how all relationships are built up or destroyed. And as we know from the moon landings, one small step for a human being can become one giant step for humankind.

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REFLECTION

- Find an image of the painting of God creating the sun and moon from the Sistine Chapel. How does God look there to you? Is this a God that you recognise, either from your own personal image or that of others? What would you like to say to this God? How does this image contrast with the baby in the manger? What feelings and prayers arise in you as you contrast the two?
- Look at the list of the Rose Castle habits of a reconciler (**rosecastlefoundation.org/habits**). Which ones appeal to you most? Which do you find most difficult to practise and why?
- Take time to think about what you most need in light of today's reading and ask God for the grace you most desire.

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PRAYER

Loving God, as we set out on our Advent journey, fill our hearts with the desire to walk in your paths and learn your ways. Give us the grace we need to build relationships of peace and reconciliation, one step at a time. Amen.

Making the journey

3 December

Luke 5:17–26 (NRSV)

One day while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem were sitting nearby, and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came carrying a paralysed man on a stretcher. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but, finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down on the stretcher through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Stand up and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the one who was paralysed – 'I say to you, stand up and take your stretcher and go to your home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, 'We have seen incredible things today.'

This is a wonderful, if quirky, scene to imagine: the awkwardness of the climb with the stretcher and its human burden in tow, the taking apart of the roof, the wrath of the householder, the precarious swinging of the stretcher on its ropes as it is lowered by the man's friends, staring down through the hole they have made, the Pharisees in their

self-righteous anger, the people in their amazement. And what of Jesus and the paralysed man himself? It's a story of relationships and encounters, as are most of the stories from the gospels.

Above all, it's a story of faith, hope and love being a joint enterprise. The man's faith and hope are part of the faith and hope of his friends – they cannot exist separately from one another and are proof of their love and the power of friendship. Faith is simultaneously deeply private but essentially communal. We worship in our hearts but also within the faith community, where our faith and also our doubts and hesitations, pooled together, can become something life-giving. Above all, community can be the nursery in which the seeds of friendship take root and bear fruit in love.

When we are baptised, we are baptised into a new mode of being human, becoming a new person in Christ for whom the usual social categories of human hierarchy no longer exist. Paul tells us that when we are in Christ, we can no longer identify ourselves in the first instance as Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28). These were the primary categories of social differentiation in his time, which pointed to an automatic sense of ascending or descending value in the human person. But the liberating message brought to us by a baby born so poor that he was a homeless refugee, lying in a cattle trough after his birth amid the messy chaos, smell and dirt of a stable, is that each of us has the supreme value of being made in God's own image, irrespective of any identifying categories or the circumstances of our birth. As Herod found out to his cost, God is no respecter of persons and is not impressed by titles and what passes among us for prestige or privilege.

Whenever Jesus meets someone who has truly taken in that they are a child of God, seeking and doing the Father's will, whatever their origin, he recognises them as a sister or brother. Most crucially for Christian witness, he invites us to do the same. Great Christian saints have always done this: while accounts that St Vincent de Paul personally took up the oars among the galley slaves to whom he was appointed chaplain

by Louis XIII of France are probably legend, he advocated passionately for their better treatment and worked, despite opposition, to secure their release.

Elizabeth Fry was shocked by the terrible conditions of women and children crammed together without proper food or clothing in Newgate Prison in London and helped create the Association for the Reformation of the Female Prisoners in Newgate in 1817. It became a model for prison reform worldwide and inspired future penal reformers. Her Quaker faith also inspired her to establish night shelters for London's homeless and to work for the improvement of conditions in workhouses and provide schooling for poor children.

Gladys Aylward was a domestic servant who felt called to be a missionary in China but was rejected by the China Inland Mission due to her lack of formal education. In 1930, she made a dangerous journey on her own to China via Siberia and, once there, worked with an elderly missionary running an inn for mule drivers and sharing the gospel with travellers. She adopted Chinese customs, learned the language, and was eventually accepted by the local people and appointed by the Chinese government as a foot-binding inspector, helping to end the practice of binding women's feet which made them so small that they could not walk properly. She also spread Christian teachings and became a trusted mediator in local disputes, following the model of biblical justice. When Japan invaded China in 1938, Aylward took responsibility for over 100 orphaned children, leading them on a dangerous 300-mile journey over the mountains to safety, relying on her faith and praying constantly for guidance and protection despite exhaustion and injury. She is remembered for her unwavering faith, courage and devotion to the people of China despite facing immense hardships. They found in this overlooked and underestimated English woman an unexpected friend.

