

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS?



Daily reflections for Advent

by Anne Le Bas

These reflections can also be followed online at the church blog, where you will find additional music etc.

<http://sealpeterandpaul.blogspot.com>

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS?

Introduction

For many people home is especially important at Christmas. They gather with family, making real efforts to be wherever “home” is for them or welcoming family members to stay with them. For those who have no home, or for whom home is not a happy place, though, Christmas can be a painful time, a reminder that things are not as they would like them to be.

It is no accident that the Christmas story is full of themes that speak of “home” and mirror both the things we treasure and the things that may cause us grief when we think of home.

Mary and Joseph have nowhere to stay in Bethlehem - there is no room at the inn, so Jesus is born homeless, and according to Matthew's Gospel he is then forced into exile, taken by Mary and Joseph to Egypt to avoid Herod's wrath. Those who first recognise him are also in some sense away from home. The shepherds are out on the hillside, not in the comfort of their own homes. The wise men are foreigners, coming from far away to search for the king.

This sense of homelessness which pervades the story makes the central point of Jesus' birth stand out all the more clearly. Christians believe that in Jesus, this little homeless child, God himself "comes home" to us in a new way. In him we see God's presence and his love, right where we are, in the mess and muddle of a stable, the mess and muddle of the very disturbed political situation into which Jesus is born, in the mess and muddle of ordinary human lives like ours. In the famous words of John 1, the Word becomes flesh and dwells - makes his home - among us.

This booklet will take you through Advent with daily readings and questions to ponder or discuss around the themes of “home”. You can also read these as daily postings on the church blog, where on some days there will also be music to listen to – apologies to those without internet access, but there is no easy way of providing these in any other form.

There are four sections to these reflections, which we will move through as we journey to Christmas.

1. Home, sweet home? Reflecting on our experience of home.
2. Leaving home and coming home.
3. The kingdom of God - a home for all.
4. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Home, sweet home? Reflecting on our experiences of home

1. In the next few weeks, we will be looking at the idea of home from a lot of different angles, but we need to start in the obvious place, by thinking about what home means to us and what our own experience of home has been. For some home has been happy, for others perhaps not so happy, but whatever it was like it will have shaped us in ways that we may not be aware of for good or ill.

I have no idea why the questions below are called Quaker Questions - they have nothing to do with the Quakers as far as I know - but they do get at one of the central features of our idea of home, that it is, or should be, a place of warmth.

The Four Quaker Questions

- What was your home like when you were a child?
- How was it heated?
- Was there a person (or people) who represented warmth to you when you were a child?
- When, if at all, did God become a source of warmth for you?

The song "Home, Sweet Home", became popular at the time of the American Civil War among both armies. It expressed the longing the soldiers had for the homes they had left behind in order to fight.

*Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home
A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there
Which we seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere*

*Home, Home, sweet sweet home!
There's no place like home!
There's no place like home!*

*I gaze on the moon as I tread the dreamy wild,
And feel that my mother now thinks of her child
As she looks on that moon from our own cottage door
Through the woodbine whose fragrance shall cheer me no more.*

Home, sweet home? Reflecting on our experiences of home

2. For some people, their ideal home is one which is shared with other people, but others may be quite happy on their own, and prefer to live alone. Most of us need a balance between the two. In the first reading below, the Psalmist clearly expects to live with other people, and enjoys that, so long as they all get along!

W.B. Yeats dream of a perfect home sounds much more solitary, but just as much longed for.

- What has your experience been of sharing a home or living alone?
- What are the positives and negatives for you?

Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life for evermore.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree *by W.B. Yeats*

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Home, sweet home? Reflecting on our experiences of home

3. Table, by Robert Hull

We were going to sell the table.
It's big where it is,
with those elbowing edges
coming after us
and corners
that force us into corners.

But we decided not to. Instead,
we said,
we'd rub down the surface,
get rid of each burn and dent
and moon of stain
and the stuck inch of newsprint.

But we've not even been able
to start cleaning our old table.

