Comings and Goings

Retracing the Christmas story through place and time

Gordon Giles

The BRF Advent book

Comings and Goings

Published by
The Bible Reading Fellowship
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Abingdon OX14 3FE
United Kingdom
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Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk
Website: www.brf.org.uk
BRF is a Registered Charity

ISBN 978 0 85746 376 0

First published 2015
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Acknowledgements

No book is ever a single-hearted effort. This book has its roots in the Holy Land itself and I am immensely grateful for the opportunities to visit Israel, Jordan and Egypt with groups over the last decade or so. I have travelled with the curates in the Edmonton Episcopal Area of London and learned from them, and I have travelled with my parishioners of St Mary Magdalene's in Enfield. I am indebted to Alistair McCabe, Andy Webster and Rosemary Nutt of McCabe Travel, and Geoff and Ann Crago who have made so much possible, and to all my fellow pilgrims for their insights, their patience and their enthusiasm. I am particularly grateful to the Revd Stephen Leader, my colleague in Post-Ordination Training, to Canon Philip Spence and to Bishop Peter Wheatley, whose retirement as Bishop of Edmonton fell on the very day I completed the manuscript. This book is a thank-you gift to them.

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Introduction

On the gravestone of the poet T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) is a brief quotation that sums up a great deal of his poetic thinking: 'In my beginning is my end… in my end is my beginning'. So on this Advent journey we begin at the end. I invite you to travel with me backwards in time, starting at the end, as T.S. Eliot might put it, and arriving as we conclude at the very beginning of all things. This shall be but one strand of our journey—one of the two rails on which we ride, a temporal strand, stretching backwards, but looping round to arrive where we began. We shall, to some extent, be time travellers, coming and going on our biblical route, tracing and retracing the path of salvation as we approach the birth of Christ via the events of his resurrection, death and life.

In the life of faith we hold all the events of Christ's life together, knowing them all at once, it seems, and yet we invariably journey only in the linear direction that begins with Old Testament prophecy and leads to his birth, childhood, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. After these events, the Church is created, which carries us to the present day through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. This is the timeline with which we have been brought up in the faith and with which we are probably so familiar. It drives our liturgical year and enables us to travel through the seasons of Christmas, Lent, Easter and Pentecost in 'chronological' order. It is what I, and perhaps you, have done all our lives, and it is good to do. Yet, this Advent and Christmas, I invite you to turn around and travel in the

opposite direction, going against the flow, for then the view will be different.

On the other track, as it were, we shall also visit some real and significant places. As well as travelling in time, I want to travel in space to the locations in which scripture and tradition have placed the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Many of these places can be visited today, and the Holy Lands of Israel, Palestine and Jordan have been pilgrimage destinations for centuries since the first pilgrim, Egeria, travelled to the lands of Christ around AD381–384.

Visiting pilgrimage sites today can be a profound experience or it can summon feelings of resentment or annoyance, as commercialisation, fiction, wishful thinking, exploitation and devotional extravagance are often in evidence. Some sites are clearly genuine, others utterly spurious. Some conjure up a wonderful sense of sacred space without laying much claim to authenticity, while others have their authenticity spoiled by the attitudes and practices on display within them. We shall 'visit' some of these sites, in an attempt to decipher their old stones, and you can make up your own mind. Perhaps you have visited them in person or may yet be inspired to do so. I have been fortunate over the years to join with and lead pilgrimages to Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Turkey and Jordan, with the wise assistance of McCabe Travel, who are one of several companies that understand the modern dynamics of the Middle East well enough to ensure that safe, pleasant and wonderfully uplifting trips can be had at very reasonable cost. On pilgrimages with both parishioners and clergy, I have found that such trips foster fellowship, facilitate great learning and, inevitably, bring everyone face to face with the challenging realities of life and politics in the modern Middle East. If one has visited these places, and met, spoken

to and eaten with the people who are sometimes known as the 'living stones' of the Holy Land, the news bulletins come across very differently.