Nearer our own time, we see countless people all over the world offering their time and service in response to their faith, volunteering in situations of terrible deprivation and working alongside local people

to help them achieve a life of dignity and a future full of hope, while also learning from them the ways of true human solidarity.

The Christmas story is also about finding friends in unexpected places: men of wisdom and power worshipping as equals alongside peasants; those at the inn who took pity on a desperate young couple from out of town; shepherds, outcast from synagogue worship by virtue of their profession, being brought into the very presence of God-with-us to worship directly, in spirit and in truth. Our Advent reflection finds us in a gospel story about a journey of faith, hope and love, even if this particular camel trek only takes us as far as the roof of a house. From the glimmerings of faith in some hopeful, house-breaking friends to its confirmation in forgiveness and healing is an epic journey which is made one step at a time, impelled by a passion for the common good. It's a journey that we make best in a community of friends.

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REFLECTION

- Take time to imagine this gospel scene in all its practical details, experiencing the feelings and reactions of any or all of the actors within the scene. What do you most notice? What feelings do you experience as you contemplate the scene?
- Are there any particular heroes of faith, hope and love who have inspired you? What is it in these people that you most admire?
- Many of us have prayed for the healing of those we love, only for our prayer apparently not to be granted. Is there anything you want to say to Jesus about this? What do you imagine that he wants to say back? Take time for a conversation or just to hold out your deep needs and desires before him.

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PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you came into our world to heal our wounds and to take away the sin of the world, which can hurt and trouble us so deeply. Help us today to experience your healing love and to have confidence that you will make our lives fruitful, whatever our circumstances. Amen.

Forgiveness 4 December

Matthew 18:12–14

> *'What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.'*

Is your general life experience that of being one of the ninety-nine sheep or the one who went astray? Both roles have their advantages and their challenges. If you were a 'good' girl or boy, you will have avoided the painful scenes, conversations and recriminations that accompany the bad boy or girl role. No being put in the corner or on the naughty step for you. No being sent to bed with no supper or put into detention. No feeling that you can never get it right, even when you do actually try. Parents, teachers and other adults in roles of authority will have looked on you with approval, siblings will have been encouraged to look to you as a good example and the parents of schoolmates will have been happy to have you round to their house as a Suitable Friend.

So much for the advantages. The disadvantage is that when things do go wrong in later life, even – and perhaps especially – when it's trouble not of your own making, it can come as a tremendous shock. This is Not How Things Should Be. Experience has taught you that good behaviour, or at least good intentions, bring their own reward, but suddenly the cause and effect of good behaviour and reward doesn't work anymore – the rules of the game seem to have shifted, and life no longer works out the way that you expect. History is full of examples of virtuous and well-meaning people getting caught up in trouble despite their best efforts. This can feel terribly unfair. It can also

prove bitterly hard when people who are used to being on the right side of things do make mistakes and suffer or cause others to suffer as a consequence. They never meant things to turn out like this, and they can find it devastating to face and deal with and impossible to believe that they can truly be forgiven.

Whether we carry the good or bad child image within us, many of us carry negative tapes in our heads: if only I had or hadn't; I should; I shouldn't; I ought; I must… It's what has been called 'hardening of the oughteries'. In these scenarios, approval or reward are always dependent on our efforts and are only given if we conform to someone else's rules, whereas punishment is always lurking to pounce on us for misdemeanours that are always entirely our own fault. There is a terrible sense of let down or betrayal if the rule of virtue bringing reward doesn't work or if the rules appear to change.

'Bad' girls or boys sense that such rules are unreliable and have rebelled against them from an early age. The apparent advantages of being free from adult restraint and an externally imposed framework of behaviour can seem like a benefit, but they also carry their own negative connotations. They can lead to a cynicism that is corrosive of a healthy self-belief: what's the point of trying; no one will ever give me credit anyway; I'll never match up to whoever the paragon of good behaviour is; I'll always be identified by my worst deeds or habits; I always; I never…

In all the encounters we read of in the gospels, Jesus seems to have had an instinctive knowledge of the type of person he was dealing with. We don't know if Mary of Bethany was a 'bad girl', but we know that her sister Martha suffered from all the anxieties and inner constraints of the 'good girl' trying desperately to get everything right (Luke 10:38–42). He understands and makes space for the needs of both, as well as offering them opportunities for growth. He equally understands the need of Matthew and Zacchaeus to have their capacity for humility, generosity and hospitality recognised, while also not avoiding or allowing them to avoid acknowledging the shadier side of their lives.