It's had too many babies
changed on it.
too many trumpets
and spoons whanged on it,
too many whales and witches
drawn on it
to do anything with it;

there's been too much homework and grief
dumped on it, too much laughter
heard round it, too many candles
burned down over it,
to do anything else but leave it there,
in the awkward place it's in,

elbowing us with its edges,
reminding us.

- Do you have, or have memories of, a table like this in your home?
- Talk about what it means to you?
- Can you remember special gatherings or significant moments around "your" table.

Home, sweet home? Reflecting on our experiences of home

4. Luke 10.38 - 42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.' The story of Martha and Mary, and their very different responses to the arrival of Jesus and his disciples for dinner, highlights what we feel true hospitality looks like.

Hospitality was very important - a sacred duty - in first century Middle Eastern homes, as it still is in many cultures. In this story Mary and Martha seem to have rather different ideas of what true hospitality looks like, however.

- What do you think of it?
- Did you grow up in a household that was often full of visitors? Were visitors a source of delight or anxiety and work in your household? Do you have many visitors now?

Home, sweet home? Reflecting on our experiences of home

5. Charles Causley's poem, "Timothy Winters" is based on a real child whom he knew. It is easy to idealise home, but for many it is far from the cosy place of safety it should be.

'Timothy Winters'

Timothy Winters comes to school
With eyes as wide as a football-pool,
Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:
A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters.

His belly is white, his neck is dark,
And his hair is an exclamation-mark.
His clothes are enough to scare a crow
And through his britches the blue winds blow.

When teacher talks he won't hear a word
And he shoots down dead the arithmetic-bird,
He licks the pattern off his plate
And he's not even heard of the Welfare State.

Timothy Winters has bloody feet
And he lives in a house on Suez Street,
He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor
And they say there aren't boys like him anymore.

Old Man Winters likes his beer
And his missus ran off with a bombardier,
Grandma sits in the grate with a gin
And Timothy's dosed with an aspirin.

The welfare Worker lies awake
But the law's as tricky as a ten-foot snake,
So Timothy Winters drinks his cup
And slowly goes on growing up.

At Morning Prayers the Master helms
for children less fortunate than ourselves,
And the loudest response in the room is when
Timothy Winters roars "Amen!"

So come one angel, come on ten
Timothy Winters says "Amen
Amen amen amen amen."
Timothy Winters, Lord. Amen

Charles Causley (1917-2003)

- *Does this poem remind you of children you have known, or of your own childhood?*
- *What could we do to make childhood happy for those around us in our families and neighbourhoods?*
- *What do children really need to have a good childhood?*
- *Pray for those who deal professionally with children growing up in abusive or neglectful homes - social workers, health professionals, school staff and children's charities. In the midst of chaotic situations they are often called on to make very difficult judgements, and know that there may be very serious consequences if they get it wrong.*

Home, sweet home? Reflecting on our experiences of home

6. Loaves and Fishes

In each section of this Advent series of thoughts there will be one day when there is no poetry or Bible readings, but a practical suggestion instead. Doing something to help others is just as important as prayer and reflection, and prayer and reflection are empty without action too.

At Seal Church we support the "Loaves and Fishes" foodbank, operated by St John's Church in Sevenoaks, which distributes food to families who are struggling to make ends meet in our area.

It is hard to provide a "home, sweet home" when you are worried about putting food on the table, and the food parcels Loaves and Fishes gives out can make all the difference, taking a bit of pressure off people going through hard times.

We collect non-perishable goods - tins or packets - in a box at the back of Seal church, by the font, which are taken to be sorted and distributed. Why not pick up something extra today which could be given to a family locally? Seal church is normally open during the day, so you can bring it along any time you like.

If you aren't local, why not find out whether there is a foodbank or family support scheme near you that you can give time, money or skills to. Or perhaps you might know a family personally that could do with a bit of support or encouragement – an offer of babysitting or other practical help might be as welcome as material gifts.