As mentioned above, this winter journey, through December and into the new year, is a virtual pilgrimage whose itinerary heads backwards in time. Real pilgrimages do that, too: the events of the Gospels have a chronology and they have locations, but it is not always practical to visit sites in the order found in the biblical accounts. A real pilgrimage jumps about all over the place, visiting sites for their geographical proximity, which means that a pilgrim has to juggle their prior knowledge and their new experiences to be sorted and ordered and reflected upon later. Yet, whose life is not a juggling feat? Whose life is so well ordered that everything falls into place just as we would like? Our lives, pilgrimages as they ultimately are, take many turns, and we are constantly revisiting experiences and places from the past and therefore, of course, of the future.

In the end, it is our burden and our joy, guided by God's Holy Spirit, to make sense of our comings and goings and to stay faithful to Christ as we navigate the zigzag path that stretches both forwards to the end and backwards to the beginning.

1 December

The beginning of the end and the 'four last things'

'When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfilment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

LUKE 21:20–28

In Advent we mark the beginning of the church year (most lectionaries commence today), and we do so by focusing on the end of time. Endings and beginnings combine as we enter

Advent, and it can be a little disorientating. While everyone else is looking forward to Christmas (an event in the past), the church is trying to get back to the future, to some point at which we suppose prophecies like these words of Jesus will come true or, in some other sense, be fulfilled. The fact that Jesus' prophecy about Jerusalem did come true in AD70 adds confusion to our comings and goings, up and down and through the Bible. The future that Jesus is referring to here is, in fact, way back in the past.

Jesus was speaking some time around AD30; his words were recorded and were written down by Luke some time around AD80–100. This means, of course, that Jerusalem had already been 'trampled on by Gentiles' when Luke committed these sayings to paper. The first Jewish–Roman war raged between AD66 and 73, having begun with protests about Roman taxation in Judea, which led to the Romans massacring 6000 Jews in Jerusalem. Full-scale rebellion ensued and the Jews initially succeeded against strong opposition. In AD70, however, after a terrible seven-month siege, the walls of Jerusalem were breached by the Romans. Led by Titus (Roman Emperor from 79 to 81), they burned and ransacked the city, including the temple (only recently completed, in AD64), with the exception of three towers and part of the Western Wall, still referred to by some as the Wailing Wall.

The desolation of Jerusalem in AD70 resonates with the passage from Luke's Gospel with which we begin our journey into the past. It looks like prophecy and would have sounded like a premonition to Jesus' hearers. We might say that Jesus could predict the future, and we might say that he was a shrewd judge of what he saw around him: he lived among zealots and Romans, enemies who laid different claims to the

holy city and its surrounding territories. His own crucifixion came as a direct result of one faction (the Jewish religious authorities) playing on the fears of another (the Romans). The seeds of rebellion were already planted in the 30s, and the writing of rebellion was already on the wall. So Jesus' warning about what would happen to Jerusalem made a lot of sense to his hearers, and even more sense to Luke, after it had happened. There can be little doubt that, as the walls came tumbling down and the starving inhabitants were put to the sword, it did feel like the end of the world to those who witnessed it, both in Jerusalem in AD70 and in Masada three years later, when the Jewish revolt was finally crushed. Jesus saw it all coming.

We are not only beginning with the end, but we are also in the most significant place. Jerusalem is the 'holy city', revered by three major religions, all of which share a common ancestry in Abraham, who was effectively the founder of Jerusalem. In the 19th century BC the Egyptians had called it Urusalimum. A semitic (Hebrew) variation on this name, Urusalim, can be traced to the Egyptian city of Tel al Armana in the 14th century BC. The Assyrian King Sennacherib called it Ursalimmu in the seventh century BC and, although he tried to invade and capture it, he never succeeded (see 2 Kings 19:15–34). These original names were made up of the words *uru*, meaning 'city', and *Salim*, a name for a god. Thus, Jerusalem has always been known as a city of a god, but not the God of the Hebrews, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jesus Christ: Salim was an Amorite god, whose name lives on in the Jerusalem of today.