Many commentators have interpreted Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria in John's gospel (John 4:1–42) as a conversation with a fallen woman, just as Mary Magdalene has been cast in art and in much spiritual literature as a former prostitute. There is no biblical evidence for this. We are told that Mary Magdalene had seven demons cast out of her, but that was a way that people in biblical times described a whole variety of ills, not necessarily involving sexual sin. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that she has had five husbands and that her current partner is not married to her. But we know that it was extremely difficult for Samaritan or Jewish women of that era to instigate divorce proceedings, whereas a man could divorce his wife because she had grown unattractive or was unable to produce children (it was always assumed to be the woman's fault) or because he didn't like her cooking. If the woman was on her sixth partner, it may have been because the previous ones had died or repudiated her. Hers is more likely to be a story of repeated tragedy, rather than of repeated guilt. Jesus defies all social and cultural norms to meet her questions and her search for an understanding of God beyond the limits of what life and her own culture have taught her. He is the living embodiment of God with us not as a restrictive imposer of rules but as life-giver, meeting us in spirit and truth.

The story of the shepherd and the ninety-nine sheep doesn't say that God is not interested in those who manage easily to be good, but it does offer reassurance that whenever we fail, or life fails us, he will always be at our side as God-with-us. Nothing we could ever do, think or say and nothing that befalls us can come between us and the love of God in Christ Jesus. The prophecies foretelling Christ's coming reassure us of this, as do the details of the story of his birth. This is what we are invited to remember and take to heart during Advent.

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REFLECTION

- Do you generally see yourself as well or badly behaved, a saint or a sinner? What image of yourself does that leave you with, as a rule?
- How do you think God looks on you? Is God's love for you dependent on your good behaviour?
- If you have any memories of repenting or of God seeking and finding you when lost, what was that like? If not, can you imagine such a situation?
- How does it feel to have God rejoice in finding you and bringing you home?

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PRAYER

Jesus, our loving shepherd, you were welcomed into this world by shepherds, who knew what it was to lose, seek and find lost sheep. Help us to trust that you will always come in search of us if we get lost or lose sight of you through the circumstances of our life. Help us to remember that there will always be a welcome home for us. Amen.

Hungry for God

5 December

Matthew 14:13–21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'We have only five loaves here and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Recently the Vatican revised its directives to bishops on what to do if someone claimed to be receiving revelations or visions from God. Couched in the Latin of canon law, the responses are cautious and range, in so many words, from 'so far so reasonably credible' to 'not a hope of being considered true'. The internet is full of claims of divine revelation, like the assertion of Florida resident Diana Duyser in 1994 that the Virgin Mary had appeared in silhouette in her grilled cheese sandwich. The sandwich remained uncorrupted for ten years, and Duyser finally sold it on eBay for $28,000. When the new Vatican directives were published a spokeswoman was interviewed about them and

asked what kinds of claims the Vatican was currently processing. She cited the case of a woman who insisted that Jesus was appearing in her kitchen and multiplying pizzas.

The gospels tell a story which, in the first instance, sounds barely more credible. All four gospel writers describe the feeding of the multitude with a few loaves and fish. We have various choices as to how we receive and interpret this story. Some have offered pragmatic interpretations which have Jesus calling on the crowds to share what they have brought with friend or stranger. This inspires his listeners to a generosity they would not otherwise have felt, and from the plenty of the few, everyone is eventually fed. This has resonances for us today. Most of the supermarkets in the UK now carry special bins and posters advertising the local food bank for which shoppers can donate a little extra for those who are unable to feed themselves and their families on a reliable basis. Food banks, baby banks for clothes, nappies and baby food, and other charitable schemes of sharing and exchange sadly have become a necessary feature of modern life, but they flourish through people's sense of solidarity. Even if we are not people with lots to spare, a modest gift, when given by many, can result in enough to feed a city.