Leaving home and coming home

7. C. Day-Lewis, in this poem reflects on the experience of letting his son, Sean, grow up and leave home.

Walking Away

It is eighteen years ago, almost to the day –
A sunny day with leaves just turning,
The touch-lines new-ruled – since I watched you play
Your first game of football, then, like a satellite
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away

Behind a scatter of boys. I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be.

That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature's give-and-take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

- Have you had to let an adult child go, or have you been that child, leaving home for the first time?
- What did it feel like? Were you prepared for it?

Some Biblical scholars see the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit and being expelled from Eden not as a "Fall" - a disaster which could have been prevented - but as a symbol of the inevitable moment when we exercise the human freedom which is God's gift to us. We may get things wrong as we do so, and it can feel as if we have lost the "paradise" of the time when all our decisions were made for us, but perhaps life is richer and better because we have to leave Eden and discover the world for ourselves.

- What do you think?

Leaving home and coming home.

8. Parable of the Hostages, by Louise Glück

The Greeks are sitting on the beach wondering what to do when the war ends. No one wants to go home, back to that bony island; everyone wants a little more of what there is in Troy, more life on the edge, that sense of every day as being packed with surprises. But how to explain this to the ones at home to whom fighting a war is a plausible excuse for absence, whereas exploring one's capacity for diversion is not. Well, this can be faced later; these are men of action, ready to leave insight to the women and children. Thinking things over in the hot sun, pleased by a new strength in their forearms, which seem more golden than they did at home, some begin to miss their families a little, to miss their wives, to want to see if the war has aged them. And a few grow slightly uneasy: what if war is just a male version of dressing up, a game devised to avoid profound spiritual questions? Ah, but it wasn't only the war. The world had begun calling them, an opera beginning with the war's loud chords and ending with the floating aria of the sirens. There on the beach, discussing the various timetables for getting home, no one believed it could take ten years to get back to Ithaca; no one foresaw that decade of insoluble dilemmas—oh unanswerable affliction of the human heart: how to divide the world's beauty into acceptable and unacceptable loves! On the shores of Troy, how could the Greeks know they were hostages already: who once delays the journey is already enthralled; how could they know that of their small number some would be held forever by the dreams of pleasure, some by sleep, some by music?

Louise Glück's poem imagines the Greek soldiers after their triumph in the siege of Troy preparing to go home again (this is the story told by Homer's Odyssey, which describes the ten years of wandering and adventure they encounter). The truth is, she implies, that however grim the war has been, there has also been excitement and camaraderie that they aren't quite sure they are ready to give up...

- Have you ever felt like this?
- Even if home is a happy place, do we always want to be there?

Leaving home and coming home

9. Luke 15.11-32

In this passage (too long to reprint here) Jesus tells what has become a famous story of two sons, one who stays at home, dutiful but resentful, while the other seems to throw away his inheritance on a wild experiment which ultimately comes to nothing.

The sting in the tale for his hearers - dutiful religious experts who behaved like the older son - is that it is the younger son who has really come to understand the depth of his father's love for him.

- Do you most readily identify with the older or the younger son?
- Have you ever felt like the younger son, far from home, full of regret, just longing to go back to the place where you came from?

Kieran Halpin's song "Nothing to show for it all" (sung by Delores Keane on the youtube clip on the blog) isn't directly based on the parable of the Prodigal Son, but it seems to me to capture the essence of it.

*I've been too long away from your lovin'
Too long with my back to the wall
I've been to some faraway places
With nothing to show for it all.*

*I've been to their sights and showcases
I've been through their strong city halls
Men with black suits and no faces
And nothing to show for it all*

*I've been too long away from this country
Too long not heeding your call
Now I'm home like some war weary soldier
With nothing to show for it all*

*I've taken the jibe and the jester
I've laughed at the joke through it all
He said get back to the place where you came from
You've got nothing to give after all*

*Breathe easy there's someone there waiting
Someone who cares after all*

Leaving home and coming home

10. Parents of grown-up-and-gone children often find that they aren't quite as "gone" as they thought. Marilyn L Taylor's poem doesn't tell us how their parents feel when the "children" come back. We are left to guess the tone of voice in which the final line should be read.

