

Views from the Pews Advent 4.

He dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. John 1: 14

When I was at a small Church of England primary school in rural Kent, we all had to stand and chant in chorus “Advent means *coming!*”. So as an adult, I was never in any danger of forgetting that the last few weeks before Christmas were all about the various ways in which Jesus comes to us, beginning with his birth at Bethlehem and ending with the expected consummation of all things on the last day. The whole sequence of ideas is summed up in that one word so firmly lodged in my mind.

In his first coming, Jesus became one of us, born as we are, living our human life with all its circumstances and frustrations just as we do, facing death as we all know we must do, and throughout his life revealing in every word and deed the nature and overwhelming love of God for us all. He showed us the kind of people God wants us to be, and how to live the kind of life he wants us to live. He was not born into a comfortable palace or into a royal family as the Magi had expected, but in poverty, in a crowded, noisy and no doubt filthy shelter used by the caravanserai, among the weary animals and excited children running around their parents trying to make their meals on campfires. Perhaps other women stepped up to help Mary when her times came, along with others curious to see the new baby and willing to help by bringing water and towels and warm blankets. Absolutely anyone could be there, friendly or not – you couldn’t keep them out. Any traveller could find a corner there, along with the animals. The stable that night was a microcosm of humanity, with a humble, God-given child in the heart of it.

There will be many such births in the refugee camps of the world this Christmastide, in areas stricken by war and famine, crowded with vulnerable people fleeing persecution and hunger. May we never forget that today, and every other Sunday of this and every season, thousands of children around the world are dying in hovels much like the one where Jesus was born. Our Advent prayer reminds us that Jesus came in poverty and great humility in order to make us rich in the knowledge of God’s universal grace.

George Appleton