Abraham (Abram) is the person with whom Jerusalem is first associated in Genesis, when Melchizedek, the archetypal first high priest of the one and only God, greets him there,

offering him bread and wine in a gesture of friendship and fellowship (Genesis 14:17–20). Abraham's nephew, Lot, has been captured in a battle near the Dead Sea, so his uncle attacks King Chedorlaomer's invaders to restore order. Melchizedek thanks him, recognising that he is also a worshipper of the singular creator God. Abraham responds with a tithe (a tenth of everything, v. 19), cementing his key role as the father of monotheistic faith. The story is quoted in Hebrews 7:1–10, which relates Jesus to a priestly succession that goes right back to Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek on a spot that is pivotal in world history.

In Jewish tradition, Jerusalem is the place where the world was created and where Adam was made from the soil of the earth. The golden Dome of the Rock, which sits atop the Temple Mount in Jerusalem to this day, is revered as the very spot where the Holy of Holies was situated, the room in the temple where the ark of the covenant was kept. Both Muslims and Jews believe that this is also the site, then called Mount Moriah, where Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac (in Islamic tradition the story relates to Isaac's half-brother, Ishmael). For Christians, Jerusalem is the place where Jesus taught, and it is the holy city of his crucifixion and resurrection.

So it is right that we begin our journey at the end times, in Jerusalem, for in Jerusalem all things begin and end, are destroyed and renewed.

In vain the surge's angry shock,
in vain the drifting sands;
unharmed upon the eternal Rock
the eternal City stands.

SAMUEL JOHNSON (1822–82)

2 December

Death comes to us all

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'

1 CORINTHIANS 15:50–55

There is a tradition in Advent of reflection on the 'four last things'—death, judgement, hell and heaven. Many people have mixed feelings about these, two of which are ostensibly places and two of which are moments in time. Yet even mention of them causes us to reflect upon what 'time' and 'place' really are.

Nothing focuses the mind more than death, which, it seems both logical and traditional to suppose, precedes judgement, hell and heaven, whatever they might be. And whatever one thinks or believes about these last three, there

is no one who doesn't believe in death. Around 150,000 people die every day worldwide, yet death is life's great mystery. We do not fully understand what happens, how it happens or why it happens. 'In the midst of life we are in death'; we cannot avoid it, neither on our TV screens nor in our own families. Death comes to us all, and we are changed by it. It is often said that to live is to change, but it is also true, as Paul tells us, that to die is to be changed (v. 52). This change is something that happens to us, not something we do ourselves.

If birth is the coming of life, then death is its going. In that we ask questions about when life begins, we take for granted that each of our lives has a beginning. We assume that there was some point in time before which we did not exist in any form. Many people now take the view that we return to that state of non-existence when we die. Our lives seem to occupy the temporal space between two moments—the moment of coming into being and the moment of going into not-being. How we fill that time is our choice and our chance, and how long it will last is an unknown quantity. As the psalmist wrote, 'Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight' (Psalm 39:4–5). Nowadays some people do know how much longer they have to live: terminal illness diagnosis and palliative care predictions are sometimes accurate, and the ability to prepare for the immediacy of one's passing—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually—is a gift, or curse, of science.

No scientist or linguist can tell us, though, what it is that we are 'passing' to. This word we use to gloss over death reflects our unease with—or denial of—the final reality of

someone's disappearance from the presence of those with whom they have occupied physical space and emotional time. Death is an ending, for sure, for those left behind, at the very least. In death our earthly lives are over, and no euphemism will conceal that reality.

On the other hand, death does not make sense, philosophically. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) realised that there is a problem with talking about the past as 'that which has happened' and the future as 'that which will happen'. It leaves no space for the present, or, rather, it begs a question about exactly how long 'now' lasts. More recently, the Czech immunologist and poet Miroslav Holub (1923–98) suggested that the present moment lasts about three seconds before it becomes an event in the past. Everything that happens happens in the now; it does not and cannot actually happen in the past or the future. Every event that ever was or will be happens in a 'now' at the time. Time seems to flow, therefore, from one 'now' to the next, approaching future 'nows' and consigning the present to the past as it flows.