- What do you think?
- Have you ever had this experience - either as a parent or a grown-up child?
- What was it like?

Home Again, Home Again

The children are back, the children are back—
They've come to take refuge, exhale and unpack;
The marriage has faltered, the job has gone bad,
Come open the door for them, Mother and Dad.

The city apartment is leaky and cold,
The landlord lascivious, greedy and old—
The mattress is lumpy, the oven's encrusted,
The freezer, the fan, and the toilet have rusted.

The company caved, the boss went broke,
The job and the love affair, all up in smoke.
The anguish of loneliness comes as a shock—
O heart in the doldrums, O heart in hock.

And so they return with their piles of possessions,
Their terrified cats and their mournful expressions,
Reclaiming the bedrooms they had in their teens,
Clean towels, warm comforter, glass figurines.

Downstairs in the kitchen the father and mother
Don't say a word, but they look at each other
As down from the hill comes Jill, comes Jack.

The children are back. The children are back.

Leaving home and coming home

11. John 19. 25-27

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

In John's account of the crucifixion, his mother Mary and one of his closest friends, John, stand at the foot of the cross - we often see them portrayed here in art . Both of them are facing a loss which will have profound emotional and practical impacts on their lives. Seeing this, in a last act of care for them, he entrusts them to each other. For many of the first Christians following the way of Christ meant losing the networks of support they had once had if their families and friends did not agree with their decision. Some also faced the loss of family through persecution. The early Church became a new family for them, as they learned to support each other across the divides of class, background and gender. Often our "family" - those we turn to for support and those we feel responsibility towards - includes, or even consists of, many to whom we are not related by blood or marriage. Like Mary and John we can find all sorts of people are part of what is truly "home" for us.

- Draw your "family" tree, but try to include in it all those who have been significant in your life, whether you were related to them or not - friends, mentors etc.
- Does the "church family" fit anywhere into your family tree?

Leaving home and coming home

12 .**Centrepont** works with young homeless people, giving them not only accommodation but also support and help to help them lead independent lives. Here is the story of one of those they have helped.

Sophie's story

Sophie is the youngest of three children. Growing up, Sophie's childhood was traumatic - her mum had mental health issues and her dad was an alcoholic. Sophie often suffered physical abuse at the hands of her parents. Her earliest memory is of being beaten black and blue by her dad when she was just three years old. Sophie was eventually placed in foster care and began to put her past behind her. Then, tragically, her foster mum died suddenly and Sophie found herself on the streets almost overnight.



Sleeping rough

Sophie was homeless for the next three years - mainly living on the streets, sleeping in doorways and parks. During this time one of her friends overdosed. Another was murdered.

Safe at last

Thankfully Sophie found Centrepont and has now been living in one of our services in south London for the past eight months. Sophie loves her room with its blue door and space for her few belongings and beloved teddy bears. It's somewhere she feels completely safe.

More than just a room

Since being at Centrepont, Sophie has formed great relationships with her support and development worker and her key worker, who has helped her to go back to college to take adult literacy and numeracy classes. In addition to her studies, Sophie is learning basic life skills such as budgeting, how to pay bills and cooking.

*** Sophie's story is true, but her name has been changed to protect her identity at her request.*

**Centrepont, Central House,
25 Camperdown Street, London,
E1 8DZ**

The kingdom of God - a home for all

13. Matthew 22. 1-14

One of the central themes of Jesus' teaching was that the kingdom of God, the place where God reigned, was "at hand". God was already living in and among people, and his kingdom was growing in the midst of the world they lived in, and in their own hearts too. Jesus called people to be part of that growth by loving those around them. In the parable of the Great Banquet, too long to reprint here, he tells of a king who invites his rich and powerful friends to a banquet to celebrate the marriage of his son. Each of those invited makes an excuse and declines. Their refusal is not only rather ungrateful, but it also signals their unwillingness to be part of the new kingdom he is building through the future through his son's marriage. The in the story man who does turn up, but refuses to wear a wedding garment is also saying by his behaviour that he is not really committed to this new Royal family. He may be there in body, but not in spirit. In the story, it is the poor and disabled who take the places of honour. This is a kingdom for them.

