

2020



ADVENT EXTRA

YOUR JOURNEY TO CHRISTMAS

27 DAILY
REFLECTIONS
and prayers

Out of the Wilderness



In this edition, we offer hope and support as we reflect on the impact of the coronavirus

A MOMENT OF
CONVERSION

Fr Peter
McVerry SJ



REWILDING
THE WORLD
Mary
Colwell



* UNABLE TO SAY GOODBYE
Sue McDermott OBE

* THE HONEST TRUTH
ABOUT DEATH
Moire O'Sullivan

THE GOOD NEWS
Emerald O'Hanrahan



WELCOME

It's been a year like no other, hasn't it? The coronavirus hit everyone – hard! How many of us buried a loved one without a “proper funeral”; were bereaved, directly or indirectly, through the pandemic; worried about relatives working on the front line or living in care homes; worked from home or wondered if there would ultimately still be a job and a regular income? How many “vulnerable” individuals and their carers feared lest, in spite of all precautions, Covid-19 would take a life?

Families, businesses and society at large worked out coping strategies for the lockdown, supermarket shortages and social distancing – and unexpectedly discovered that pandemic clouds had silver linings. People rediscovered family, community and volunteering. “Clap for the NHS” on Thursday evenings became a national opportunity for solidarity and support. (I used the lid of a large wok and a wooden spoon.)

In May, Pope Francis announced a special year of the anniversary of his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, which would extend to 24 May 2021 – and in the midst of our Covid-19 anxieties, we watched as the natural world blossomed and multiplied because of the reduced human interference. Mountain goats wandered through Llandudno and sheep tried a takeover of McDonald's in Ebbw Vale! You can probably think of wonderfully unexpected joys in your own experience.

Captain Tom Moore captured everyone's hearts, raising almost £33 million by walking around his garden. He also broke two Guinness World Records AND earned a commemorative postmark on every item posted through Royal Mail for the five days leading up to his hundredth birthday. He also received a letter and knighthood from the Queen.

Faith communities discovered new ways of praying together. Pope Francis, seeing himself as “a parish priest” globally supported millions of people spiritually and liturgically through electronic media, but also donated medical supplies and concrete pastoral care from inside a locked-down Vatican City.

In a special way, we want to recognise and thank Dr Mabel Adhagiuno's for her contribution to *Advent Extra*. A doctor and member of the Focolare Movement, she wrote for the magazine at the height of the pandemic in Nigeria, where she is currently working.

Just as this year has been unique, so will this Advent and Christmas be unlike any other in our experience as, with God's help, we emerge from our Covid-19 wilderness in search of new life and hope. It is why we at Redemptorist Publications scrapped our original plans for *Advent Extra* and opted to publish something which, we hope, will offer support on a journey which may still be filled with sadness and uncertainty.

All of us at Redemptorist Publications would like to take this opportunity to wish you and yours a peace-filled, joyful Advent and Christmas.

Sr Janet Fearn FMDM
Editor

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Your journey to Christmas starts here...

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THE WILDERNESS: SANCTUARY OR WASTELAND?

The wilderness occurs nearly 300 times in the Bible. It's not an accident. Fr Denis McBride reflects that the wilderness means different things to different people. What does it mean to you, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19?



Wilderness of isolation

In the coronavirus pandemic, many people were told to go into the wilderness of isolation, to shield themselves from the virus. The wilderness of isolation, they were assured, would be their protection and salvation. If they mixed easily with people as they normally did, that could endanger their lives by contracting Covid-19. Some were isolated alone in small flats. Like one woman, who wrote to me to say, "I've had to put up with myself on the fourteenth floor for months in my tiny flat, so small there is no room to change your mind. Putting up with myself, believe me, it has been tough going. My food is delivered. My only journey is to go to the door and collect it. I have been thrown into myself

in a way I have never endured before. I pray a lot more so that when God sees me he will know I am no stranger. I am dying to get out of this place and hug another human being – anyone will do."

The wilderness, of course, can be anywhere

Every country has them – the wastelands, the inhospitable regions, the uncultivated wildernesses, the badlands, the jungles, the swamplands. No man's land is everywhere, the unmapped terrain that most people naturally avoid, the bleak hostile territory where only the daring or the foolish venture. The wilderness, both as a place and as an archetype, has served a variety of purposes in the telling of the human story as:

"The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it."

Pope Francis, Urbi et Orbi blessing, 27 March 2020

- a place of refuge, a hideout
- a brooding, secret landscape
- a place of testing
- a sanctuary to escape the world
- a setting where you confront yourself
- a sacred place to meet God
- a godforsaken, wild place
- the territory of the devil
- the hinterland within or the unconscious

The image is weighted with ambiguity and goes in several directions. That said, however, the wilderness and the call of the wild both retain a powerful attraction for many people. In 1992, the young Christopher Johnstone McCandless, a brilliant academic student and elite athlete, walked alone into the wilderness in Alaska, north of Mount McKinley. After graduating with honours, he changed his name, gave the \$24,000 he had in his bank account to charity, abandoned his car and possessions, and burnt the money he had in his wallet. He gave all this up to discover transcendent experience.

Chris McCandless had long admired the writer Leo Tolstoy, who had forsaken a life of privilege to wander among the destitute. Above all, he admired the virtue of renunciation and wanted to live by this virtue, to test its limits in the wilderness. He lasted sixteen weeks (112 days) and eventually died of hunger. The writer Jon Krakauer spent over a year retracing that journey in his book *Into the Wild*, trying to uncover, from the journals kept by McCandless and speaking with his family, what made him fall in love with the wilderness. Six days before he died of starvation, aware of his plight, McCandless made the last entry in his journal: "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless you all." There is no regret that the wilderness he so much wanted to vanquish eventually destroyed him.

The wilderness enters the biblical story very early with Adam and Eve being banished from the Garden of Eden into the wilderness, and their son Cain being cursed and banned from tillable land to become a restless wanderer on the earth. The biography of the wilderness in the Bible ends with the book of Revelation when the woman clothed with the sun gives birth to a son and is threatened by the red dragon that wants to consume her child: "The woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God" (Revelation 12:6).

The biblical narrative moves between the two extremes: wilderness as exile and wilderness as sanctuary. The Judean wilderness plays an important role at the opening of Jesus' ministry as the place of his initiation by John the Baptist and the scene of his temptations. An arid landscape of about 1,500 square metres, this wilderness occupies the area from the eastern slopes of the Judean Mountains down to the Great Rift Valley, running along the western shore of the Dead Sea, the lowest place on the surface of the earth. Very little rain falls here, so there are very few plants or animals to liven the landscape. Many deep wadis, formed by centuries of rain running off the hills, penetrate this wilderness.

As you can see from the photograph, the Judean wilderness is no lush Lake District: it's an inhospitable, forbidding landscape – from a distance it resembles the highlands and the cratered surface of Mars. You're not going to go out there for a day's shopping or a cool picnic. The wilderness has a certain majesty about it, but its bearing is too remote, the ground too hard, the air too thin and the heat too oppressive. There are too many rocks, too much light, too little life.

Hence Jesus' question: "What did you go out to the wilderness to see?" It was in the wilderness of Judea that David fled from the fury of Saul, that Elijah the prophet found sanctuary in its caves, and that the Essenes escaped the priestly and temple domination of Jerusalem by settling at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. The wilderness is difficult to cross, which is why Herod the Great built two fortresses (Herodium and Masada) in the middle of the desert, as safe retreats in case the people revolted.

Few of us would want the wilderness as our regular address. We prefer the familiar territory of our comfort zones.

Here John the Baptist led his revivalist movement and attracted the people of Judea and Jerusalem out to hear his message; it was here that John the Baptist and Jesus met. It was also here that the Zealots made their final desperate last stand against the might of Rome, at the fortress of Masada.



*The Greek Orthodox Monastery of St George
in the Judean Desert*

The Judean desert is known for its rugged landscape, which has provided a refuge and hiding place for rebels and zealots throughout history, as well as solitude and isolation for hermits. In later generations, after the growth of Christianity, monks began to inhabit the caves of the Judean wilderness and soon began building monasteries there, which clung perilously to the stark desert cliffs. In the Byzantine period the wilderness attracted thousands of monks seeking seclusion and by the sixth century there were about seventy monasteries spotted throughout the region.

The wilderness that challenges the hero from without is mirrored by the terrain of the unconscious which challenges him from within. His resolve will be tested, not only in physical courage and endurance, but also in psychological stamina and mental resolve. Does

he have the inner resources and the inner clarity to face the challenges that now beset him?

Few of us would want the wilderness as our regular address. We prefer the familiar territory of our comfort zones, where we are in charge and can remain within the predictable rhythm of the familiar, unthreatened by any satan. Sooner or later, however, we all find ourselves thrown into some sort of wilderness, within or without.

After all, it took Jesus thirty years to reach the wilderness, a journey that was not his personal choice. The language of the narratives is in the passive voice ("led" – "thrust" – "expelled"), indicating that Jesus was not the principal actor on this stage; the Spirit of God was directing him to the place of trial and testing, where from the outset of his ministry he would be questioned and forced to find clarity about himself and his purpose.

Sometimes you need your enemy to help you define who you are, what you stand for and what your governing purpose in life is. Sometimes, paradoxically, it can be your enemy that presses you towards resolution. This was what happened to Jesus in the wilderness.

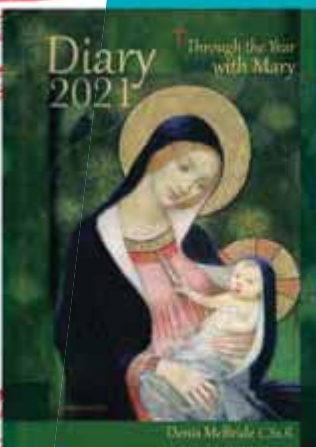
Fr Denis McBride's many CDs, DVDs and books are available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk.



DIARY 2021

Through the Year with Mary

Fr Denis McBride C.Ss.R.



This stunning hardback diary features a beautiful painting each month and a thought-provoking reflection by Fr Denis McBride to accompany Mary throughout the year. Mary demonstrates to us how we should mother the word of God. We should take the word to ourselves so that it becomes us, part of our very being – and then we should give it away.

Included in the A5 diary is an introduction from Fr Denis, year planners for both 2021 and 2022, key dates and feast days, notes pages and a ribbon page marker. All these features make it the ideal faith companion, appointment organiser and thoughtful gift.

To order your copy visit www.rpbooks.co.uk

Code: 1876 ISBN: 9780852315958 Price: £7.96



HOPE HAS NO EXPIRY DATE



Des Kelly reminds us that the pandemic gave us many examples of goodness, good news which we should remember to carry with us into Advent

As a result of the pandemic has something within us changed, do we look at community, society and humanity differently? Has something good emerged from all the anxiety and pain? Have we accepted what Pope Francis said, "All are responsible for all"? Have we become closer to God and people? Do we have a deeper understanding of God in this Advent season?

To be human is to be vulnerable and all life hangs by a thread. The Covid-19 virus highlighted again this fact to the whole world. The list of such unfathomable, unwanted, sudden and dreaded intrusion was varied with the sudden death of a loved one, the loss of a job or the trampling on of a dream. The arrival of the virus was a wake-up call for many who had taken life and people for granted. The lockdown time slowed the pace of life for many and the idea of key workers was turned on its head.

