

BRF Advent Book

AT HOME IN ADVENT

A domestic journey
from Advent to
Epiphany

Gordon Giles

Includes group
discussion questions

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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Introduction

Welcome aboard! Welcome to an Advent journey that goes nowhere but takes us everywhere, and through it all, stays at home! This book is a sort of sequel to *At Home in Lent*, the BRF Lent book for 2019. In that book I followed an inspiration from Neil MacGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, which was about artefacts in the British Museum. Travelling through Lent, we stayed at home, reflecting on the stories and the significance of everyday household objects, from toothbrushes to toilets, dining tables to curtains. The book was well received. Now, in Advent, we are taking a similar approach, with Advent, Christmas and Epiphany flavours.

How little could I have known, in writing that book, how poignant the title and content would become in Lent 2020. While I and my congregation were reading Bishop David Walker's splendid BRF Lent book *You Are Mine*, the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, and churches were closed for public worship from Mothering Sunday onwards. By late March the UK was in lockdown (which began to be eased in July), a dazed and fearful nation commenced social distancing and the message of 'Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives' was emblazoned everywhere. Holy Week and Easter were transferred online, and many ministers and churches experimented with live-streaming, pre-recorded content and even the idea of 'spiritual' Communion. Many, many people were ill, thousands died and millions stayed at home in Lent, and thereafter.

Most of this book was written before that strange and trying time, when being at home was never envisaged as a permanent activity. Social distancing and isolation can feel like a prison sentence, and it is physically, spiritually, psychologically and emotionally challenging. Not everyone could turn to the isolation of Jesus in the wilderness, in the garden of Gethsemane or even on the cross for inspiration

and hope, but many did. There was some comfort from and creative engagement with the events and emotions of Holy Week and Easter as having new messages for us in the despair and hope of death and resurrection. Jesus was isolated in his passion, and the disciples were isolated in the upper room. Just as many were able to reflect on being 'at home in Lent', now we can reflect on being 'at home in Advent', which will inevitably be very different from last year because so much has changed. This year we will likely experience a different kind of Christmas, with the traditional carol services affected amid a wariness of large gatherings. Public worship has adapted and changed.

Now we enter Advent and look forward to Christmas, which will also have a special meaning this year after the social isolations of Lent and Easter, a strange summer and ongoing trepidation about what the future holds for our health and our wealth. These are, ironically perhaps, Advent themes: hope, expectation, trepidation.

So it is by circumstance rather than design that I offer this sequel inviting us all to reflect on being 'at home in Advent', living at the end of a year when we have had to stay at home more than we would have liked or expected, and when the idea of being 'at home' takes on meanings and resonances for us that we could not have imagined a year ago. This year's Christmas will be very different, but let us embrace it together.

While we shall certainly spend some time at home, we begin by setting out on the Advent journey, with some chapters that might more accurately be summed up as 'Out and about in Advent'. There are many ways to travel, at different speeds, alone or in company, self-propelled or in the care and control of others. From bicycles to buses, many of us spend considerable time travelling, to and from work, for pleasure or duty or even against our will or desire. It is said that the railway was one of the most revolutionary inventions of the industrial age, indeed that the industrial age could not have happened without it. In any event, transport is vital to our current existence, whether or not we ourselves go anywhere. We were painfully reminded of this

last spring. Most of the things we own have been on some kind of journey, powered by oil, gas, coal, electricity or wind. This is a phenomenon that has grown over the years and that now presents our world with problems which will affect the future state, or even existence, of planet earth as we know it. The Advent journey presents us with the perfect opportunity to reflect on these questions.

Being 'at home' in Advent not only applies to our domestic set-up and how we might reflect upon it in our daily lives. It is also a wider opportunity to reflect on the bigger picture: the beauty of creation and the gift of God that is the planet earth, which we call 'home'. Amid the celebration of creation and redemption, we can also reflect on what it means to live on earth in the light of the Advent messages of the end of the world, judgement, salvation and hope.

The coming of Christ is all about light shining in the darkness, the 'dispelling of the darkness of this age', as a famous prayer puts it, and we welcome the light of Christian hope to our planetary home just as much as we do to our own dwelling places. Thus, there is a wider spiritual form of being 'at home' in Advent. That is not to say we can be 'comfortable' in Advent – far from it; Advent is a discomfoting, disconcerting time, during which the church has traditionally invited us to reflect on sin, judgement and death, if only to help us appreciate all the more the illuminating presence of the Word made flesh, shining in the darkness, whose first coming enables us not to be overcome by fear or despair.

So this Advent, as we set out on a journey that will bring us home via the stars and the stripes of human sin, through darkness and light, consumerism and gifting, we offer not only our hopes and fears of all the years but also ourselves to God. We pray that our journeys may be fruitful and inspiring, until at last we reach our heavenly home.

20 December

Christmas carol: missionary music

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

At this time of year there is a perceptible crescendo of carol singing as we approach Christmas Day. Radio stations have their sonic equivalent of the Advent calendar, increasing the Christmas flavour as the anticipation mounts, so much so that by Christmas Eve Classic FM plays little else. Strictly speaking the Christmas season begins on Christmas Eve (not 1 December), by which time many people have heard as many Christmas carols as they can bear, and by New Year's Day the Christmas music has diminished and normal service is resumed. The popular song 'The twelve days of Christmas' reminds us that there are twelve days after Christmas, and then Christmastide evolves into Epiphanytide, which lasts until Candlemas on 2 February, when the church celebrates the presentation of Christ in the temple. The Christmas season lasts 40 days. Yet if we added that to the run-up to Christmas, we would have two months of Christmas carols!