This process may get us through life in a vaguely satisfactory manner, but we know that time can be divided into segments far briefer than three seconds. Furthermore, how long does it take to die? We cannot answer that question unless we can define 'life', and that, the medics will tell you, is not so easy. What they do tell us is that death should be thought of more as a process than as an event. Nevertheless, they will also tell us that clinical death occurs when the heart stops pumping blood and breathing ceases. Consciousness is lost within several seconds, while measurable brain activity continues for only 20–40 seconds. The tissues begin to be starved of oxygen and, within a few minutes, can be irreversibly damaged by a process known as ischemia.

None of these symptoms of death is momentary, and, when observing them, it is far easier to say, for example, that brain activity has ceased (and therefore death has occurred) than that brain activity is in the process of ceasing (so someone is not yet dead but soon will be).

Mind-boggling as this is, we are still wedded spiritually and culturally to the idea that there is a moment of death. We cannot say for certain what it is to die, so whatever happens 'next' is even more problematic. However, those who say that death is the end have even less to inform their view than the resurrection hope in which Christians believe. In life and in death we are for ever changing; we are born, we grow, we flourish, but then we also ail, weaken and die. Such is the nature of things. Yet it is God who, as Creator, gives us life and gives us hope in eternal life as death disconnects us from this earthly realm. It is God who gives us Jesus Christ, in whose victory death itself is swallowed up, reconnecting us to both the earthly and the eternal.

When we die we are changed, and we should not despair. We are in the hands of God, and we should remember that death has been swallowed up in the victory of Christ. We do not know what eternity and resurrection are like, but we do know that they are not nothing. Our Christian hope is that death is not the end, and there is something to live and die and hope for.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

HENRY FRANCIS LYTE (1793–1847)

3 December

Christ comes in judgement

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give

> me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."…
> "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'
> MATTHEW 25:31–43, 45–46

When we have died (whatever that actually involves), what happens next? Are we 'going' to heaven or hell? Before we can consider what those two 'places' or destinations on our journey might be, we must turn our attention to the second of the 'four last things'—judgement. This parable of the sheep and the goats is a wonderfully simple but powerful summary of what Christians have believed for centuries about what happens when we die. Some things in the parable are clear: there are two destinations or states to end up in, eternal life or eternal punishment. Both entail some kind of continuation, which may be anticipated with something between complacency and terror. It is clear that the scenario Jesus paints is familiar to his original hearers. The parable is not about what heaven or hell is *like*: they know that already. Jesus' point is to indicate on what grounds the determination of destination is achieved.

It is important to understand that, in first-century Palestine, sheep and goats were regarded as essentially the same animal; they were not distinguished from each other, as they are in our culture. Just as wheat and tares (a kind of weed) would be allowed to grow together (Matthew 13:24–30), to be separated at harvest time, sheep and goats would graze together. Ultimately God makes distinctions that we do not; when those distinctions are made, and because we cannot tell the difference between sheep and goats, there will be an element of surprise.

Even more important in this parable is the rationale behind the day of judgement. Notwithstanding what Paul and James wrote to their friends and followers in Greece and Rome about salvation through faith rather than works, here it is very clear: where you go when you die depends on how you have lived, and the 'good guys' are those who have shown compassion and care for the weak and vulnerable. The message is simple: if you cared for them, you will be saved; if you did not, woe betide you.

Consequently, in the medieval Western Church, the emphasis at funerals moved away from the hope of eternal life to an emphasis on judgement, with hell and purgatory very much in evidence. Funerals became public events at which the church attempted to discipline the people, and artists depicted the torments of the damned and the rewards of the faithful. In 1533, Pope Clement VII asked Michelangelo to paint *The Last Judgement* on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel, commissioning one of the most vivid depictions of Jesus' parable. Similarly, 'mystery plays' portrayed the souls of the damned being dragged into hell, and Dante emphasised the idea in his *Inferno*. Musically, Requiem masses, especially those by Berlioz and Verdi, rendered this terrifying moment in a blaze of multiphonic awe. In poetry we only have to turn to 'The Dream of Gerontius' by Cardinal Newman (set so marvellously to music by Sir Edward Elgar) to enter into the experience of judgement as filtered by the medieval church. Newman's text describes how the old man Gerontius makes confession and passes from life to death, going via purgatory to heaven.