I remember a story about a Jewish rabbi during a natural disaster. He was asked how he could explain such a tragic act of God. The rabbi answered that the disaster was an act of nature. The act of God occurred when people stepped up to help each other. During the pandemic we saw many examples of people helping others and the realisation of how much people depend on one another.

A quote sometimes mistakenly attributed to C.S. Lewis in 1942, during the war, has been so relevant to these times:

Satan: "I will cause anxiety, fear and panic. I will shut down businesses, schools, places of worship and sports events. I will cause economic turmoil."

Jesus: "I will bring together neighbours, restore the family unit, I will bring dinner back to the kitchen table. I will help people slow down their lives and appreciate what really matters. I will teach my children to rely on me and not the world. I will teach my children to trust me, and not their money and material resources."

Jesus and Mary knew what it was to be human and vulnerable. Mary would have gasped and pushed and done all the things that a mother giving birth would do. There would have been blood and water on the dirty straw in the stable. Jesus would have been gasping to breathe.

Advent is a time for waiting and hoping

Pope Benedict XVI said, "The beautiful task of Advent is to awaken in all of us memories of goodness and thus to open doors of hope."

The world today is always crying out for some good news. Let us not then deprive it of the good news brought by the angels to the shepherds.

"Behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people. This day a Saviour is born to you. He is Christ the Lord."

Des Kelly, a retired headteacher, now works to develop leadership in Catholic schools and parishes

UNABLE TO SAY GOODBYE

In thinking back over the year, my mind is a patchwork of emotions. There have been devastating times when friends have died, a close friend unable to be with his dying wife, a family unable to hold a meaningful funeral; so many feeling unable to say goodbye, our children and grandchildren unable to visit us because of lockdown, shielding and social distancing! And throughout all of this, an unexpected life-threatening health issue denied us the opportunity to gather in support with friends at church. What a difficult year this has been!

Yet through all of this there have been great moments of unexpected hope and joy: speaking with a neighbour for the first time in years; receiving people's offers of help while we have been shielding; creating new ways of celebrating significant events including my seventieth birthday; making long-intended but hitherto unfulfilled phone calls to friends; seeing friends and family in a new virtual reality. The love I have experienced from my family and friends has brought me great happiness during exceedingly difficult times. Together we have understood that great sadness and uncertainty are also part of our lives, and we have shared many tears over the phone.

All these experiences have brought new meaning to my choice of fabrics while creating and working on this year's Christmas patchwork quilt. The colour and pattern of each piece of fabric speaks to me of this unique year and my hope for the future. It is a real mixture of love, devastation, loss, celebration, strength, courage and, above all, hope. It makes me think that a simple parish patchwork quilt of this year could help us all on our shared road to adjustment and hope.

Many of us didn't expect to say goodbye to loved ones this year. Nor did many of us expect not to be



Infection risks during the pandemic kept many people from the deathbed or interment of a loved one. Sue McDermott OBE, whose bereavement work has focused on children, reflects...

able to say goodbye – without a funeral service or a reception to share our memories, our thanks and our sadness. While we know that death is the natural end of life on this earth and the greater the love the greater the grief, not to have a funeral service for one we love is a tragedy beyond words. Their death needs to be marked and their life remembered.

Through my bereavement ministry over many years, I know that the human response of sensitive listening, kind words and practical help really matter and can be life-giving. We need time and space to grieve alone and in our communities.

Many of us will have been able to gather this November for some form of service of remembrance and thanksgiving. Hopefully, this will have brought us some comfort in the midst of our loss and grief. As we journey through Advent, this year as every year, we will naturally think of those not with us. This year we may need to find a way to express our love for those we couldn't be with when they died, for those friends whose funerals we couldn't attend, and for other bereavements and losses.

I'm thinking at this time of the saints who live next door. They are heroes: doctors, volunteers, religious sisters, priests, shop workers — all performing their duty so that society can continue functioning...
Pope Francis, *Commonweal*, 8 April 2020

In my own parish we will be offering a number of opportunities during the last week of Advent to anyone living near our church for a time of prayerful reflection, gentle music and the opportunity to light candles for loved ones. Tea and coffee will be available and a chance to share our stories of loss with sensitive listeners. Parishioners and those visiting will be invited to create their own square of remembrance for our parish patchwork quilt.

During our Christmas liturgies we will especially remember loved ones who have died this last year. In addition to the usual candles lit in church, others, blessed by the community, will be gifted and lit at home as a sign of love for those who have died, of thanksgiving for those who have helped us this year and a sign of hope in the year to come. These little ways of marking this unique year at Christmas will enable us to be truly present to each other – journeying together in love and hope, true companions on our journey.

Of course, Christmas this year may be especially difficult for some children. Some children will have experienced the death of a significant person in their lives and may not have been able to share the final times with a mum, dad or grandparent. The support that they receive at home and at school on their journey of grief will be crucial and will help them cope in their changed world. They may need reassuring that nothing they did or didn't do contributed to the death of a loved one. They will need "permission" to be happy at times in a routine which is as "normal" as possible. Hopefully, all schools will offer ongoing bereavement support. More and more schools use the services of Rainbows Bereavement Support GB. Its website (www.rainbowsgb.org) offers much practical help and guidance, to schools and to parents and carers.

At the height of the coronavirus crisis the words of hope and encouragement that Pope Francis expressed really mattered to me and have stayed with me over the months. They seem even more important now for the coming year:



Every square of Sue's patchwork quilt is someone's personal memory of a loved one

"Tonight, before falling asleep think about when we return to... when we can hug again... when normality will seem an unexpected and beautiful gift. We will love everything that has so far seemed futile to us... when every second will be precious. Strength and courage..." Pope Francis, April 2020

"Strength and courage when alone and when together!" seems to be a mantra to carry forward through and beyond this Christmas. While living with our grief, we journey on into 2021 in love and hope with family and friends. My Christmas gift to myself and those on this journey is one of hope: hope that all the positive effects of our "patchwork year" will be maintained and deepened, living one day at a time.

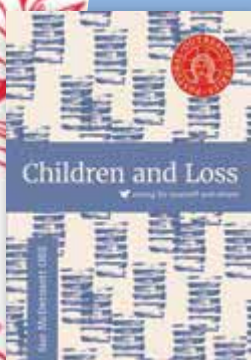
Sue McDermott OBE is a former Executive Director of Rainbows Bereavement Support GB, www.rainbowsgb.org, and, following her retirement, remains a patron of the charity.

Children and Loss

Sue McDermott



A child's needs are not the same as an adult who faces bereavement. Sue McDermott OBE, former Executive Director of Rainbows Bereavement Support GB, and now a patron of the organisation, is committed to helping children, their families and teachers face, grow through and emerge whole from the life-changing experience of loss and bereavement. She shares her many years of face-to-face experience throughout the pages of this book.




Sample chapter available at www.rpbooks.co.uk




GUIDING CHILDREN
& YOUNG PEOPLE
THROUGH LIFE'S STORMS

www.rainbowsgb.org

THE HONEST TRUTH ABOUT DEATH



Because of the coronavirus, many thousands of people are, this year, coping with Christmas in a way they couldn't have foreseen. Moire O'Sullivan shares her own heartbreaking story and offers practical advice.



He wanted a precise number. He wasn't going to back down.

"How many have died from the virus?" Aran asked me once again.

I wasn't sure if I should give him the information he was searching for. To start with, Aran was only six years old. I also knew from the maths work I'd been given for home schooling that he only understood double digits. He wasn't ready to grasp the concept of thousands of people having succumbed to Covid-19.

"A lot," I said, before forcing a quick smile. "And that's why we have to stay home, so that everyone stays alive and well." I hoped that by quickly changing the subject that the number question would disappear.

"How many is 'a lot'?" he asked. My son refused to let it go.

The only problem was his younger, pre-school brother had been in the background all this time, eavesdropping on our conversation.

"But I don't want to die!" Cahal suddenly screamed, tears gushing down his tiny face.

Death was a sensitive subject in our household. My husband, their father, had passed away only fifteen months previously, a mere two days after Christmas. It had been a tragic, unexpected death after a brief battle with depression. While I was desperately trying to make sense of it all, to come to terms with my own loss, I was tasked with helping my children understand what had just happened to their daddy.

I knew that whatever I said would leave an indelible scar. Even though it seemed counter-intuitive, my GP advised me to tell them the truth, to use the word "death" or "dead" instead of phrases like "gone to sleep" or "lost" which could only cause confusion. He warned me that I would probably have to repeatedly remind them that Daddy wasn't come back. And when the time was right, it was important to explain the cause of their father's death, for them to realise that it was in no way whatsoever their fault.

The day after Pete's death, I brought my sons into our living room. I sat my eldest, Aran, on my knee, whilst three-year-old Cahal started to do somersaults on the rug. Hard as I tried, I couldn't make my child sit down. I took a deep breath and began.

"Do you remember how Daddy was sick?" I asked them, a little relieved that they at least knew this part of the story.

"Was that when he was in hop-stipal?" Aran asked.

"Yes, you remember the doctors in hospital?" I said. "Well, I'm so sorry, Aran, Cahal, but the doctors weren't able to make Daddy better." I held Aran close, trying to protect him from what I would say next. "Daddy died yesterday."

With those words, Aran immediately understood. His body curled up tight, so tight into a ball, as if defending himself from this onslaught of hurt.

"Daddy died?" he said, his voice small and sore. "So is he in heaven?"

"Yes, of course he is, my dear," I replied. I didn't need to explain how and why Daddy died. Just the fact that Pete was no longer with us was the nugget I would give them to process right then.

"Cahal, Cahal," Aran shouted. "Daddy died and is in heaven."

Cahal stopped his manic moves for a moment to come closer to Aran and me. "Daddy's... Daddy's..." he managed, before letting out a gut-wrenching, soul-destroying cry. "But who is going to give me horsey?" he wailed, before throwing himself on the ground. If there was one thing Cahal loved, it was being hoisted on to Pete's sturdy shoulders and carried around at a height. I went quickly to gather

Cahal up off the floor, although it was I who needed gathering right then.

So when my youngest said, at the height of the virus lockdown, that he didn't want to die, ever, I had already learned not to lie to him.

"But everyone dies, little one," I said, pulling him up on to my knee. "We're just trying to make sure that loads of people stay alive right now, so that they can be old like granny and granddad."

His sniffles abated a little with this explanation.

"Will you die?" Cahal asked, a little soulful now.

"Of course I will," I answered, "But hopefully not for a very, very long time."

"But if Mummy dies," Aran interrupted, "then she gets to see Daddy in heaven."

"Exactly!" I said, infinitely proud at my eldest son's newfound wisdom.

Sometimes honesty, even around difficult subjects like death, can be the best policy. During this Christmas period, let us not be afraid to speak the truth about what we think or how we feel, for it is with such honesty that we can find healing.

Moire O'Sullivan is a mountain runner, adventure racer, author, mum and a regular contributor to Look, the younger children's Sunday sheet of Gospel-focused activities and games, available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk.

Moire's book, A Quarter Glass of Milk, about coming to terms with her husband's death, will be available from April 2021

REACH FOR A STAR



"That's Mummy's star. It's there so that every time you look at it you can say hello and you can say a prayer for her."

The death of a loved one is achingly lonely. It can be very hard for a small child – and incredibly painful for whoever is supporting them. It's almost impossible to be "brave" with a broken heart.