That would be wonderful. Most Christmas carols are actually hymns of praise to God, extolling the virtues of divine love, the saving work of God and the theology of incarnation, as well as reminding us of the biblical story. At no other time of the year do we hear so much Christian gospel in our shops, on our streets and on the airwaves. For some people, carol-singing is the sound of Christmas and even if they never darken the doors of a church, they love carols.

Many people do come to church at Christmas. Church of England statistics reveal that around 2.5 million people have attended carol services consistently over the past decade. Nine Lessons and Carols services have been held for a century now and still attract large numbers, especially if candlelit. The service provides a staple menu of Christmas hymns sung by the congregation, carols sung by a choir and readings from the Bible that tell of the run-up to the first Christmas, and it culminates with some hardcore theology, found in the final reading of John 1. Likewise the related *Carols from King's* TV broadcast, while not the same content as the service, attracts millions of viewers on Christmas Eve, especially for the music. These broadcasts and services epitomise Christmas for many people.

Many Christmas carols are macaronic (sung in two languages), especially those which quote the angels' *gloria* in Latin. When church services were in Latin, the people generally did not understand much of what was said or sung, but the *gloria* was familiar. The tradition has remained, and *gloria in excelsis* is a frequent refrain in carols, such as 'Angels from the realms of glory', 'Ding dong merrily on high' and the Basque carol 'The angel Gabriel'.

Nowadays there is still a need to sing every carol in two languages: not Latin and English, but the languages of faith and of fun. When we sing 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night' or 'Hark the herald angels sing', we may or may not be affirming the message of the lyrics. Take 'While shepherds watched'. Arguably the first English hymn ever written, it originally appeared in the supplement to *A New Version of the Psalms of David* in 1700. In some editions it was entitled

‘Song of the angels at the nativity of our blessed Saviour’. Based on the angels’ song from Luke 2:14, it is not a psalm, which is why it appeared in the supplement, allowed in as a scriptural paraphrase. The point is, a hymn such as this, which expounds and reflects upon the story of Christmas, is sung in pubs and schools by all and sundry, only some of whom are aware of, or believe in, what they are singing. Likewise with ‘Hark the herald angels sing’: atheists and those of other faiths join in singing of the one who was ‘born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth’. Similarly, Christina Rossetti’s ‘In the bleak midwinter’, set to music so beautifully by Gustav Holst, Harold Darke and more recently Bob Chilcott, concludes with the profound verse:

*What can I give him,
poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part.
Yet what I can I give him?
Give my heart.*

One might reflect on what is going on internally for those who sing this carol but do not mean anything by it. Others love singing carols, and they mean what they sing; such carol-singing is macaronic in a modern sense: festive and faithful. Obviously, and delightfully, it is possible and desirable to be both. In doing so, and in being both, our hope and prayer is that everyone might come to believe what they sing and sing what they believe.

There are trivial carols and modern Christmas songs, some sillier than others. Yet even some of the Christmas classics have something to say to us, even if they make no mention of the nativity or incarnation. ‘White Christmas’ is a wonderful song, and there is no harm singing it (even if it is set in summertime). Songs about Santa are fun and flip-pant and stand in the Dickensian tradition of being kind, being with

family and having fun. Greg Lake, who wrote ‘I believe in Father Christmas’ in 1974, has been accused of writing an anti-Christian song, yet it seems to be a protest against the commercialisation of Christmas and an affirmation of family warmth and forgiveness. What seems antithetical to the season might not be. Contrast this with ‘It came upon the midnight clear’, which was written by Edmund Sears, a Unitarian who did not believe in the Trinity. The carol does not mention Jesus at all, yet it is often sung at midnight services because it has the word ‘midnight’ in its first line and mentions Christmas themes, such as angels and peace on earth. ‘Away in a manger’ is a hugely popular cradle carol, but its lyrics do not bear serious theological scrutiny.

Christmas carols can be complex. Yet carol-singing is a wonderful, fun, unifying, reflective thing to do at this time of year. It is such a sadness that this year we cannot celebrate large-scale carol services in the customary way, because of the coronavirus restrictions on large gatherings. Yet let us enjoy what we can, on the radio, television and online, and look forward to the day, hopefully next year, when the angels’ song and the story of salvation through incarnation can resound in our churches, pubs, streets and concert halls.

Reflection

- Do you think about what you sing? As you sing carols, reflect on what they are really saying to you and others.
- Next time you sing or hear a carol, pay attention to the text: is it true? *Pray for all church musicians who have had such a difficult year, and give thanks for the gift of music.*

Prayer

O Lord, grant that what we sing with our lips, we may believe in our hearts, and what we believe in our hearts, we may show forth in our lives. Amen

Based on the ‘Choristers’ Prayer’



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Praise for *At Home in Lent*:

Gordon Giles has elevated the everyday to the realm of spiritual reflection and meditation in a way which is both simple and profound.

The Revd Prebendary Dr Neil Evans,
Director of Ministry, Diocese of London

Following on from the success of *At Home in Lent*, Gordon Giles takes a journey through Advent to Christmas and beyond in the company of familiar seasonal and domestic objects and experiences.

Focusing on the everyday stuff we typically associate with this time of year, including some things not so festive, he reflects on their spiritual significance, meaning and message in today's world. Beginning with chapters on journeying and travel, the book moves through major Advent themes of expectation, waiting, mortality and hope to the joy of incarnation and salvation.

Gordon Giles is Canon Chancellor of Rochester Cathedral. He is the author of several books, including *Comings and Goings* and *At Home in Lent* for BRF.

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