Many families now operate a reverse Advent calendar. Instead of the ones which simply extend the Christmas consumer indulgence over an extra month by offering 24 days' worth of luxury goodies, each day has an item for buying and donating to the local food bank or charity centre. This is a lovely reminder of the God who wanted to enter every aspect of our human lives, sharing our poverty and our need and offering us a pattern of self-gift and imaginative generosity. The 'Secret Santa' and other anonymous gifting traditions operate in workplaces all over the world. The anonymity carries resonances of Jesus' words in Luke 6, where he speaks of giving or lending without hope of return. If we are only good to those who are good to us, where is the virtue in that? Being good to someone anonymously is another way of sharing the generosity of God, who gave the greatest treasure the world has ever known to people who might never recognise it for what it was.

Other biblical interpreters don't hesitate to accept a miraculous interpretation of the multiplication of the loaves. If Jesus can heal the blind, the lame and the dying, he can surely provide food for the hungry. But there is more to this story than a miraculous answer to a pressing practical problem. The story urges us to look at what we hunger and thirst for. In the beatitudes Jesus blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice or righteousness (Matthew 5:6). When he himself is hungry and is tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread, he reminds the tempter that human beings do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from God (Matthew 4:4). How many of us actually hunger or thirst, or have a similar sense of longing and need, for God's word, and what does it mean to nourish ourselves on it?

There are many methods of meditating on the scriptures. One of the oldest is *lectio divina*. Latin for 'divine reading', it is a traditional Christian practice of prayerfully reading and meditating on scripture, not simply studying the text but encountering God through his word. This method has been practised since the early church and was formally developed by St Benedict in the sixth century. Later it was promoted by Guigo II, a Carthusian monk of the twelfth century, who outlined the four key steps of *lectio divina*:

1 *Lectio* (Reading) – What does the text say? We choose a short passage from scripture and read it slowly, attentively and repeatedly, noticing words or phrases that stand out. These may be what God is bringing to our attention.

2 *Meditatio* (Meditation) – What does this text say to me? We reflect on the passage and how it applies to our life, asking: what is God saying to me personally here? We can use our imagination, placing ourselves in the scene if it's a gospel or other story.

3 *Oratio* (Prayer) – What do I want to say to God? We respond to God by praying from the heart, sharing our thoughts, struggles, desires or gratitude, asking God to deepen our understanding and transform us.

4 *Contemplatio* (Contemplation) – How is God drawing me closer? We rest in God's presence, allowing the words to sink into our soul beyond thoughts and words, simply being with God, embracing his love and guidance.

Some traditions add a fifth step, *Actio* (Action), which focuses on how I live this out and how the passage inspires a change in my daily life.

Commentators on *lectio* have said that it's 'ruminating' on the word of God, like a cow chewing the cud to get every last bit of nourishment from it! It was put simply but succinctly by an old Revivalist preacher who, when asked how he prepared his sermons, said, 'I reads myself full, I thinks myself clear, I prays myself hot, and I lets myself go.'

I meet too many people who tell me that they don't know how to pray and feel depressed by spiritual books which seem to be aimed at people they could never hope to be. But when they start to talk about what does go on when they try to pray, I know that I am listening to people who know quite well how to communicate with God, but don't recognise that this is what they are doing. They are convinced that prayer is some mystical and spooky specialist skill, reserved to professionally 'holy' people or to God's chosen few.

We are always going to be reduced to nothing when trying to enter the presence of the living God. God is entirely other, and we are limited human beings. But we are wired for God; it's in our DNA to long to reach out or deep within and find the God who, in Meister Eckhart's delightful description, is like someone behind us who calls to our attention by clearing their throat. One of the twentieth century's great contemplatives, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, wrote:

> In prayer we discover what we already have. You start from where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.[3]

If we take our hunger seriously, God is only too ready to feed our longing and does it quite simply with the word who came to dwell among us.

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REFLECTION

- In the beatitudes Jesus calls blessed those who hunger and thirst for justice, and he tells Satan that we don't live on bread alone but on every word that comes from God. If you were to choose some Bible verses to help this message to become more real in your life, what verses would you choose?
- What is it, in spiritual terms, that you hunger and thirst for? Take time to express this to God.

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PRAYER

Jesus, bread of life, you encourage us to nourish ourselves with your living word. You are the Word made flesh, who came to live among us. We ask for the grace for your word to become alive in us, so that those who encounter us, encounter your word brought to life in us. Amen.

Finding the way

6 December

Matthew 7:21, 24–27

'Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven… Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.'