Try using an easily identifiable star as a point of contact. Whether it's a star or a planet doesn't matter: it becomes "Mummy's star" or whoever it is whom you long to be near again. Seeing that friendly star, night after night, can help to fill the bottomless hole in your hearts.

Let the star's light comfort you and remind you of someone who helped to make life worth living. If you want, have a good cry. The star isn't the person you love so much, but it can be a valuable link. Use it to pray to and for someone who was uniquely precious. Remember the very special times you shared – re-live and treasure them.

Advent Week One

LISTEN

Regardless of what has happened during the past year, God has been with us. Eldred Willey urges us to hold on to hope.



SUNDAY 29 NOVEMBER FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

He is able

Isaiah 63:16-17. 64:1. 3-8; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

Eleven-year-old Fox Campbell was skiing in the French Alps with his family. Going on ahead of his father, he turned off-piste and accidentally skied into a hole, bringing down onto himself an avalanche of soft snow.

There was no way he could get himself out. All he could do was believe that his father was capable. Retracing the route his son took his father found the spot thirty minutes later using his transceiver, dug with all his might and found his son five feet down, cold but alive.

Even in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak we have a God who will not abandon us, who, as Isaiah realised, has always been our true Father.

Jesus tells us to stay awake and we might ask: "Stay awake to what?" Stay awake first of all to the truth that God, who is our father, is not just determined to dig us out, but is also capable.

Father, I choose today to hold onto the truth that whatever hole we may have fallen into, you are a God who acts and you are able to pull to us out. Amen.

MONDAY 30 NOVEMBER

ST ANDREW, APOSTLE

Is it working?

Romans 10:9-18; Matthew 4:18-22

The question we have probably heard most often over the last few months is: "Is it working?" Is social distancing working? Is the vaccine working? What do the figures show?

If we are seeking the things of God, we may be asking the same kind of questions. Is my faith working? Is grace working? What does the evidence of our lives show?

In today's Gospel story we see the fishermen have an encounter with Jesus. Although we are given tantalisingly few details of the encounter, we see its effects. The four men who, half an hour earlier, were preparing to walk one way along the beach towards their homes, are now walking the opposite way, and they have a confidence which was not there before.

So with us: as day by day we encounter Jesus, we reset our course, and we walk with a fresh motivation and hope. It's working.

Jesus, thank you for the amazing way we change each time we encounter you. Thank you that you keep finding us and calling us. Amen.



"It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines, nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves."

Pope Francis

TUESDAY 1 DECEMBER

The invisible friend

Isaiah 11:1-10; Luke 10:21-24

Stephen Langton was born in a small town in mediaeval England, subsequently became a cardinal and Archbishop of Canterbury, and, amongst other things, wrote songs. In a moment of inspiration, he opened himself to something great, as he reveals in the opening line of his hymn: *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* – Come, Holy Spirit.

In these past months, too many of us have unwittingly become covered by the darkness of the Covid-19 virus. Now, in these days of Advent let us, like Stephen, deliberately welcome the light of the Holy Spirit, so that he may inflame our hearts with his love.

What a contrast between the virus, our invisible enemy, and the Holy Spirit, our invisible friend! One is a usurper who brings death; the other is the Lord and giver of life. One brings despair and depression; the other stirs up generosity, solidarity and self-sacrifice.

Come, Holy Spirit. Drive far from us our deadly foe, bring us true peace and guide us safely through all perils beneath your wings. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 2 DECEMBER

An unbelievable feast

**Isaiah 25:6-10;
Matthew 15:29-37**

Some of the first places to close when the British Government announced a lockdown were Richard Branson's Virgin money lounges – comfortable rooms where customers could enjoy his free hospitality and meet their friends.

Part of the lounges' culture was a trait of spontaneous generosity. When one customer returned from a relief mission in central Africa and was unable to slot back into work, Virgin staff lavished on him a surprise food hamper. It was an unbelievable feast, more than he could carry home on his own.

Just as the banquet at journey's end is sometimes impossible to guess, so food on the journey is sometimes impossible to understand. The Israelites in the wilderness called their daily provision "manna" – a word which means "What is it?"

Rather than grumble about our desert rations, let's focus on believing in the banquet ahead. Whether in this land, or in a better one ahead, it is surely coming.

Father, thank you for being such a lavish giver. May we never weaken in our confidence that you are preparing a wonderful feast for us. Amen.

THURSDAY 3 DECEMBER

A sure hold

**Isaiah 26:1-6;
Matthew 7:21. 24-27**

Skeleton Gorge, on the South African Cape Peninsula, takes its name from the climbers who chose it as their route to the top of Table Mountain and tragically failed to arrive. The ground on the slopes of the gorge is unstable and it makes for treacherous footholds.

One couple of climbers lost their way and discovered themselves on its infamous precipice. The husband managed to reach a ledge, but in horror saw his wife's hands desperately clutching at a crumbling hold. Just as she was slipping away, he grabbed an outcrop of solid rock with his left hand, caught her wrist with his right and pulled her up to safety.

After so many of our institutions appear to have lost their bearings, when so much of what seemed solid has crumbled, it matters what you hold on to. "Trust in the Lord," says Isaiah, "for the Lord is a rock for ever."

Father, thank you that when nothing else seems to be holding, you are our sure point of support. Amen.



FRIDAY 4 DECEMBER

A daddy and daughter duet

Isaiah 29:17-24;
Matthew 9:27-31

"The only thing more contagious than a virus is hope," said Mat Shaw from Utah. Mat and his fifteen-year-old daughter Savanna had recently recorded a duet from their "quarantine recording studio" – otherwise known as their kitchen – where they were in lockdown due to the Covid-19 virus.

Propelled by the heavenly quality of Savanna's voice, the recording went viral and, within a few weeks, had millions of views. "I pray you'll be our eyes," she sang, "and watch us where we go; and help us to be wise in times when we don't know."

In today's beautiful Gospel story Jesus restores the eyes of the blind men so that they can see the way. As our communities emerge from the sombre wilderness of the pandemic, let us join in a prayer that the Lord would show us where to go.

And when he asks us, "Do you believe that I can do this?" may we respond with a simple "Yes".

Jesus, I pray we'll find your light and hold it in our hearts. Guide us with your grace. Lead us to a place where we'll be safe. Amen.

SATURDAY 5 DECEMBER

Called by name

Isaiah 30:19-21. 23-26;
Matthew 9:35 – 10:1. 6-8

The couple were staffing a stall at the famous *Life of Jesus* play on the Wintershall Estate in the Surrey hills. They had camped in a field near the barn where the actors were sleeping. During the performance they joined the crowds who were following Jesus through the fields and forests as he healed the blind and crippled, and as he preached from a boat on the lake.

Evening fell, the crowds left and the play ended. The couple returned to take down their tent. Then a voice called out an invitation to them and they found themselves sharing a BBQ by the barn with "Jesus" and the resurrected "Lazarus".

While we trudge as a society towards the end of the pandemic wilderness, the Lord is calling people out of their individual wildernesses, from being part of the nameless crowd to becoming his personal companions. When we hear his voice, what a privilege to respond!

Jesus, thank you for calling us by name to be with you. Thank you for the extraordinary gift of being asked to work in your harvest. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINTS

As we come through a time of individual and community suffering, let's reflect on how God has used this experience to speak to us. When have you recognised his voice?

In a new or existing journal, write down what you have heard. Share it with a friend and explain what it means to you.

Eldred Willey works as a communications officer for the Diocese of East Anglia

Advent Week Two

LEARN

Paul Bryant emphasises that, although this year has been a hard one, Advent offers us a season of hope.



SUNDAY 6 DECEMBER SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

God is with us

Isaiah 40:1-5. 9-11; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

Do not be afraid! The Word of the Lord endures forever. God promises to lift us out of the darkness and to restore us to wholeness and joy. At this time of year, we remember that God is with us. He is Emmanuel who takes on our flesh, embraces our vulnerability and depends on love alone.

God's closeness to us is comforting. We can rely on God who does not stand aloof from our life on earth and is with us always, in the good times and the bad. When we stand together in solidarity, God is there. When darkness surrounds us, God is there, an ever-present help in times of trouble and a sure guide on the path of hope.

If we trust in Jesus, the way, the truth and the life, then we fear nothing. If we listen to the Holy Spirit, God the Father will restore us to wholeness and prosperity.

Lord Jesus, as we look ahead with hope, fill us with the Holy Spirit so that we may know the joy that comes from you alone. Amen.

MONDAY 7 DECEMBER

God will make us strong again

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 5:17-26

God saves us. If we listen to God; if we follow the voice of the Holy Spirit, the Lord rescues us, restores us and leads us into the Promised Land. It does not matter what has gone wrong, if we have failed or fallen into sin. No matter how desperate the situation might seem, if we turn back to God with open hands, open hearts and open minds, he will lift us up, will breathe life into the desert places of our lives, and we will see and hear again with eyes and ears renewed by God's merciful love. We will walk and talk again with a confidence built on the rock of Christ, the Word of God.

This is the way of holiness. If we choose to follow it, we will be glad; we will rejoice greatly, shout for joy and blossom. God will make us strong again, courageous and ready to strive with all our might to enter his kingdom of heaven on earth.

Heavenly Father, teach us to trust in you so that we may follow your path, wherever you lead us. Amen.



“Faith begins when we realise we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them.” Pope Francis

TUESDAY 8 DECEMBER

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Say “Yes!” to God

**Genesis 3:9-15. 20;
Ephesians 1:3-6. 11-12;
Luke 1:26-38**

Today we remember that God chooses Mary to play a particular and eternal part in the divine plan of salvation. God saves Mary through her own son, Jesus Christ.

Before all people, before all angels, even before the foundation of the world in Christ, God chooses Mary to be holy and blameless in his sight. God blesses Mary with every spiritual blessing in Christ. God divinely adopts Mary as his daughter. Mary’s trusting obedience, her “Yes!” to God opens the door for abundant blessing. If, like Mary, we say “Yes!” to God, we can share in the spiritual blessing of Christ and his divine adoption.

To listen and obey the word of God is to become a child of God, free from slavery to sin, rejoicing in a return to Eden and to the origins of our relationship with God, praising his glorious name and uniting all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Lord Jesus, we yearn to be united with you, to be as one people under Christ. Grant us this desire that we may live to praise your name. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 9 DECEMBER

Do not be afraid

**Isaiah 40:25-31;
Matthew 11:28-30**

Our God is gentle and humble in heart. God gives rest to the weary and strength to the weak. If we hope in the Lord, we will soar like eagles on wings; if we trust in him, nothing will move us; if we put our faith in him, all things are possible. God lightens our burdens, eases our sufferings. If we listen to the Holy Spirit, if we follow where it leads us, we can overcome any challenges in our path. This is the way of holiness, the way of faith, hope and love.

Do not be afraid. Do not be tempted to despair. With God, no journey is too hard: there is always light in the darkness and rest for our souls. God, who can move mountains and raise the dead, does not grow tired or weary.

Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, lighten our burdens and guide us on the path of faith, hope and love. Amen.

THURSDAY 10 DECEMBER

With us always

**Isaiah 41:13-20;
Matthew 11:11-15**

The Lord, our redeemer, is with us always, watching over us, waiting for us, making our paths straight and yearning for our return to him. If we listen with the ear of our hearts, he will mould us into tools of his good works, instruments to accomplish his great deeds. God, the master craftsman, the mighty Creator, is ready to make of us what he will. And God can work miracles, making the weak strong, the foolish wise, the barren fertile. Nothing is impossible for God.