Protestants do not believe in purgatory. The 22nd of the 39 Articles of Religion describe it as 'a fond thing vainly invented' and, indeed, many Roman Catholics have

abandoned it too. Karl Rahner, probably the greatest Catholic theologian of the 20th century, was not very interested in the particular salvation of a particular soul, where it happened and when and how; rather, he focused on the idea that after death the soul is united with the cosmos, through which, while awaiting the final day of resurrection, the soul becomes aware of the effects of sin on the world. This, Rahner reckoned, would be purgatory enough—not so much punishment as awareness. More significant still is the opinion of Pope Benedict XVI (Josef Ratzinger). He did not like the classical, pay-and-display-your-sins idea of a middle stage between death and salvation. Rather, he believed that Jesus himself is the refining fire who transforms us in the power of resurrection. Significantly, this is a doctrine of death and judgement that relates to Jesus Christ rather than to human prayer and intervention, indulgences and all the medieval paraphernalia of devotion that sought to scare people out of hell by 'scaring the hell' out of them.

Even more important, in this movement away from medieval understandings about judgement, is our renewed ability to return to resurrection hope. Jesus told the parable of the sheep and goats in order to show that God makes distinctions that we do not, and to promote compassion and love for neighbours. Not long after this parable, we read that he went on to suffer and die, before rising again. Christianity bases its fundamental hope on resurrection, not on the immortality of the soul. Christ leads us in that way by his own victory over death. Whatever 'judgement' is or however it happens, our calling as Christians is to love our neighbours and trust in God's merciful redemption, which leads to resurrection life.

When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?...
I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?...
I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?...
When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?...

SIDNEY CARTER (1915–2004)

4 December

Going to hell

'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."'

LUKE 16:19–26

It is possible to go to Hell. Known in Jesus' day as Gehenna, it is a valley on the south side of Jerusalem, where children were once sacrificed to the god Molech (2 Kings 23:10). It became a rubbish tip and was perpetually on fire, thereby presenting an image to which people could relate. Consequently the

valley was considered accursed, and 'Gehenna' became a synonym for hell. It can be seen today from the vantage point of Caiaphas' House (also known as St Peter in Galicantu), which marks the place where Peter denied knowing Jesus three times (Mark 14:66–72).

If Gehenna was a real place where grotesque violence was known to have happened, we can add to the mix the Jewish concept of Sheol, the place of the dead. According to Job 11:8, this was a very deep place, as far away from heaven as it could be. It seems to have had various compartments or regions, and there was a sense of life continuing there in some way. Jacob expected to mourn there (Genesis 37:35); David gave instructions not to let his army commander, Joab, go there in peace (1 Kings 2:6); soldiers took their weapons to Sheol with them (Ezekiel 32:27), yet the dead existed there without knowledge or feeling, in silence and oblivion. Significantly, it was not believed to be completely separated from God; indeed, God could reach into it (Amos 9:2).

As well as Gehenna and Sheol, we need to introduce the mythological idea of Hades into our dark and deadly equation. The Greek god Hades, son of Cronus and Rhea, received the underworld for his realm when his brother gods, Zeus and Poseidon, received dominion of the sky and sea respectively. This underworld realm soon became known simply as Hades. It was not considered a place of torment; rather, it was a sad dreamworld, without daylight or hope, where the dead would fade away. Hades was surrounded by five rivers: the Acheron (river of woe), the Cocytus (river of lamentation), the Phlegethon (river of fire), the Styx (river of unbreakable oaths), and the Lethe (river of forgetfulness). Thus, ancient Greek thought (in which the apostle Paul would have been well schooled) had developed

an understanding of a gloomy underworld populated by mournful souls consigned to oblivion.