In Jesus the kingdom of God becomes a home for all, no matter what their background or life-story. It is important to realise that this story Jesus tells is a story, over the top and exaggerated for effect. It isn't meant to tell us how God feels or would act, but just to help us be aware of the huge privilege of God's invitation to us to get involved in his work - why would we want to decline?

- Have you ever found yourself in grander surroundings than you were used to, feeling over-awed and worrying that you had somehow trespassed into a place that was not for you?

The Kingdom by *RS Thomas*

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

The kingdom of God - a home for all.

14. The prophet Isaiah wrote for the people of Israel when they were in exile in Babylon. Through him God promises that he will restore them to their land, and that there is a good future ahead of them. Isaiah pictures this as a time when all God's creatures will be at home with one another.

Isaiah 11.6-9

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

The Peaceable Kingdom

Edward Hicks (April 4, 1780 – August 23, 1849), a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) from Pennsylvania, painted many variations of this scene. In each there are subtle differences, and some scholars now believe that they represent the state of the Quaker community, which was beset with arguments at the time. The animals look more, or less, peaceable in the different versions!

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Hicks



- What would your perfect world be like?

The kingdom of God - a home for all

15. Psalm 137

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.*

*On the willows there
we hung up our harps.*

*For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*

*How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?*

*If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!*

*Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.*

This Psalm was written when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. They knew that Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians and they did not know whether they would ever be able to go home. The promise of the prophets to them was that God would lead them home eventually.

Isaiah's well known words famously set by Handel in "The Messiah" announces to them that the time has come. His words are echoed in the prophecy of John the Baptist, who announces that Jesus is a new way to God, and that the home God wants to create for all people can be found in him.

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Isaiah 40.1-4

- Do you think that anything can really change in the world, or in yourself?
- What encouragement would you need to believe that things could be different?

The kingdom of God - a home for all

16. 2 Corinthians 5. 17-19

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.

There are times when we all know that we need healing and that our world needs healing. There are times when we are painfully aware of how far we feel from being the kind of people we would like to be. The promise of the Bible is that God can make of us a new creation, making us whole in ourselves and reconciling us to one another. Indeed this is a mark of the way his kingdom is - a place where people can start afresh and be remade.

- What do you think needs to be made new in your life?
- Are there people you need to be reconciled with?

From Wikipedia:

Originally created in 1977 and entitled *Reunion*, this statute standing in the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral depicts a man and woman embracing each other. In May 1998 it was presented to University of Bradford as a memorial to the University's first Vice-Chancellor Professor Ted Edwards. De Vasconcellos said:

"The sculpture was originally conceived in the aftermath of the War. Europe was in shock, people were stunned. I read in a newspaper about a woman who crossed Europe on foot to find her husband, and I was so moved that I made the sculpture. Then I thought that it wasn't only about the reunion of two people but hopefully a reunion of nations which had been fighting."



Later it was taken for repairs to the sculptor's workshop and renamed Reconciliation upon the request of the Peace Studies Department of the University. It was unveiled for the second time, under the new name, on de Vasconcellos 90th birthday, October 26, 1994

In 1995 (to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II) bronze casts of this sculpture (as *Reconciliation*) were placed in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral and in the Hiroshima Peace Park in Japan. An additional cast can be found on the grounds of Stormont Castle in Belfast. To mark the opening of the rebuilt German Reichstag (parliament building) in 1999, another cast was placed as part of the Berlin Wall memorial.

The kingdom of God - a home for all

17. John 14.1-6

Jesus said: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

On the night before he dies, Jesus promises his disciples that he is simply going ahead of them to prepare a place, as a servant might do ahead of the visit of an important person to make sure there was somewhere for them to stay.

He has shown them the way to the home God is giving them by the way he has lived his life. If they love as he has loved, they will find that they are at home and at peace whatever happens to them, and that he will be with them and they with him.