The Lord will raise us up on eagles’ wings. His glory will lighten the darkness. The poor and needy will be saved, the oppressed will be rescued from their distress, the desolate will be consoled. When we follow the Lord, mercy and freedom will flourish and the name of Christ will resound in the four corners of the world.

Heavenly Father, as we strive to renew our ways upon the earth, turn our hearts to you and give us hope. Amen.



FRIDAY 11 DECEMBER

Greater than we realise

Isaiah 48:17-19;

Matthew 11:16-19

God's plan for our lives is greater than we realise. He has prepared everything so that we can prosper and flourish. If we listen to God's word, obey his commands and keep his covenant, our future is brighter than we could ever imagine.

We have a chance today to set out on the path of righteousness, a path on which we will grow in wisdom and holiness. If we choose to journey with God, our lives will be restored. Out of what is broken we can rebuild a better world, a world of which our children can be proud, a world in which human love and tenderness are the measure of all things.

God does not forget us. In unfailing love God sends us his son, Jesus Christ, to save us from evil. Advent is a time of hope. Let us hope together and be brave, for nothing is impossible with God.

Lord Jesus, as we emerge from a time of darkness, be with us and guide our efforts to renew the face of the earth. Amen.

SATURDAY 12 DECEMBER

More than we dreamed possible

Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4. 9-11;

Matthew 17:10-13

Elijah is one of the greatest heroes in the Bible, a man not of his time, but of eternity, knitted so closely to God that he could perform miracles. He called fire down from heaven to confound the prophets of Baal and their murderous idolatry. He multiplied oil and flour to save the faithful widow from famine and her son from certain death. In Elijah, we see the reality of God in all its multicoloured glory: quick to act to save his people from the oppression of idolatry; gentle, kind and loving in times of need and distress; ready to suffer to save us from sin.

We may not always recognise God, but he always recognises us. God never gives up on us. So today, let us remember that God is with us and together, if we are courageous, we can achieve more than we ever dreamed possible.

Jesus, thank you for your unfailing love. You never forget us. You help us in times of distress. Teach us to trust you now and for evermore. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINTS

After a challenging year, Advent offers us a chance to look ahead to the future with renewed hope. What are you hoping for? Do you have doubts and fears?

What fills you with hope this Advent?

How might your hopes become your reality?

Paul Bryant is a school lay-chaplain and Head of Theology, Philosophy and Religion at The Pilgrims' School in Winchester



Advent Week Three

LOOK

Advent is, above all, a season of hope. After a difficult year, Gráinne Treanor reminds us to hold on to hope and keep faith: Jesus is coming.

SUNDAY 13 DECEMBER THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Nurture renewal and joy

Isaiah 61:1-2. 10-1; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8. 19-28

Today's readings speak of great renewal and joy. Isaiah describes the earth making fresh things grow, while John refers to the water of the river Jordan.

This nature imagery is linked to the renewal and joy springing from the coming of Jesus. Isaiah refers to good news to the poor, the binding of hearts that are broken and liberty for captives. Paul reassures us that God will not fail us. Advent is a time to look at how we can nurture that renewal and joy in our world, literally in our care for the earth and as Christians in our response to those in need. This Advent we find ourselves torn between grieving a loss of life and freedom most of us could not have imagined a year ago and watching nature recover, following the disruption of our "normal" human activity. We see brokenness and renewal side by side.

Lord, help us to look around us this Advent season to see where we, despite our losses, can share renewal and joy with others and how we might nurture the world around us so that it continues to emerge from a wilderness created by human destruction. Amen.

Dear Lord, thank you for giving us a physical sign of your love by sending your son Jesus to us. We pray we may model ourselves on his divine nature as closely as we can. Amen.

MONDAY 14 DECEMBER

Take Jesus' hand


Numbers 24:2-7. 15-17; Matthew 21:23-27

Today's reading from the book of Numbers refers to the one "with far-seeing eyes ... who hears the word of God", while the psalmist prays, "Lord, make me know your ways ... Make me walk in your truth". The psalmist describes a good and upright Lord who "shows the path to those who stray" and "guides the humble in the right paths". This longing to know the right path contrasts with the unwillingness of some to recognise the authority of Jesus, as described in Matthew's Gospel.

This Advent, after a year in which we found ourselves cast suddenly into a wilderness, we may feel weary, alone and even abandoned. It is easy to stumble, lose faith or stray into despair and hopelessness. But it is at times like this, when we feel most alone, that we need to relinquish control and take the hand of Jesus who guides us.

Lord, during the wilderness experiences of life, help us to seek and follow your path and return to it when we stray, finding strength in our personal faith and in the faith of the Christian community that accompanies us. Amen.





“Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again: ‘Do not be afraid’.” **Pope Francis**

TUESDAY 15 DECEMBER
Look for the real gold

Zephaniah 3:1-2. 9-13;
Matthew 21:28-32

There is a well-known expression that tells us that all that glistens is not gold. In other words, not everything is at it appears at first glance. A product does not always live up to claims made about it. A “special offer” has so many terms and conditions attached that it may not be special at all. Promises made can turn out to be empty.

Today’s readings reveal the real gold behind what merely glistens. Zephaniah describes a defiled and tyrannical city. Matthew identifies those least expected to recognise goodness as the first to see it. True goodness lies among the poor and humble who do God’s will. This year, we witnessed true goodness and humility in all walks of life: doctors, nurses, hospital porters, undertakers, shop assistants, couriers and more. When our shops, businesses and even our churches closed, we saw what glistens when the rest is gone: family, compassion, community, love.

Lord, at a time when many of the superficial things we valued have been stripped away, help us to look beneath the surface and recognise the true goodness in those who have supported us, often beyond the call of duty, over the past year. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER
Keep faith!

Isaiah 45:6-8. 21-25;
Luke 7:18-23

2020 has been a year of great suffering in the lives of many. As the new year began, fires blazed in Australia, reminding us of the fragility of our planet and the damaging effects of human misuse of its resources. This was soon followed by worrying news of a virus that within weeks had reached pandemic levels. Our lives were altered in a way that seemed less like anything real and more like a dystopian novel or film. After years of so-called human independence, “progress” and “control” – when faith in a creator seemed dispensable to many – we were truly shaken.

Today’s first reading celebrates the unrivalled power of our creator, while Luke describes the many healing miracles of Jesus and refers to the happiness of those who do not lose faith. As we accept the indisputable precariousness of human power, have we ever been more in need of faith?

Lord, we are sorry for those times when we felt so in control of our lives that we dispensed with our need for you. We ask you to pour your healing on those who have suffered illness and loss in the past year. Amen.

THURSDAY 17 DECEMBER
No life is “ordinary”

Genesis 49:2. 8-10;
Matthew 1:1-17

“[A]nd Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” So ends today’s Gospel reading, a genealogy of Jesus. In recent years, there has been renewed interest in genealogy. Wider access to records means that family history is no longer the preserve of those who have the time and knowledge to peruse records in libraries or the privilege of an already documented family history. With research, many “ordinary” people have found “extraordinary” ancestors.

Yet no life is “ordinary”. Our parents and other ancestors nurtured us and instilled values that we either carry on or reject today, and what they gave us is truly great. Throughout 2020, Covid-19 took many of these people from our lives, usually with little warning. As Christmas approaches, we pause to reflect on and give thanks for the values they shared throughout their time with us.

Lord, we ask you to give us the strength to instil the Gospel values of love, justice and peace, so that your people can continue to fulfil your will in our world. Amen.

“Starting from our roots, let us sit around the common table, a place of conversation and of shared hopes. In this way our differences, which could seem like a banner or a wall, can become a bridge. Identity and dialogue are not enemies. Our own cultural identity is strengthened and enriched as a result of dialogue with those unlike ourselves.” Pope Francis

FRIDAY 18 DECEMBER

The day is coming

Jeremiah 23:5-8;

Matthew 1:18-24

Today's readings bring us closer to the celebration of the birth of Jesus. They are full of the promise of what is to come. Jeremiah tells us the days are coming. The Lord will raise a virtuous branch for David who will practise honesty and integrity in the land. The psalm sings of the days when justice will flourish and there will be peace till the moon fails. And the angel in Matthew's Gospel tells Joseph not to be afraid of marrying Mary, because she will give birth to the one who is to save his people from their sins – Emmanuel, “God is with us”.

As we reflect on this promise, we prepare for this coming of God among us. How can we welcome Jesus anew? Looking inward to our spiritual life and outward towards the world, how can we renew our commitment to God's path for us in life?

Lord, as we look to your promise of the coming of Emmanuel, God is with us, help us to welcome Jesus into our lives, accepting with faith the consolation he brings in times of great trouble and allowing others to experience his presence in the world through our words and actions. Amen.

SATURDAY 19 DECEMBER

Promise of birth and rebirth

Judges 13:2-7. 24-25;

Luke 1:5-25

Today's readings are again full of the promise of birth. In Judges, the birth of Samson is announced to his mother, “having borne no children”. In Luke's Gospel, Elizabeth and Zechariah, both “getting on in years”, learn that they too are to have a son, John. John would be their “joy and gladness” and he would do great things.

The human longing for a child is deeply rooted in nature. It is what drives the survival of species of all types – plant and animal. But for humans, it is also about sharing love, nurturing another human being and even being loved back. This Advent, we look at those around us, grateful for their loving care and protection, and especially this year for their ongoing presence in our lives when many are bereaved.

Let us continue to reach out to the natural world, loving it and protecting it from human exploitation.

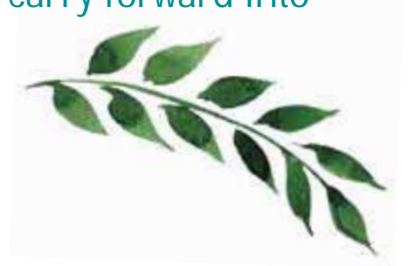
Lord, help us to look for signs of God's creation all around us – in plants, animals, oceans and sky, and in every human being we encounter – and to act in ways that allow the God-given life around us to flourish. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINTS

This Advent, we look for signs of God's constant presence around us. How can our faith comfort us and empower us to comfort others? How can we play a part in renewing God-given life and beauty, so that even in the wilderness we have experienced, new life and hope can arise?

Gráinne Treanor is a mother of three and professional editor/proofreader who works from her home in the west of Ireland

During the coronavirus lockdown, we learned new ways of loving, living and giving. Michael George suggests that these are lessons which we can carry forward into our Christmas celebrations.



SUNDAY 20 DECEMBER
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

You are not alone

2 Samuel 7:1-5. 8-12. 14. 16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

"Do not be afraid, Mary," spoke angel Gabriel.

Fear is a natural emotion. At different times in our lives it strikes at the heart of each of us. It is difficult to contend with on our own. Managing fear so that it stimulates rather than holds us back often needs someone else's reassurance, saying, "It's going to be OK."

When faced with a life-changing situation or a step into the unknown, just like a child leaving a parent and starting at school, it helps to hear "You can do it", from somebody we trust. The words boost and give confidence. They help us achieve something we may have doubted was possible. Community spirit – even a community of just two – can help achieve so much more than we could do on our own.

