

A decorative pattern of stylized leaves in various shades of teal, yellow, and grey, with some leaves having internal vein patterns. The leaves are scattered across the top half of the cover.

Gordon Giles

AT HOME

A white rectangular box with a dashed blue border, containing the subtitle text.

and Out & About

A photograph of a golf course with a paved path leading through a row of young trees with bright green leaves. The path curves to the right, and the trees line the edge of a green. The sky is bright and clear.

*52 biblical contemplations
on faith, hope and love
for a re-emerging world*

**Includes group
discussion questions**

Praise for *At Home in Lent*

‘In *At Home in Lent* Gordon Giles has elevated the everyday to the realm of spiritual reflection and meditation in a way which is both simple and profound. Gordon’s reflections are helpfully reminiscent of expressions of Celtic spirituality, where we find prayers for the cooking pot and for lighting a fire. A most accessible guide and accompaniment with which to navigate Lent, with just the right amount of challenge and affirmation, particularly for those leading busy lives. As Gordon has bravely used the toilet as an area for reflection, it is safe to say that this book might well be used in the smallest room as well as on the train or in a prayer space.’

Revd Prebendary Dr Neil Evans, canon steward of St Paul’s Cathedral

Praise for *At Home in Advent*

‘This book invites us to take Advent and the Christmas season seriously. By using a number of meditations based on commonplace articles like traffic lights, burglar alarms and even Christmas jumpers, Gordon Giles unlocks the meanings of the story that shapes the time of year. The book has a definite context, having been written during the tight lockdown of early 2020, which makes it even more relevant. We have all become far more acquainted with our own houses, and a book that seeks to see the spiritual significance of this is therefore most valuable. The author tackles issues of expectation, waiting, mortality and hope as well as celebrating the joy of the incarnation and the salvation that Jesus brought. This is a first-class read and a valuable aid for the Advent and Christmas seasons.’

Cavan Wood, *Transforming Ministry*



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AT HOME

and Out & About

*52 biblical contemplations
on faith, hope and love
for a re-emerging world*

Gordon Giles



This book is, to some extent, a farewell and thank-you gift to the people of St Mary Magdalene's, Enfield, whom I had to leave without ceremony during lockdown in 2020 after 17 years as their vicar. To them my family and I owe a huge debt of gratitude for faith, hope and love.

I would also like to thank friends and colleagues Stephen, Olivia, Dan, Jonathan, Phil, Matthew, Chris, Sue, Belinda and all at Rochester Cathedral and elsewhere who, whether they realised it or not, have contributed to the creation of this book. And to Jessica and Maria, as always.



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Introduction

In 2020 and 2021 we were at home in Advent and at home in Lent. These were difficult, fearful, even tearful times, on which we look back with sorrow and upon which we continue to reflect. We shall never forget a year or more of lockdowns and the impact they had on our living and loving, our freedoms, wishes and relationships. And for so many the sense of closure when a loved one died has been hard, if not impossible, to achieve.

Yet amid the clouds of poison vapour that the coronavirus spread over the globe, there were also signs of hope, acts of human kindness and sparks of divine light flickering in the penitential and solemn glooms of the seasons of Advent and Lent. Christmas 2020 struggled to be a season of light, and the baubles were very hollow indeed as Christmas dinners and parties were cancelled or prohibited, and families denied what, for many, 'Christmas is all about': family, fellowship, eating, drinking and making merry. It was a deprivation for all, necessitated by a deadly and real fear of something beyond our control and to which, through government intervention, we had no choice but to submit. The coronavirus had real power over us, and to some extent, still does. The same cloud hung over Christmas 2021. It was not until Easter 2022 that many felt any sense of normality resuming.

The virus controlled us in two ways. It restricted our freedom to do as we pleased and to meet whomsoever we wanted and roam wherever we wanted. It exercised a physical and practical dominion, the extent and range of which hardly needs describing. Covid-19 exercised a spiritual dominion too. For it closed our churches, deprived us of singing hymns and carols and forced us to wear masks when we were finally allowed back in. More significantly, it changed the spiritual landscape of faith, and *made* us think, act and pray differently. Initially this was thought of by many as a destructive power, while others embraced

the new opportunities for praise, worship and service, and it became a creative power. Good may yet come from this, if it has not already.