In West Side story two lovers from opposing families imagine a place where they can be together. Such a place would be very different from the place they now inhabit, a world riven with gang-warfare. The story, based on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, ends in tragedy, but the song is a reminder that if the world is to be a home for all, then there are changes we all need to make to enable it to be so.

*There's a place for us,
Somewhere a place for us.
Peace and quiet and open air
Wait for us
Somewhere.*

*There's a time for us,
Some day a time for us,
Time together with time spare,
Time to learn, time to care,
Some day!
Somewhere.*

*We'll find a new way of living,
We'll find a way of forgiving
Somewhere . . .*

*There's a place for us,
A time and place for us.
Hold my hand and we're halfway
there.
Hold my hand and I'll take you
there
Somehow,
Some day,
Somewhere!*

Music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven

18. The Refugee Council

Many people do not have anywhere to call home in this world. They have had to leave their own countries and seek asylum and shelter elsewhere. The Refugee Council works on their behalf. Here is the story of one woman they have helped.



Esther's Story (Esther is from East Africa)

I came to the attention of the Refugee Council in 2003 when I was an unaccompanied minor at the age of fifteen. I was trafficked to the country for domestic servitude and locked in a house for five months. I escaped and I was taken to the police by a stranger. At the time I was new to the country, had no family or friends and spoke very little English.



The Refugee Council allocated a key worker for me that helped me to find a solicitor and introduced me to a youth club run every Tuesday, to help me make friends and feel as part of a community. Some of the friends I met in the youth club have continued to be my friends and even my best friend whom I am a godmother to her son. They also referred me to summer school where I could learn English and mathematics. This helped me to build my confidence and improve my spoken and written language.

The key worker I was given helped me with my asylum application and went with me to the Home Office for my first screening, and appointments that followed in preparation for my statement for my case. I was given leave to remain until the age of eighteen. In 2005 I made an application to the Home Office to extend my leave and they wrote to me informing me that my case had been transferred to Legacy.

In 2009 I was facing destitution after social services demanded I provide them an up to date document showing what my status was, as I had not heard anything from the Home Office. I contacted the Refugee Council for advice and they referred me to a legal firm who helped me write to the Home Office for update. The outcome was successful as the Home Office replied to say they were still processing my case and that they would solve it soon.

My case went to court in 2012 and I had a positive decision after waiting for seven years for a decision from the Home Office. Now that I have status I can start building my life in the UK and begin healing from the traumatic experience I went through in my country and here in the UK. The Refugee Council have been very helpful to me. I don't know what I would have done without the support I received from the Refugee Council for a number of years.

The Refugee Council, PO Box 68614, London, E15 9DQ

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

19. The central and most wonderful claim of Christian faith is that, somehow, in Jesus, God became present and visible in the world. It does not claim that God was not in his world before Jesus, but that he revealed God's presence in a new way which transformed the lives of those who encountered Jesus. They realised that even in a carpenter from Nazareth, even on the cross, God was present.

John 1.1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

- As you go through this day (or look back on this day) be aware of the "holy moments" within it -the moments when there was an opportunity to love and be loved, moments when there were chances of healing and reconciliation.
- Where will you find God (or did you find God) in this day?

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

20. Luke 2.1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

At the heart of the Christmas story is a family for whom there is no room. Their child must lie in an animal's feeding trough. We don't know how much historical truth there is in Luke's account of Jesus' birth - there is certainly no record of a census like that he describes - but the stories of the birth of people who later become great were often intended more to signpost the themes of their later lives than to give an accurate picture. Luke would probably have known people who had met Jesus and could bear witness to the kind of person he was. His account of the birth of Jesus points to the way in which, as an adult gave especial priority to those who were in some way outsiders, treated as superfluous to the world's requirements, people for whom there was also "no place".

- The tenderness evoked in us by this story of a vulnerable baby born in a cold and indifferent world is a reminder of God's love for those who are vulnerable in our world today, including ourselves, and his call to us to love the vulnerable too.