Angel Gabriel's words speak God's message to us all. Don't be afraid. You are not alone. You can do it.

Grant me, O Lord, the confidence to place all my fears and anxieties into your hands. Amen.

MONDAY 21 DECEMBER

The beauty of human love

Song of Songs 2:8-14; Luke 1:39-45

"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away," wrote the writer of the Song of Songs. Waiting for the birth of Jesus we anticipate the arrival of beauty: God-made-man.

Beauty is experienced in many different forms. There is the awe-inspiring beauty of mountains, lakes, sunsets and majestic creatures, but this year in particular has revealed so much beauty in humanity: the beauty of compassion, care, selflessness, charity... the beauty of human love.

The writer of the Song of Songs also wrote: "Let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." What wonderful words to say to ourselves each morning, for we are all born to be like Christ. We have all been given the mission of showing love in our own faces and through the way we use our voices... being beacons of beauty in our world.

Lord, may my face radiate your beautiful love; may my voice amplify your compassion. Amen.



“How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow, not panic but a shared responsibility? How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer? How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all? Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.” Pope Francis

TUESDAY 22 DECEMBER

Share with one another

1 Samuel 1:24-28;

Luke 1:46-56

As soon as the angel Gabriel left her, Mary's reaction was to share her news with someone she loved: her cousin Elizabeth. Mary travelled to Elizabeth's house and stayed for about three months.

We can only imagine what happened between Mary and Elizabeth during this time. We can be sure that the two women were a source of support to one another: they were both carrying children that at this time in their lives they had not expected. Mary must have felt welcome. Elizabeth must have enjoyed Mary's presence. It must have been a place of love.

Whether celebrating or enduring difficulty, it's natural to share our experience with those whom we love. Whether or not we can spend time with each other in person, like Mary and Elizabeth we can look to them as inspirations, sharing with one another in mutual excitement and anticipation of an event of great joy.

Open my heart, Lord, to share the joy that your birth brings with all those I love. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 23 DECEMBER

God is gracious

Malachi 3:1-4. 23-24;

Luke 1:57-66

As a teacher I often remind children that words carry meaning and that we must choose words carefully. Some words are frequently inappropriately used – how many things are genuinely “incredible” (impossible to believe), for example? It is upsetting when we hear someone say that they are “starving”, when they are merely moderately hungry. The words we use matter.

The angel Gabriel told Zechariah that Elizabeth was to give birth to a son, who would be named John. When the Baptist was born, John was the name given to him by his parents. “John” means “God is gracious”. Through the birth of their son Zechariah and Elizabeth had been blessed by God's divine and ever-generous goodwill.

During Advent more than at any time we often use the name “Emmanuel” as a name for Jesus. The meaning of “Emmanuel” is “God is with us”. And God is with us, always, because God is gracious, always.

May I feel your presence with me each day, Lord; may I know that I am filled with your grace. Amen.

THURSDAY 24 DECEMBER

Jesus' sunrise

Mass in the Morning

2 Samuel 7:1-5. 8-12. 14. 16;

Luke 1:67-79

Sunrise can provide spectacular settings. My mind is taken back to rising early one morning on a Mediterranean holiday and going out with my young son to see the sun rising over the horizon and taking its place in the sky. It was awe-inspiring and memorable.

The sun rises each day and seldom do we actually notice it. We know that it will happen each day: it is the rhythm of natural life.

Zechariah described the anticipated birth of Jesus as the coming of “the rising Sun”.

The sun provides light and warmth. From the dark or the wilderness of night come the energy, safety and comfort of the light of day.

Through sharing, the light of the sun becomes no less bright and neither is its heat diminished.

Like the sun, Jesus was born to share freely of his Father's love and to fill our lives with light.

Thank you, Lord, for the light emerging from darkness, illuminating our way. Amen.



FRIDAY 25 DECEMBER

Christ is born for all

Mass at Dawn

The Nativity of the Lord

Isaiah 62:11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20

God's love is for all. Christ is born for all.

Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus was lying in the manger, cared for by Mary and Joseph, who no doubt were like any first-time parents, thrilled by Jesus' safe arrival but also anxious about their new life-preserving responsibilities. Jesus, a vulnerable newborn baby, was surrounded by cattle and oxen. And who should visit Jesus first but shepherds. The new-born king was visited by the poor and the lowly.

By placing humble shepherds as the first to pay homage to Jesus, God's message is "I am your God", and "I am like you".

Being like us, God truly knows our joys and sorrows, elations and anxieties. He is not a distant God. He is our God and God's love is for all.

In the birth of Jesus we can rejoice because God loves us. God loves you. God loves me. God is love.

Loving God, we rejoice in the birth of your son, Jesus, born for us, born for me. Amen.

DISCUSSION POINTS

This week's readings continually illustrate God's grace and enduring love, shared with all peoples. God wishes for us to receive his grace and gift of love... and then to share it. Our lockdown experience showed us new ways of loving, living and giving. How can we radiate and amplify God's gift of love in the coming days?

After many years spent in the classroom, Michael George has recently changed direction and is now working as a school lay-chaplain

A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY?



During the pandemic lockdown, Canon John Lumley's parishioners formed a renewed and reinvigorated community through their creative thinking and generosity.

At our last public Mass, I told parishioners: "We have a parish Facebook page. I will learn how to post a reflection on it every day." That was the limit of my ambition. But I was encouraged to try live-streaming and so, with great trepidation, I set up my iPhone for my first live-streamed Mass. I broadcast it at a 90-degree angle! Not a good start.

In those early days, people were so unsettled – frightened, actually – that they were desperate for something to strengthen their faith and diminish the sense of isolation. Streamed Sunday Mass became streamed daily Mass, then evening prayers too. We rediscovered traditional prayer forms. A weekly Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour was a big hit and a shortened service of Benediction responded to our need to experience that God is with us.

**Missing each other.
Missing the Body of Christ.**

There was a real danger of parishioners becoming passive onlookers, turning the clock back decades. So people were encouraged to greet each other before and after Mass, as well as exchanging a virtual sign of peace during Mass: the rainbow emoji was an obvious biblical symbol to send.

We became a focal point for prayer requests as people developed a sense of supporting each other

in prayer. Separated families, near and far, were being united in our live-streamed services. Parish musicians sent in mp3 files of music and singing. Ministers of the Word recorded the readings for Mass. One parishioner imaginatively led us in weekly May devotions.

As well as prayer, there was charity too. Parishioners set up standing orders to donate to the parish. They responded to calls for food and money for the food bank (open to all) run by our primary school. Donations of money for CAFOD also came in. Conscious of the (mainly elderly) parishioners who had no internet, we created prayer booklets for Holy Week and for the nine-days vigil leading up to Pentecost.

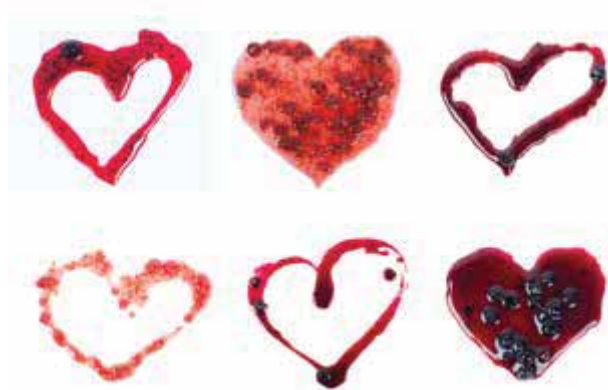
Although we strove to be community, we were conscious that we were missing those parishioners without the internet. And even among the rest of us, there was a tangible hunger to be in touch with the Body of Christ – the community as well as the sacrament. Not being able to celebrate funerals or offer physical consolation and solidarity in the face of illness and death underscored the fact that no matter how hard we tried, we were missing something.

Missing each other. Missing the Body of Christ. That realisation is a gift in itself. Without doubt, the internet is a huge blessing and live-streaming will become a permanent feature of our parish life.

Paradoxically, the coronavirus lockdown nurtured a real appreciation for what we had lost – and a deep longing for community to come.

Canon John Lumley is the Episcopal Vicar for Christian Discipleship for the Diocese of Middlesbrough

LOVE IN LOCKDOWN



Love grows! Dr Lucy Russell and her family discovered that the pandemic lockdown soon became a lesson in love and a renewed interest and loving concern for the natural world.

On numerous occasions over the past twelve years I have wished I could press “pause” and take a breath and some time to enjoy the children and our place in time.

At the start of the 2019-20 school year I organised my working week around being available to walk and meet Edgar from school and be as much a part of my youngest son's last year at primary school as I possibly could. Then, in the spring, the pause button was pressed. There would be no SATs (yippee!), but also no May Procession, no Year 6 trips, no play, no last sports day as sports captain, no time to say goodbye before moving on.

But there were blessings to be counted. Better to be healthy and safe and live differently. Would we all stay healthy? We began taking a daily family walk to Sholden through the fields a few streets behind our house. It takes an hour there and back and there is plenty of nature to enjoy along the way. Before these walks, although my husband and the boys had cycled along these tracks, I hadn't explored these fields and hedgerows. I hadn't seen the pheasants or heard the coots.

After three weeks of taking the same walk daily, James began to tease, “Oh look, that's different: I think that blade of grass was bent the other way yesterday...” It

made me smile, I was happy to have been lent some extra time with my teenage son. Would I have got him out for a daily family walk in “normal” circumstances? We can live without change and excitement. We are lucky things are the same. The trees came into leaf. The crops began to grow. The birds built their nests. There actually was something new to notice each day – and time to talk.


At one house in Sholden, jars of sweet orange marmalade were set out for sale on the garden wall. Money from their sale being put towards materials for scrub bags for NHS frontline staff. On our walk around Sholden one day, having passed this house for perhaps the twentieth time, James asked whether we could make some jam using the raspberries in our freezer (grown in the garden last year) and set up a small stall outside our house to raise money for the NHS. I liked his idea, so the next day we made seven jars and the day after that he set up his own stall outside our house. Within an hour and twenty minutes he had sold out, and thanks to extra donations had raised £18. While school lessons were on hold, we learned lessons in love – and isn't that what Advent is about in its preparation for a divine act of love for the whole world?

Dr Lucy Russell's book, Who Do I Say I Am? is available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbbooks.co.uk



BEYOND THE WILDERNESS

The coronavirus was a truly global pandemic. Formerly working as a GP in London, Dr Mabel Aghadiuno found herself at the frontline of the outbreak in Nigeria, from where she wrote her message of hope.



From June 2019 to February 2020, fire burned an estimated 46 million hectares (72,000 square miles) of bush in Australia. This area is roughly equivalent in size to Syria. We recall images of an inferno on the rampage. Firefighters heroically battled with the flames but despite their effort people died, animals died and their habitats disappeared. None of us imagined then that another fire smouldering in China would later engulf parts of the world. We didn't see the pandemic coming.

The Covid-19 virus measures 65-125 nm. As it takes a million nanometres to make one millimetre, we cannot conceive anything so infinitesimal. Though invisible to our eyes, this virus has brought swathes of humanity to a standstill.