In 2021 four huge concrete cooling towers standing 117 metres tall were demolished near Rugely in Staffordshire to make way for over 2,000 homes, a school, park land and employment spaces. The crowd of spectators was so big that it became a public danger, and police had to warn them to stay away and watch the demolition online from home. There is something mesmerising about great structures falling. We can barely believe that something that seemed so solid and permanent can come crashing down and crumble into nothing but rubble and dust.

Jesus uses a similarly dramatic image to describe the flimsiness of faith which consists more in lip service than in living and acting according to God's will. It's a stern warning which leaves us with something of a dilemma. How exactly do we know what God's will is, and how can we be sure that we are doing it?

Many people believe that God has a divine blueprint for each of us, in which every detail of our life has been mapped out beforehand. This God says to us: 'I've got a plan for the whole of your life, all worked out for you, but I'm keeping it a secret. You have to spend your life trying to discover what it is. I won't give you any helpful clues, but I'll punish you forever if you don't figure it out correctly.' This is emphatically not the God revealed to us by Jesus. It's a monster who delights in tormenting us with anxiety and guilt, while making it impossible for us to work out who and how we should be in this world.

Throughout history, Christians have sought ways to understand and follow God's will for their lives in methods ranging from prayer, scripture study, reasoned decision-making in the more formal and theological context, to some quite astonishing folk methods at the more superstitious end of the market. Believers prayerfully reflect on Bible passages and apply them to their lives or pray directly to discern God's will. We see Jesus himself, in Luke 6:12–13, praying all night before choosing his disciples. Proverbs 11:14 says, 'Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counsellors there is safety.' Many people consult pastors, spiritual directors, or other mature and trusted believers to gain wisdom. In Acts 15 we see the early church making decisions through group discernment and counsel so that, in answer to a question vexing the wider community, the leaders can write confidently: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…' (v. 28).

St Thomas Aquinas emphasises using reason alongside faith, teaching that God has given us minds to think and choose wisely, so we should use our reason and common sense. Our decisions should align with scriptural principles, wisdom and moral truth and if a choice clearly contradicts God's commands, it is unlikely to be his will. If a decision leads to deep peace and joy, it is more likely to come from God than if it brings persistent anxiety, turmoil or doubt. Even the subconscious can be a helpful guide when it tries to surface, and throughout scripture we see God guiding people through dreams (Joseph deciding to take Mary as his wife; the Magi being told to avoid returning to Herod), visions (Peter in Acts 10) and signs (Gideon's fleece in Judges 6:36–40).

The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola aim to help people rid themselves of what he calls 'disordered attachments' that can bind us in patterns that are destructive and compulsive. We can be attached to images of God and of ourselves or to relationships or behaviours that are warped and destructive, destroying our sense of our own or another's worth. Ignatius encourages us to counter this by discovering our deepest desires, because this is where God's will also resides.

In this he echoes St Augustine of Hippo, who lived a wild life as a young man. After his conversion he wrote: 'The whole life of a good Christian is holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled… this is our life, to be exercised by desire.'[4] Those words, 'the desire gives you the capacity', point to a direct relationship between our deepest longings and our capacity to have them fulfilled.

Throughout history, people have also sought signs and divine guidance using folk traditions, superstitions and personal rituals. In the Old Testament, people used the Urim and Thummim, sacred stones to cast lots to determine God's will. We see this in Joshua 18:6 and Acts 1:26. Less biblically, people have flipped coins, drawn slips of paper or thrown dice, trusting that God controls the outcome. The Bible flip-and-point method sees people randomly opening the Bible and pointing to a verse, believing it will reveal God's will. There's a joke about a nun who did this and landed on Matthew 27:5: '[Judas] went and hanged himself.' Horrified, she tried again and got Luke 10:37: 'Go and do likewise'!

Some people seek signs, like the man in the story who is trying to decide whether to marry Susie or Maria. He goes into a Catholic church to pray and sees an inscription by a statue of the Virgin Mary that reads 'Ave Maria'. In ancient and medieval times, people observed the movement of stars, the flight patterns of birds, sudden weather changes or seeing a certain animal at the right moment, believing them to be divine messages. Folk methods show how deeply people desire divine guidance, even in creative or unconventional ways. The difficulty with

these sorts of method is that they can become a way of manipulating outcomes rather than trusting God's wisdom.