Even though this book was written during the major period of coronavirus restrictions and emergence, it is not my purpose to retell the story or rehearse the drama of the coronavirus in the UK and elsewhere. It is a story we all know well, and we have our own parts in it, some labouring tirelessly backstage, others in the limelight. Many of us were simply in the audience, powerless but emotionally engaged in the tragedy unfolding before and around us. We have been at home in Lent and Advent, and perhaps you even read the two books I wrote whose titles and content serendipitously summed up our state of being in 2020 and 2021 – *At Home in Lent* and *At Home in Advent*. But now it is time to go out and about with God, to reclaim and renew our spiritual engagement with God's world in which we dwell and move and have our being. God has not changed. The world has not changed. Jesus Christ has not changed. But we have. This is not a problem, but an opportunity.

So I invite you to leave Lent and Advent at home on the shelf, and come and explore the world in the wake of Covid-19 – to reflect on what has changed and to re-engage with what has not. The Covid pandemic has to some extent given way to other phenomena to engage with and reflect upon: the attack on Ukraine, energy and cost-of-living crises, environmental concerns and the death of Queen Elizabeth II. These events bring challenges and traumas, emotional upheaval and real cause for worry. There is always something to worry about, something to pray about, something to reflect on. Yet we must not lose sight of Covid-19, for it affected us in ways that nothing we can remember ever has.

This is not a Lent book nor an Advent book, although it may be read in any season. It can be read from Eastertide to Eastertide weekly, and is laid out with that in mind, but its 52 chapters can be read week by week at any point of the year, or on consecutive days, or even randomly. As with *At Home in Lent* and its successor *At Home in Advent*,

the theme of each chapter is an object, activity or phenomenon about which we might learn and on which we might reflect under God. As we re-emerge into a world that is both scarred and healed of the coronavirus to varying degrees, we encounter the familiar in new ways and the unfamiliar in old ways. We are changed and it is time to embrace that, for we cannot resist or deny it.

Voltaire's atheistic hero Candide concluded that we live in 'the best of all possible worlds'. The apostle Paul wrote that 'we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28). And Jesus, in our joys and sorrows, calls us over the tumults of the world to follow him, love him and to find faith, hope and love in all things. For God has a good purpose in all the hard things that happen to his people and, in Christ the good shepherd, provides a gateway to eternal, abundant life (John 10:10).

So let us walk on, to roam from home and go out and about in God's world of hope and promise.

Easter

1 Social distancing

Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her...

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

JOHN 20:11-18, 26-28



We are Easter people, and ‘Alleluia’ is our song. Yet in Easter 2020 churches were closed and clergy told to stay away to slow down the Covid-19 infection rate. For the first time in living memory, we were told that how we behaved had a real impact on the life and death of others.

We have to look a long way back into history for parallels. In 1208, King John refused to accept Pope Innocent’s archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton. So the pope put England under an ‘interdict’ which endured between March 1208 and July 1214, and clergy could not celebrate the sacraments. In 1348 the Black Death killed half the population of England. The Great Plague of 1665–66 killed an estimated 100,000 people, almost a quarter of London’s population, in 18 months. The next bubonic plague pandemic, known as the ‘Third Pandemic’, lasted from 1855 to as recently as 1960, emerging at various places in the world throughout that period.

There are various aspects of modern lockdowns which can be traced back to pandemics of long ago. A novel one this time, however, was ‘social distancing’. Whether it was two metres, or ‘one metre plus’ (involving mask wearing), we were told to stay away from other people. Pews were cordoned off and chairs were repositioned in churches (the vergers at Rochester Cathedral had a special two-metre stick they used) and signs appeared in supermarkets and streets alike, exhorting us to ‘Keep your distance’. We still see some of those signs, or footprints on the ground, which will remind us for years to come.

Jesus’ words to Mary Magdalene when she encountered him at the garden tomb resonate with the newfound phenomenon of social distancing. ‘Do not hold on to me,’ he says, or, as the Latin Vulgate puts it, ‘*Noli me tangere*’ – ‘Do not touch me.’ These are harrowing words for Mary to hear, whose natural reaction is to want to embrace her Lord amid the delightful confusion of realising he is alive.