Most people recover but, like the bushfires, Covid-19 leaves loss and wilderness. Too many perish. We have all heard heartrending stories of bereavement: the two brothers in their fifties who were in adjacent hospital beds, a young nurse who died leaving behind three adorable little girls, a woman in a coma because of Covid-19 who wakes to find her husband did not survive, a child who dies alone in a hospital bed. Then there is the hell of a nurse

who has not yet buried her husband – a Covid-19 victim – and receives the news of her son's murder. Countless tragedies. Some public. Many private. We are afraid of a disease that we cannot completely control or prevent. As collective humanity we see our life is fragile, ephemeral, unpredictable. For twenty-first century people accustomed to being in control, with scientists who can even "manipulate" or "manufacture" life itself, this loss of control petrifies.

And the creeping questions: where is God in all of this? Where is his love? Where is the good in health workers dying who are pledged to save life? Where is the love in thousands of people dying alone without family? It is tempting to ask, "Hello! Is anyone there?"

In my personal and professional life, I have faced death various times. When I was fourteen, my father died after a car hit him. I have lost four cousins – three in their twenties – in four unrelated accidents. The deaths of my father and my cousin, Chuma, were particularly hard as I was close to them. Chuma was full of dreams and had just enrolled at university to be a lawyer. What wilderness in my soul! I wondered how the world could still turn and people continue to do the ordinary things of life without them.

Professionally, I have looked after the terminally ill and comforted patients after the death of a loved one. Deaths are not only physical. I have accompanied the wilderness and disorientation caused by a life-changing diagnosis, the desert of mental illness, the wasteland of addiction or abuse.

I would not have the courage to look after patients in pain without the knowledge and experience of Jesus' death and resurrection. Frankly, if he had not died on the cross, if he too had not faced the wilderness, he would have nothing to say to the deepest part of me, nothing that could comfort me. I would not dare to try to be a channel to bring him to others – often not through words, but through a silent nearness. I would be empty-handed because, in certain situations, being a doctor is simply not enough.

Christ's love and desire to be with us goes from the vulnerability of the cradle to the wilderness of the cross. So, as some of us face this Advent dreading the

empty Christmas chairs of colleagues, neighbours, friends and family because of Covid-19 or any other reason, we must remember we are not alone. We too are swept up in the mystery of Christ's vulnerability and wilderness.

In Australia, many eucalyptus trees harbour buds underneath their thick, fireproof barks. After a fire, the buds sprout. Fresh, green shoots rapidly grow. So, it can be for us, in our collective wilderness. Jesus talks of the grain of wheat that dies and bears much fruit. In true style like the gentleman and brother he is, he wouldn't suggest something he is not prepared to do himself. We can be like the grain of wheat that dies with him. We too can look forward to Advent as the time which heralds the coming of the One who longs to journey with us through and beyond every wilderness – now and always.

Dr Mabel Aghadiuno is a doctor and a member of the Focolare Movement, currently based in Nigeria



MIGHTY OAKS

Elzéard Bouffier was a French shepherd and widower who lived in an Alpine valley which loggers had ruined and its original inhabitants had abandoned.

Bouffier decided to bring life back to his valley and home and so, every day, the lonely shepherd walked several miles to the nearest forest in order to collect fallen acorns from the forest floor. Every day, he returned to his cottage, dug holes in the ground and planted the acorns.

Replanting the forest took many years but, acorn by acorn, the barrenness gave way to green shoots, slender saplings and trees. Water once again flowed in the dried-up river bed. People returned and built new homes. The sounds of birdsong and children's laughter came back to fill the empty silence.

"Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." Sometimes we just need a little bit of hope and buckets of perseverance.

The tale of Elzéard Bouffier was told by Jean Giono in a short story, The Man who Planted Trees, which later became a film of the same title.



THE GOOD NEWS

In spite of the difficulties of the lockdown, Emerald O'Hanrahan reminds us that there were also unforgettable blessings and joys.

I've really struggled with putting this year and this extraordinary time into words. Who knows what life will look like when you read this? We've all been through days when the fabric of life and everything we believed to be solid and unchangeable revealed itself to be illusory and shifting. The pandemic tested whether we'd built the houses of our lives on rock or on sand. Those early days of lockdown were scary and destabilising and yet we all know how moving it was to clap for the NHS each week and to connect with our neighbours at a time when we couldn't leave our homes to connect in person.

The Zoom calls were an absolute blessing. They also came with tension and friction: relatives' faces frozen halfway through key sentences; the pressure of coming up with a quiz just as good as last week's; work calls cut short and missing key information. Regardless of the hiccups, those calls were a valuable lifeline.

My husband and I both celebrated our birthdays in lockdown and I'm struggling to remember a happier birthday. There were the joys of sunshine, spring bursting through, the usually invisible joy of being in full health and able to walk and run, an unexpected video call with my family – and all those (quarantined and disinfected) gifts! I'd had no idea he'd been stockpiling such treats.

We remember that God's gift of our sunniest spring for years came during those scary and frustrating lockdown days, transforming our daily walks into walking meditations, contemplating the rebirth, the resurrection, of nature in the days leading up to Easter.

A friend, a nurse working in the community, volunteered for redeployment to a Covid-19 Intensive Care Unit ward and was inspiring in her bravery as she answered

that inner call. What struck her most was the creativity of others. A speech and language therapist had volunteered to come to the ICU to help with drug runs (one of many, many health professionals who left their regular places of work to do this). Trained in a motivational interviewing technique, she spent a day in the ICU giving the staff individual five-minute sessions, whenever they had a free moment, to help with their mental health. My friend's experience of this was, "so incredible: we were all in at the deep end, and feeling unskilled and unsupported, and she made us see what great things we are doing." Hearing her talk, working in the ICU had boosted her confidence and self-esteem: another unlooked-for gift.

My friend talked about, for the first time, feeling valued as a nurse and hoping that children might have ambitions to be a doctor, nurse or teacher. Her ICU manager told her that many people are now applying for ICU nursing jobs. She felt that change might really come.

So although it might be hard to see a way back to normality right now, or to imagine what life will look like on the journey towards Christmas, we don't need the whole plan. All we need to know is our next step as we become quiet, turn to Jesus and, as the Quakers say, "attend to what love requires".

A friend from church sent me a cartoon in which the devil talks to Jesus, saying, "I've closed all your churches!" - and Jesus replies, "but I've opened one in every home!" So I'll retreat now to the cushion in front of the bookcase, light a candle and listen to what Jesus is asking of me.

Emerald O'Hanrahan is best-known as Emma Grundy in the BBC Radio 4 series The Archers



A MOMENT OF CONVERSION



It took a tiny virus to offer the world a turning point and a choice. Fr Peter McVerry SJ suggests that we are living in a unique moment of conversion.



The world, as we have known it, has changed, perhaps for ever. One tiny, invisible, virus has brought the vast economic edifice, which humankind has spent centuries erecting, crashing to the ground. It has also shattered our arrogance, the belief that we are masters of the planet we inhabit, and that the future is entirely in our own hands, under our control. We Christians have been taught that there is a power greater than ourselves, a being we call God. Now humankind is being taught that there is a power greater than ourselves, which we do not control, called nature. This virus invites us to humility. Unless we learn humility, the next crisis, climate change, may destroy us.

The virus shines a spotlight on the inequalities and injustice in our world. Those who live in overcrowded shanty towns in Latin America, or slums in Africa and Asia, with little access to healthcare, where social distancing is impossible and facing starvation during a lockdown, are the most vulnerable. Those in Ireland who are homeless and whose health is compromised by their homelessness, those living in overcrowded homes because of the failure of our housing policy, refugees living in the often-criticised direct provision centres where whole families have to share rooms: all face the full fury of the virus. The inequalities in our world have condemned many to death. They are Christ crucified today by our sinfulness.

Our western world has promoted a culture of rugged individualism, the belief that I am responsible for myself and my family, and no-one else. The ideal person, to which we are asked to aspire, is one

who is self-sufficient, financially secure and not dependent on anyone or anything else. But the virus has taught us that this self-protective individual is a myth, an impossible ideal. It has revealed our interconnectedness, the fact that we are, each of us, dependent on everyone else. Our love of air travel, for business or pleasure, has enabled the virus to travel the world within days. I am only as safe as

The inequalities in our world have condemned many to death. They are Christ crucified today by our sinfulness.

the most vulnerable person in the world. A chance encounter with a stranger could end my life.

This is a moment of conversion. The word "repent" in the Gospel does not mean "be sorry for your sins". No, it means "turn around", do a U-turn, go in a totally different direction. The call to repentance today is a call to reject a culture of selfish individualism, which has made us less and less inclined to let the sufferings of others disrupt the tranquil rhythm of our comfortable lives, and embrace a culture of solidarity, building a world of justice, where others' needs have priority over my wants.

Fr Peter McVerry, a Jesuit priest in Dublin, is the founder of the Peter McVerry Trust, a national housing and homeless charity committed to reducing homelessness and the harm caused by substance misuse and social disadvantage, <https://pmvtrust.ie/>



Natural historian Mary Colwell witnessed the before and after effects of the pandemic on the natural world and rejoiced in the difference.

REWILDING THE WORLD

In January I visited Venice. The beauty of the buildings, the rich cultural life and the sense that God is honoured around every corner was overwhelming. I visited the opera, galleries and restaurants, and I spent two evenings rapt by sacred choral music performed in ornate chapels whose walls were priceless works of art. As an expression of ecclesiastical majesty and human genius, Venice is, beyond question, a wonder of the world.

Yet – I yearned for a green space. I searched for quiet groves where I could gather my thoughts, where the sweet music of birds could enhance my contemplation on the mysteries made manifest in sculpture, paintings and music. I could not find any. I also crouched on the steps that led into the water of the canals to try to spot fish. Their gentle movements in a medium I cannot inhabit always brings a different perspective to human environments. I love to watch fish: they are a connection to deep time, to the eons before mammals walked on dry land and when water held all of the life on earth. They have played a central role in human history, and today they provide nearly one-fifth of the protein we eat. I like to think of them as silent witnesses to when, “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” But I couldn’t see them in Venice’s famed canals. The water was too murky with silt, churned up by the motorboats that

constantly cruise the narrow channels. If they were there, they were hidden in darkness. Taking a trip to the islands in the lagoon, I noticed how badly eroded their coastlines have become as precious sediment is swept away by the waves caused by the water taxis and cruisers. The soft, shifting boundaries between land and water are badly damaged and degraded. The vegetation, so vital as nurseries for small fish and other sea life, is threadbare and barely holding fast.

Reflecting on my time in “La Serenissima”, I concluded that the connection between God and humanity is gloriously celebrated in art and architecture, but recognition of that vital relationship between the creator and the natural world was nowhere to be seen.

Just weeks later, everything changed. Venice, like most of world, was gripped by the chaos of the pandemic. The busy streets became quiet and the boats moored. At last the waters were stilled. It was then that the fish appeared in the canals. They swam in glittering light and glided in and out of the seaweed that waved above a now-visible sandy base. Jellyfish pulsated and glimmered, like glass ornaments come alive. The blue sky and white clouds were reflected in crystalline waters. Cormorants appeared to feed on fish they could now see. Dolphins were regularly spotted in the lagoon. After just a few weeks, nature returned to Venice.

The floating city was not alone. Soon, a litany of creaturely antics was recorded in newspapers and online. An otter family were photographed trotting past a hospital in Singapore, coyotes appeared in car parks in San Francisco, penguins waddled down streets in South Africa, kangaroos hopped across the roads in Adelaide, herds of deer rested on green verges in London, wild boar wandered over a zebra crossing in Israel and in Wales goats browsed in the centre of Llandudno. The sudden appearance of wildlife was made possible by what has been coined the "circuit breaker effect," a disruption to normality that allows life to take advantage of our disappearance. Confined to our houses, we could only watch as the living planet frolicked and played outside. It was a glimpse of what life could be like if nature is given a breathing space.