In the book of Revelation Jesus says: 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (Revelation 3:20, NRSV). Many carols feature Mary and Joseph knocking at doors in Bethlehem with no one willing to open the door to them. The famous painting of *The Light of the World* by William Holman Hunt shows Jesus knocking at a door that has been closed for so long that ivy has grown over and all around it. The door has no handle from the outside, it can only be opened from within. We open our hearts to God's will and God's grace in our lives not by making the right holy noises or finding the right method, but by having open hearts, eyes and ears to detect God's presence all around us, and when we act on God's invitation to become words made flesh in our turn. A balanced approach often involves prayer, scripture, wise counsel and careful thought.

God's will is not just about decisions, but about growing in relationship with him. No single method is foolproof, but when spiritual and practical approaches are combined, they can help believers make wise and faithful choices.

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REFLECTION

- If you can, find a photo of Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World* painting. How does it speak to you? Is there anything you want to say to Jesus as he knocks at your door?
- Find an Advent hymn or Christmas carol that mentions God's longing to be with us and God teaching us how to live and choose well. How does it make you think about finding God's will in your life?

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PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you called blessed all who do your Father's will and you yourself prayed to do his will and not your own. Help us to seek and find God's will for ourselves, through recognising our deepest desires and offering them to you, our heart's desire. Amen.

Lighten our darkness

7 December

Psalm 27:1, 4, 13–14

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?…

One thing I have asked of the Lord,
that I will seek after;
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple…

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living!
Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
yea, wait for the Lord!

The difference between light and darkness can be enormous. Children and even adults can be terrified at the thought of 'things that go bump in the night', dangerous or threatening creatures lurking in the dark corners of a room which feels safe and peacefully familiar in the light of day. A harmless pair of slippers under the bed or a slight bulge in the curtains created by a draught can suddenly become a monster or a dangerous intruder waiting to pounce.

There's a much-repeated story about a little boy who was terrified of going to sleep in the dark. His parents had tried everything to comfort and reassure him, but nothing worked. In desperation his father said, 'Don't worry, you won't be alone in the dark, because God will be here looking after you.' He thought he'd made a good point until a little voice wailed back from the bed, 'But I don't want God; I want someone with skin on!'

Jesus came into the world precisely to be God with skin on, taking a body like ours, living a life like ours and dying a death like ours. The dark we fear as adults may not be the physical dark, but what we carry within us. People often talk of doubt as darkness or of the experience of bereavement, breakdown of relationships or unhealed hurts as 'being in a dark place'. Winston Churchill famously described the depression from which he suffered as 'the black dog'. Suffering mental or physical illness can feel like falling down a dark hole into which no light shines.

One of my favourite Advent customs is the one of lighting one more candle each week on the Advent wreath to signify the light of Christ that's coming into the world. An old proverb says, 'It's better to light a candle than curse the darkness.' Each time we reject despair and cynicism in favour of hope, we make the world a brighter and more faith-filled place. Jesus' disciples were happy to follow him in the light, while he was preaching and teaching and working miracles. When he warned them that he would suffer and die, they protested. But the dark times of our lives are precisely when we need a God with skin on.

God doesn't promise us that we will escape the darkness and have a life free of pain, suffering and death. But in Jesus God enters into the darkness with us and promises us that we are never alone. Peter, James and John saw Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountain (Matthew 17:1–6). The night before he died, Jesus led them up the Mount of Olives, where they saw him in his agony (Matthew 26:36–46). The cross and the resurrection, the light and the dark, are two sides of the same coin. Jesus walks beside us in the valley of shadow, and the darkness can never overpower him.

As Advent progresses, the northern hemisphere moves inexorably towards the darkest time of the year, with Christmas itself coming only a few days after the winter solstice, which has the longest night and the shortest amount of daylight. It's not surprising, then, that many of the scriptures connected with the birth of Christ speak of darkness and light. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the people who walked in darkness seeing a great light and of light shining on those who walked in the shadow of death (Isaiah 9:2). John's prologue assures us that the light shines in the darkness, which has not overcome it (John 1:5). When we are indoors, warm, safe and comfortable, it's easy to believe this and even to take it for granted. When we are alone in the dark, whether that darkness is inside or outside us, it is harder to believe in that light which cannot be overcome.