*"Adoration of the Shepherds"
Gerrit van Honthorst - 1622*

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

21. The shepherds in the Christmas story were out on the hillside. They were probably living in temporary shelters, wherever they could find pasture for the sheep, as many shepherds across the world still do today. They were there because the flock needed guarding against the dangers of wild animals and bandits who might steal them. They were, therefore, at risk themselves, and probably sometimes in danger. No doubt they sometimes longed for the comfort of their own beds in their own homes, with their own families, especially in the small hours of a long night.

The last thing they expected was to be the ones to receive the news that the Messiah had been born. The angels come to them, where they are, in the middle of nowhere very important in the world's eyes. Heaven comes home to earth, even on this cold, dark hillside.

Luke 2. 8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

- Have you ever "kept watch" by night - working the night shift, sat with a sick relative or a tiny baby? What is it like to be up at this time?
- Here is a prayer you might like to say as night falls.

**Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who wake,
or watch or weep this night,
give your angels charge over those who sleep.**

Tend the sick, give rest to the weary, sustain the dying, calm the suffering, and pity the distressed; all for your love's sake, O Christ our Redeemer. Amen

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

22. Matthew's account of the birth of Christ has no manger in Bethlehem, and no shepherds, but it points just as much to the way the adult Jesus gave a welcome and a home to all who came to him. The "wise men", probably members of the Zoroastrian faith of Mesopotamia, were drawn to Jesus from afar. They came from a completely different culture and religion, and yet found that there was room, and a welcome, for them in Jesus' presence. Having given their gifts to him, they go home "by another way". They go back into their own culture and faith, but the implication is that they are changed people, with a larger vision of the love of God than they came with.

Matthew 2.1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

- Have there been times when your view of God or of your faith has been challenged? Has faith always felt like "home" or has it sometimes felt like a foreign territory, a land where you have felt like an outsider?

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

23. Matthew 2 13-23

Now after the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

We often skate over the end of Matthew's version of the nativity story. It doesn't fit with our cosy view of Christmas. He wanted, though, to emphasize that right from the start this child was in danger, and that his coming brought trouble and pain in its wake because of the implicit challenge to the corrupt powers that ruled his world. Jesus and his parents become refugees in Egypt, and the fury of Herod is unleashed on many other children in Bethlehem. It is an old story, but a modern one too. Innocent children the world over suffer at the hands of despots who cannot bear to lose the power that is all that makes them feel worthwhile. It is tempting to feel that perhaps it would have been better to leave things as they were - Jesus' birth stirred up a hornets' nest. But ultimately "peace" which is simply collusion and compromise is no peace at all. The "home" for humanity which God builds through Jesus' life and ministry is one which is built on truth. In the end, too, this child does not escape the wrath of another Herod (this king's son) and the might of the Romans who support him when he dies on the cross.

- Have you ever had to take a stand on something, knowing that if you did so it would lead to trouble and suffering for yourself or others?
- Were you tempted not to?

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us

24.

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee.'
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat.

Today we come to the end of our Advent exploration of what it means to be at home, to travel home, to make a home for ourselves and others, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, who is our home and our welcome. As this poem by George Herbert reminds us, the essence of home is love, and where love is, there is God.

George Herbert. 1593–1632

Over the coming days Crisis will be inviting many guests to "sit and eat", giving them at least a little of the sense of being "at home" that so many of us take for granted.



Ben's story

When you're homeless, Christmas can be the toughest time of all for someone like Ben, for him Crisis at Christmas was a lifesaver. The odds were stacked against him from the start. He was shunted from foster home to care home and then went from one insecure job to the next – until, aged just 27, he found himself on the street last winter.

"The cold just sinks into you," he remembers. "I was struggling even to walk. My body was proper giving up on me."

On Christmas Eve, Ben met someone who told him about Crisis at Christmas. Your gift could give someone like Ben the warmest welcome they could hope for, a hearty Christmas dinner, good company and friendly faces, and the chance to take advantage of a whole range of services to help with housing, gaining skills and finding work.

"I wouldn't have had a Christmas if it wasn't for Crisis."

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