The circuit breaker worked on many of us too. A common refrain during the lockdown was how much more people appreciated the nature that lived alongside them. Although it was always there, it had gone unnoticed in the busyness of life. In the weeks at home, for those with gardens or who lived in rural places, the natural world seemed so much more vital. Birdsong entered our lives, cheering us through difficult days. Spring flowers bloomed brightly. Outside my house, with no council workers armed with pesticides, "weeds" grew up between the pavements creating an eclectic jumble of wild plants that attracted bees and butterflies. Wildlife took on an extra dimension, one of companion and fellow traveller. It provided a joy that required no subscription to enjoy, it was a gift freely given. Birds

and butterflies, flowers and trees also gave us an anchor point in a world that was suddenly dangerous and challenging.

An American scientist friend wrote to me about her time in isolation. She would normally have been out in the wilds studying endangered birds and helping to protect them. It was frustrating for her as she has so much important work to do. Confined to walks around her town, however, she found unexpected peace. "For me, it has made me more aware and, ironically enough – though socially distanced – I feel more connected in many ways, especially this morning. It is in these gentle moments that I feel the closest to nature and I can truly breathe. I just now feel like I am breathing much deeper."

Gentle moments – a good phrase to describe a glimpse of grace. The reappearance of nature has given many of us grace-filled connections which I hope will continue as the world slowly returns to whatever the new normal will be. We may, of course, slide back into the rule of money. Or might we take a more natural path and learn from what we have been taught about our relationship with nature? I am moved to note the wisdom of the composer Debussy: "Listen to no one's advice except that of the wind in the trees. That can recount the whole history of mankind..."

And we celebrate the Word who created that history and entered our world's beautiful, fragile loveliness...

Mary Colwell is an award-winning wildlife broadcaster, writer and environmental campaigner

LIGHT a CANDLE for LOVE

For those of you missing loved ones this Christmas use this cut out, keepsake to light a candle of love.

Take a moment to sit in stillness. As you light your candle pause to reflect on the person you are missing.

Remember special memories that make you smile. Give thanks to God for their life.

Loving Lord,
Let the light of this candle
bring to life
in our hearts and minds,
the life of
who was such a precious part of our lives.

Blesswith your heavenly light.
Although now not in sight we shall remember.....
in the stars that we see on Christmas night.

Thank you for blessing our lives with.....

One day, may we be together again,
with you, in heavenly peace.
Amen

The Christmas Carol Quiz

Do you have a favourite Christmas carol? Is it quiet or loud?
Does it match your personality?

Why not try our fun Christmas carol quiz and see which will be your special carol for this Christmas season, and what it says about you!

1

Which of these pictures is your favourite?



Picture A



Picture B



Picture C

2

What is your ideal Christmas?

- a. You prefer quiet family time. The presents are great, but it's the feeling of togetherness at Christmas that you love.
- b. Excitement, fun and games – the more action the better!
- c. You always make sure you think of others at Christmastime – grandparents, elderly neighbours – that's how you think Christmas should be celebrated.



3

Your favourite present would be:

- Books to read, or arts and crafts. You like spending time working quietly on things – that helps you feel the peace of the Christmas season.
- Something noisy and fun, to help you celebrate the joy of Christmas! Maybe a new drum kit or a keyboard – something that will let your neighbours know it's Christmas!
- Giving to others is your favourite part of Christmas. It's not all about presents after all, but bringing joy to others.



Which is your favourite scene from the nativity story?

- The stable where Jesus was born. You like to imagine Mary and Joseph looking in wonder at baby Jesus.
- The angels singing to the shepherds – it must have been so cool to see the sky light up and hear their beautiful songs of praise!
- The wise men that travelled so far just to bring Jesus their gifts – they really must have known how special Jesus was!



4

Now add up your scores...

Mostly "a"s – PEACE

Your carol for Christmas is Silent Night. Its simple tune and words will help you imagine what it must have been like in the peaceful stable with the Holy Family.

"Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm all is bright..."

Mostly "b"s – JOY

Your carol is Ding Dong Merrily on High, one of the most joyful carols of the season. Christ was born to Mary and all of heaven rejoiced!

"Ding Dong merrily on high, in heav'n the bells are ringing..."

Mostly "c"s – CHARITY

Your carol of the season is Good King Wenceslas. It's an old carol that tells the tale of Wenceslas, a saintly king. One frosty winter's evening, the king set out from his warm palace to help a poor man struggling through the snow. It ends with these words:

*"Ye who now will bless the poor,
Shall yourselves find blessing!"*

Write your answers in the boxes

1

2

3

4



THE ANNUNCIATION

'Tis ours
to muse and reconstruct the days,
their hours and deeds that once were yours.
'Tis ours to fail, for know we not
the instant when an angel song
was heard by wakeful heart. The years
are flown, and still we ponder long
your "Aye".

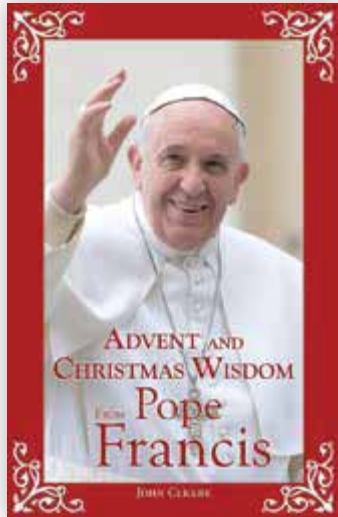
Our fond imagining
would hold you firm amid the things
we cannot count as strange... the home
and village, friends and laughter, love
of one beloved. Yet hear we not
the words, nor see the form beheld
at his announcing.

Oft our thoughts
to Joseph turn, to speculate
upon his anxious heart... and yet
in ignorance we stay. To us
is not to know the godly way
with humankind.

We pause to think
of days before a second heart
was heard to throb beneath your own.
Uncomprehending, answers find
we not to questions, "How?" or "Why?"
But "Aye" upon the whispered breeze
WAS sighed, and in our questing souls
is echoed "Aye", for thus it was.

A mystery, the moment when
a damsel gave reply, by word
enfleshing Word... a moment born
in time, suspended evermore
within eternity. As pass
the ages, marching Time
a world has changed for good or ill,
but nought has altered, "Be it done
to me according to your word."

Sr Janet Fearn,
Franciscan Missionary of the Divine Motherhood

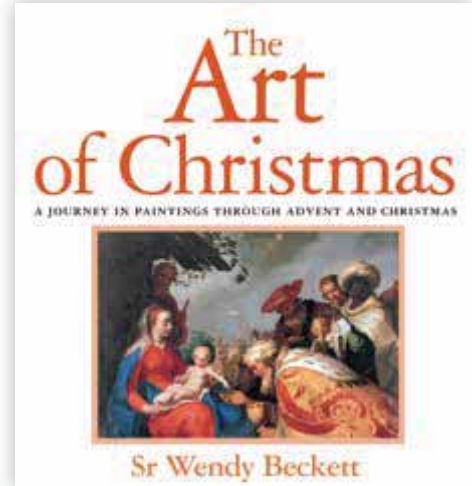


Advent and Christmas Wisdom from Pope Francis

John Cleary

This Advent, prepare to celebrate Jesus' arrival as an infant in the small town of Bethlehem. Born into poverty, he brings us the good news that God loves us – and calls us to give of ourselves to others. Let the example of Pope Francis, as he models the humility and generosity of our Saviour, inspire you. Reflect on the Pope's teachings, accompanied by scripture, prayer and action. Then go out and share the message: Jesus Christ is born!

Code: 14905 ISBN: 9780764826467 Price: £8.50



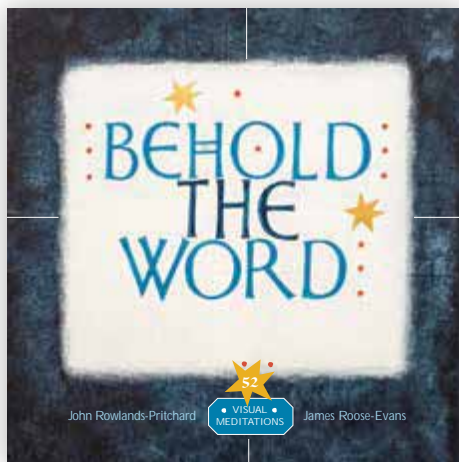
The Art of Christmas

A Journey in Paintings through Advent and Christmas

Sr Wendy Beckett

In her reflections on this beautiful selection of masterpieces from a range of artists, Sr Wendy Beckett guides us through the feasts and themes of Advent and Christmas. Sr Wendy leads us to a deeper appreciation of this joyful yet challenging season, and stimulates us to consider its meaning in our lives.

Code: 1461 ISBN: 9780852313541 Price: £9.95



Behold the Word

James Roose-Evans

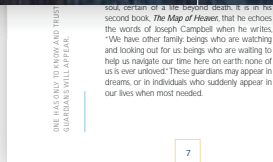
Illustrated by John Rowlands-Pritchard

This stunning collection of artwork and reflections for each week of the year pairs painted inscriptions of quotes by John Rowlands-Pritchard (Associate of the Royal School of Church Music and founder of musical group Opus Anglicanum) with thoughtful text by Fr James Roose-Evans (Anglican priest, author and award-winning theatre director).

Code: 1885

ISBN: 9780852315972

Price: £9.95



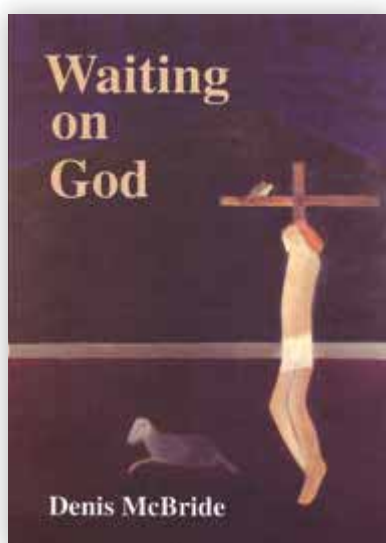
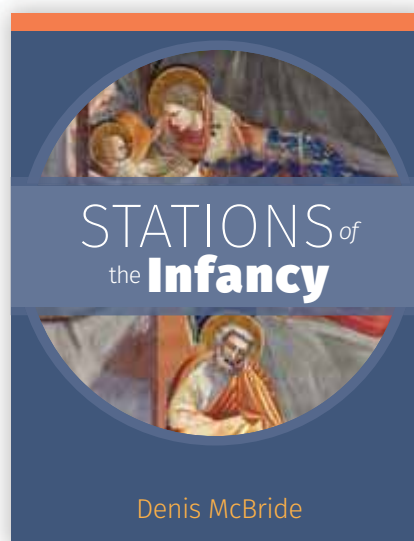
Stations of the Infancy

Denis McBride C.Ss.R.

"The format of the book is simple. Fourteen episodes are chosen from the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, except for the very first, which is taken from John and which stresses the awesome reality of God becoming truly human. Each episode has the same shape: after the opening response there is a scripture reading, followed by the author's personal reflection, then a prayer and a closing response. Fourteen carefully chosen works of art match each station as appropriate. The author, with his usual aplomb, makes the scenes come vividly alive and has created a beautiful, thoughtful book."