The decision to celebrate Christmas near the winter solstice on 25 December was made for both theological and practical reasons, rather than because someone stood in the stable at Bethlehem with a calendar. The reasons include the date's alignment with pre-Christian solstice festivals, such as Roman Saturnalia (17–23 December), which featured feasting, gift-giving and social role reversals, where slaves could act as masters for a day. This was taken up in later centuries in cathedrals and monasteries, with a choirboy or novice chosen to act temporarily as the bishop or abbot during the Feast of St Nicholas (6 December) or the Feast of the Holy Innocents (28 December). While mainly expressing a social need for relaxation of otherwise rigid hierarchies, this role reversal also reminds us of the humility of the 'God with skin on', who, as Paul reminds us:

> Though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.
>
> PHILIPPIANS 2:6–8

The theme of God as our light and help also echoes the Roman 'Birthday of the Unconquered Sun', the sun god *Sol Invictus*. Early Christians did not initially celebrate Christmas, but by the fourth century, 25 December had been established as the feast of Christ's birth. Some scholars suggest that the church chose this date to emphasise Jesus as the true 'light of the world' (John 1:5; 8:12) and the light that overcomes darkness (Isaiah 9:2). The *Sol Invictus* festival absorbed older traditions, including the Mithraic cult, popular among Roman soldiers, in which the sun-related deity Mithras was often depicted slaying a bull with the sun shining above him. Church leaders like Pope Leo I (440–461) warned Christians against honouring the sun instead of Christ, even though the theme of Jesus as the 'sun of righteousness' (Malachi 4:2) matched the solstice symbolism.

Other Christian sources suggest that Jesus' birth was calculated independently, based on the idea that he was conceived on 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation, making 25 December his birth date. This derived from a Jewish belief based on the idea that great figures lived a 'perfect' lifespan and died on the same date as the one on which they were conceived, in different years. Based on the belief that prophets died on the anniversary of their conception, they reasoned that Jesus must have been conceived on the same day he died. The Western Church calculated that date as 25 March, which connected his death to Passover, with his birth exactly nine months later in December. The Eastern Church calculated the crucifixion as 6 April, so this led to a different date for Jesus' birth, 6 January, which became the feast of Epiphany.

All this is interesting background to some of the key Christian dates, but where do such ideas lead us? Psalm 27 opens with fighting words: 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?' These words are easily said, but not always easily acted on or felt. We can be like children playing at going on a bear hunt and chanting proudly, 'I'm not scared', only to think that we see eyes and snout and claws at the back of the cave and run all the way home. Yet the Psalms were written at a

time when life was precarious for most people, when straying outside safe boundaries and even sometimes staying within them was a risky business. Wild animals lurked, enemies advanced, natural disasters could not be avoided and, as another psalm notes, plagues could lay waste at noon.

But Psalm 27 roots its confidence in two things: living in the house of the Lord and hope. Most of us can't and wouldn't even wish to live in a temple or church, but we can find the temple within. Our homes can become holy places if we develop and nurture a sense of God with us in our everyday lives. Learning to savour and appreciate the little things of life as God's gifts to us can help us to 'behold the beauty of the Lord'. Hope is not the same as optimism. It faces reality but insists that change is possible. It believes that Christ has already overcome sin and death, therefore we can have confidence that suffering and evil never have the final say. Even in the dead of winter darkness, that is what will help us to hold firm and take heart.

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REFLECTION

- Is there anything in your life at present that causes you to fear or lose heart? How might you speak to God about this?
- Advent is a special time to make decorations and crafts that play with light. If you don't have time to do this, you could simply light an Advent candle in the darkness. What thoughts and prayers come to you as you see light shining in the dark?

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PRAYER

Jesus, you are the light that no darkness can ever overcome. Shine your light in the dark places of our minds and hearts, in the darkness of our world, and help us to hold firm and take heart. Amen.

The lectionary readings for Advent speak of making a straight path towards God, but many of us find our own route decidedly winding. Biblical characters in the story of the incarnation are called to set out on the road to discipleship using any means of carriage they can. This book offers user-friendly encouragement (with the occasional spur onwards) to explore what helps and what hinders us in this journey to deeper encounter with the flesh-and-blood God we find in scripture, in our lived experience and in the least of his sisters and brothers.

Gemma Simmonds is a Roman Catholic theologian and sister of the Congregation of Jesus. An ecumenical canon of the Church in Wales and chair of trustees of the Community of St Anselm at Lambeth Palace, she has trained candidates for religious life and ordination in the Catholic and Anglican churches, working as a spiritual director and retreat giver for over 30 years. She is a regular broadcaster on religious matters on the BBC and other radio and television networks.

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