As we arrive at the medieval idea of hell, it is clear that elements of Sheol, Hades and Gehenna have combined to influence our culture and our interpretation of what it might mean to be judged and 'go to hell'. The medieval picture, which so many people today find difficult to engage with, was planted in Western culture by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (c.1265–1321), whose *Divine Comedy* is undoubtedly one of the greatest and most influential poems ever written. Divided into three parts, '*Inferno*', '*Purgatorio*' and '*Paradiso*', it lays out an allegorical journey from death to redemption, cementing in popular imagination the idea that if a person recognised their sin, they could pass through a purging place (purgatory) and be made fit for heaven subsequently.

The schema depends on concepts of both time and place that are far from earthly. 'Inferno' (literally 'fire'), or Hell, is divided into nine layers or circles, each reserved for the perpetrators of certain kinds of sins—Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Anger, Heresy, Violence, Fraud and Treachery. Limbo, famously and controversially, contained the unbaptised and virtuous pagans, who, though not sinful, had not accepted Christ. They were not tormented as such; the torments of Hell escalated through the other circles. Dante's vision was extensive and rich, and he populated his Hell with real and imagined characters. At the epicentre of Hell was a giant, terrifying beast with three faces, one red, one black and one a pale yellow—none other than Satan himself, condemned for his personal treachery against God, the ultimate sin.

Another brief reference to hell is to be found in 2 Peter 2:4: 'For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of

deepest darkness to be kept until the judgement…'. Here the Greek word for hell is *tartaros* (which found its way into the Latin Requiem texts set to music by many composers).

When we think about hell, then, we are considering a conglomeration of traditions. Only some of these traditions originate in the Bible, and some of them are works of fiction. Nevertheless, in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, this stereotypical 'up or down', 'burn or bask' presentation of the afterlife is clear to behold. The name Lazarus is a variant of Eleazar, which means 'God has helped'. This Lazarus is not to be confused with Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus raised from the dead in John 11. This Lazarus was a friend of Jesus, and the other didn't really exist: he is merely a character in a parable.

In comparing the two Lazaruses in the New Testament, we encounter a difficult puzzle. The Lazarus in the parable is enjoying what might be considered to be the eternal life of his soul. He has died and gone to heaven. His nemesis, the rich man, has died and gone to the other place. This situation is clear-cut, black and white, but it flies in the face of what happened to the other Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. We are not told that Lazarus of Bethany died and went to heaven; rather, he was raised from the dead—a physical resurrection. In that story, and in his own death and resurrection, Jesus shows us a foretaste not of heaven but of resurrection life.

Can we reconcile the two? Do we have the eternal life of the soul, whereby the body rots and the soul lives on in paradise or hell, or do we look to resurrection—the raising of our bodies on the last day, to be united with Christ and to dwell with saints and angels? In the communion of saints, of which we are *already* a part, we experience resurrection life

rather than the simple 'eternal life' of a disembodied soul.

Tomorrow we shall ascend to heaven to see if we can find out.

Brief life is here our portion, brief sorrow, short lived care;
The life that knows no ending, the tearless life, is there.
O happy retribution! Short toil, eternal rest;
For mortals and for sinners, a mansion with the blest.

BERNARD OF MORLAIX, 1146

Life involves many 'comings and goings' as we make our way along the path of faith day by day, guided by God's Holy Spirit. This book of readings for Advent and Christmas invites us to make a journey through time, from the end to the very beginning of all things. The daily reflections work backwards from the traditional Advent focus of the 'Four Last Things'—death, judgement, heaven and hell—via Jesus' life, death and resurrection, to come at last to the incarnation and the events commemorated at Christmas itself. In the following days, the focus turns to Christ as the Word of God, present at the dawn of creation. Along the way, we 'visit' some of the actual Holy Land sites associated with Gospel events, drawing new insights from the familiar stories.

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978-0-85746-376-0
UK £7.99
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Cover image: Pearl/Lightstock
Design: Heather Knight