Fr Denis Blackledge SJ

Code: 1861 ISBN: 9780852315590 Price: £12.95



Waiting on God

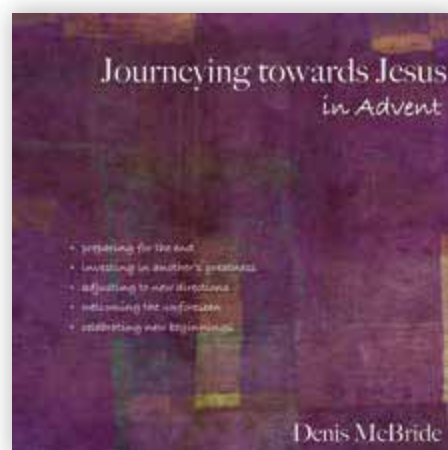
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Journeying towards Jesus in Advent

Denis McBride C.Ss.R.

In this insightful and inspiring book, Fr Denis McBride guides us through the Advent season towards the celebration of the birth of Christ. Suitable for private reading or for use in groups, this book invites us to journey together towards a deeper appreciation of the true meaning of Christmas.

Code: 1481 ISBN: 9780852313824 Price: £10.95

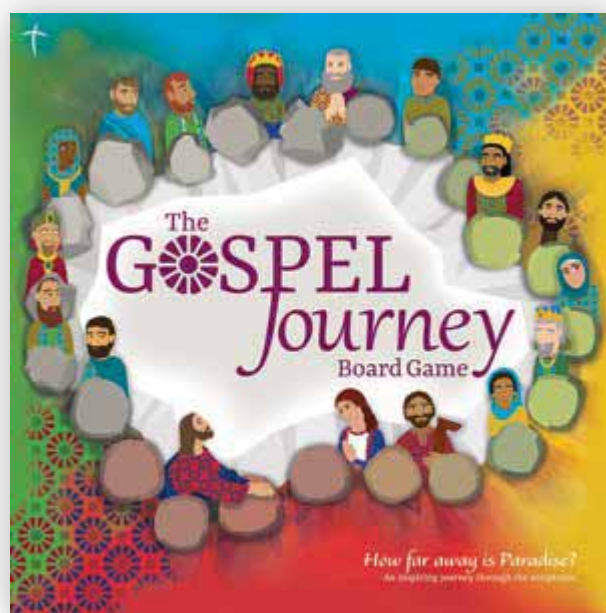
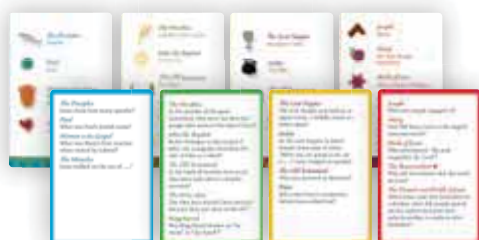
The Gospel Journey Board Game

How Far Away is Paradise?

Created by Denis McBride C.Ss.R. and George Allen

The Gospel Journey is an exciting and engaging board game that challenges the players' knowledge of the New and Old Testament. It takes the form of a pilgrimage to Paradise and is aimed at ages 14 upwards. It can be enjoyed by 2-4 players or teams.

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Ideal for social and fund-raising events in your parish.



"It is a great way to learn about the Gospels."

Ms Greene

"We played it with family members aged 8-88 and thoroughly enjoyed it."

Miss Stephenson

"A thoroughly enjoyable game which can be used to reinforce learning in an easy and accessible manner."

Mrs Singh

"It has the potential to be a much needed tool in Christian education."

Ms Macmillan

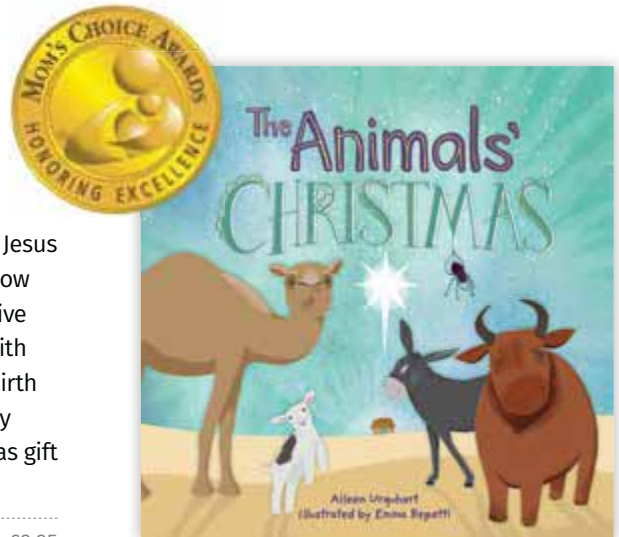


The Animals' Christmas

Aileen Urquhart

Read the nativity story as never before – told by the animals who were there. Get Sarah the Spider's perspective on the Annunciation and Daniel the Donkey's tale of carrying Mary to Bethlehem. How about Obadiah the Ox seeing his manger used as a crib for the baby Jesus and Lilah the Lamb react to the angels with awe and wonder. Read how Khalid the Camel tells of the gifts his masters brought from afar to give to this newborn prince. This hardback book, beautifully illustrated with charming characters and stunning backdrops, tells the story of the birth of Christ through the eyes of the animals who saw it. What might they have noticed? Was Mary heavy? Was Joseph kind? Ideal as a Christmas gift or as wonderful way to engage little ones with Christmas in Advent.

Hardback Code: 1825 ISBN: 9780852315279 Price: £9.95



The Animals' Christmas Cards

This pack of six beautiful cards contain a seasonal message "Wishing you all the peace and love of a very Happy Christmas"

PACK OF 6 CARDS 178 x 120mm Code: 1835 Price: £3.76



The Animals' Christmas Coasters

Heat resistant coasters featuring six designs inspired by *The Animals' Christmas*, made from satin finish printed melamine with a hardboard base.

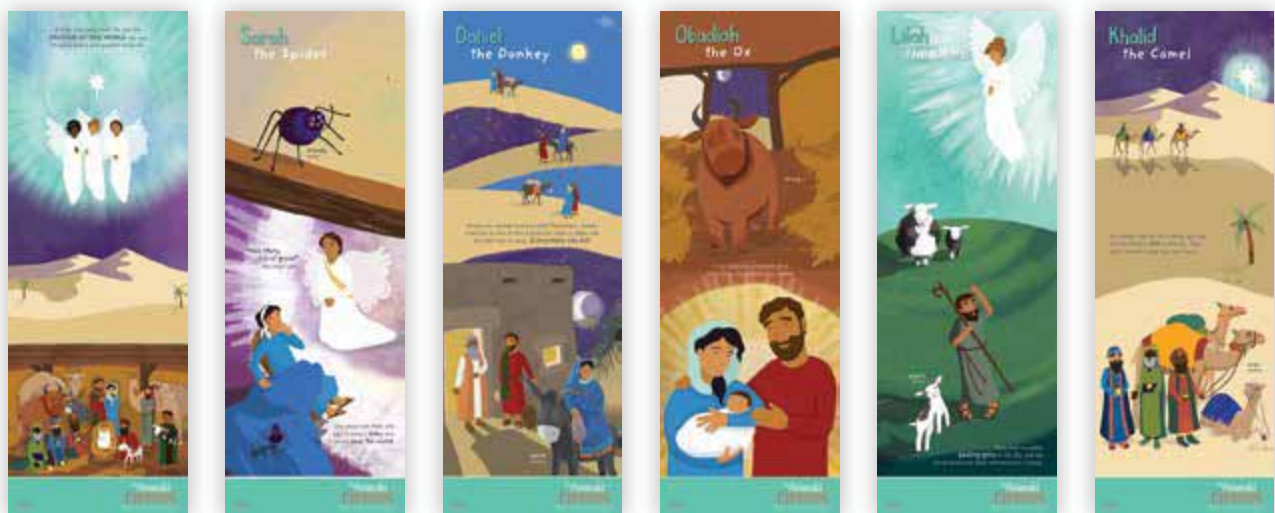
SET OF 6 COASTERS 98mm Square Code: 1837 Price: £9.95



The Animals' Christmas Banners

This set of six stunning banners features six designs from *The Animals' Christmas*. They can be used for school assemblies, in the classroom and in church settings.

SET OF 6 BANNERS 420 x 1188 mm Code: 1836 Price: £42.00





Real Advent Calendar

A great way to share the Christmas Story.

The Real Advent Calendar is the UK's only Fairtrade Advent calendar which comes with a free 24 page Christmas story-activity book. There is a page for every day of Advent and some fun Advent challenges along the way.

Code: A1158 Price: £4.00

Suitable for **Vegetarians**

Visit www.rpbooks.co.uk for a full list of ingredients.

Visit www.info.fairtrade.net for Allergy Advice: For allergens include **Milk** and **Soya**. May also contain **nuts, gluten** and **egg**.



Celebrate: Advent 2020 Follow the Star to Christmas

A new magazine for Catholic kids full of cool activities and fun quizzes. Perfect for 7-12 year olds it will encourage them to think about and grow in their faith while they have loads of fun! Twenty-two pages jam-packed with puzzles and facts – adults might learn something too! *Celebrate: Advent* comes with our bestselling Advent calendar and activity sheet for even more things to do. This year there's an easy way to refocus on the real meaning of Christmas as we *Celebrate: Advent*.

A4 MagazineCode: 1857 Price: £1.95



Children's Advent Activity Sheet 2020

A beautifully illustrated double-sided A3 sheet to help children prepare for Christmas. On one side of the sheet is an Advent Calendar, on the other a selection of puzzles, games, and other activities for the whole family.

A3 PosterCode: 1402 Price: £0.50

Viral prayer

Loving Lord,
the world's gone viral!
What matters now is that each of us
becomes a fresh living virus,
infecting others to become
ever more fully alive and aware
that you hold us all,
individually and as a community,
in your tender, compassionate, loving hands.

Loving Lord,
what matters now is an infection of
real presence, not pretence,
true depth, not shallowness,
radical commitment, not fancy,
living truth and good news, not fake news.

Loving Lord,
now is the time to re-awaken reverence and respect
for self, others, and creation,
to act and re-act and relate
as guests on our one good earth,
to work together as living instruments
of peace and justice,
to realise that small is beautiful,
that each human individual is equally precious and
vulnerable.

Loving Lord,
we live in a brave new world,
for each of us is called and challenged to be brave,
to be a person of courage, an encourager,
someone who puts fresh heart into others,
someone whose touch enlivens.

Loving Lord,
as the great sculptor Auguste Rodin once stated:
"The main thing is to be moved, to love,
to hope, to tremble, to live."

Loving Lord,
you said you had come to give life to the full.
And that is the challenge for each and every one of us now:
to bring fresh hope and vision, beauty and appreciation
for all the awe-inspiring wondrous gifts of our
Resurrection and Spirit-filled world.

Loving Lord,
plunge us into the depths,
so that out of the depths
we may rid our Church and world
of superficiality, shallowness, indecision, felt hopelessness,
and all that smacks of blind selfishness.

Loving Lord,
take us, bless us, break us, give us,
make us living Eucharists,
tabernacles on legs.
Amen.

Fr Denis Blackledge SJ