Artists who have depicted this famous scene – Fra Angelico, Titian and Holbein among them – have presented an emotional snapshot

of this beautiful, terrifying, alienating moment. Mary reaches out to Jesus, who leans away in a gesture of what we might paradoxically think of as loving rejection. For in these images there is separation, a breaking loose of the human in God, as Jesus reveals that he will ascend and, in bodily form, be gone. She cannot touch him and nor can we. So close, yet so far. The joy of the encounter is shot through with the wrenching pain of separation.

Those who visited elderly relatives in care homes or friends, those whom we embrace or even greet with a warm handshake, know something of this agony as we were told, not by God but the state, 'Do not touch.' It is better for everyone if you do not, we were told; it will only cause further pain; it is dangerous; you will do more harm than good; it is selfish, and satisfies your needs but does not serve others; do not administer the kiss of death inadvertently. Some people are more 'touchy-feely' than others, for sure, so social distancing caused varying degrees of angst. Yet for many the lack of touch from others, particularly for those who live alone, was agonising and adherence to social distancing rules became sacrificial. Meanwhile others did not conform, sometimes with dire consequences. Every death from Covid-19 was a tragedy of its own, but none more so than those which resulted from deliberate ignorance, rejection or resistance to medical advice to not come into close contact with or touch those whom we love. It was not only about not becoming infected, but also about not infecting others.

Social distancing, while being a form of mini-quarantine, based on the scientific study of the distribution of aerosol particles in breath, was nevertheless one of the toughest dimensions of Covid-19 precautions. When in summer 2021, the prime minister said it was okay to hug someone again, the relief was palpable. The return to shaking hands and hugging seemed strange after not doing so. Yet at least it meant that the long Lent of social distancing was over and the ability to renew human touch was resurrected.

When Jesus first appeared to the disciples in the upper room, he showed them the marks of passion which proved his resurrection. But like Mary in the garden, they did not touch him. Thomas was absent and did not believe. So when Jesus returned, he invited Thomas to touch him. The time was right. It is important to be able to touch and hold others; their bodily presence is as important as emotional and spiritual presence. In the faith, hope and love the risen Christ gives us, we have all three: spiritual faith, emotional hope and loving touch. These three abide, and they abide, as the risen Christ himself does, in us, with us and through us.

The ability to touch others was denied and then restored. This was a kind of death and resurrection of its own, and Mary felt it keenly in the garden. Yet the resurrection is truly good news for all of us, at home or out and about, inside or out, now and always. For the risen Christ is with us always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). Thus we *are* Easter people, and 'Alleluia' *is* our song.



Give us your Easter joy, O Jesus, and even if distanced from others, draw us close to you, that we may embrace a world blossoming with resurrection hope, faith and love. Amen

Spring

2 Flowers

My beloved speaks and says to me:

‘Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away;

for now the winter is past,

the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth;

the time of singing has come,

and the voice of the turtle-dove

is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs,

and the vines are in blossom;

they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away...

Catch us the foxes,

the little foxes,

that ruin the vineyards –

for our vineyards are in blossom.’

My beloved is mine and I am his;

he pastures his flock among the lilies.

SONG OF SONGS 2:10–13, 15–16





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Across a year's worth of weekly reflections, Gordon Giles focuses on everyday objects, scenes, activities and places, drawing out spiritual insights to help us reflect on what we have learned as we venture out again after months of restriction, absence and anxiety.

From Easter, through the changing seasons to the following Easter we are led to consider: what is it like spiritually to stop wearing masks? What does a beach say to us after coronavirus? How has Zoom affected us during lockdown and how do we now relate to technology as a medium of fellowship? Where is Christ amid our restrictions and our releases?

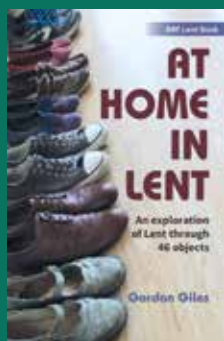
'Gordon Giles helps us to look at the Bible in a way that is engaging, encouraging and blessedly reassuring.'

Pam Rhodes, broadcaster and author



Gordon Giles is Canon Chancellor of Rochester Cathedral. He is the author of several books and the editor of BRF's *New Daylight* Bible reading notes.

Also by Gordon Giles:



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