

BRF ADVENT BOOK

DONKEY ROADS AND CAMEL TREKS

A pilgrim's guide
for Advent

GEMMA
SIMMONDS



*A wonderful, witty and deeply pastoral
journey through Advent.*

Isabelle Hamley

'Donkey Roads and Camel Treks is a wonderful, witty and deeply pastoral journey through Advent. Gemma draws us into the heart of the story with gentleness and challenge in equal measure, closer to the God who holds us with tenderness and leads us into transformation.'

**The Revd Preb Dr Isabelle Hamley, principal of Ridley Hall,
Cambridge and author of *Embracing Humanity***

'Advent is a time of great anticipation, and as Gemma says in her charming, inspiring and frequently profound new book, one of her favourite times of year. But what happens when all our plans for a spiritual Advent, filled with deep prayer and peaceful meditation, run into the reality of our often complicated and complex lives? In these beautifully written and artfully presented meditations, Gemma reminds us that the first Christmas also took place in a complicated and complex world, and that God is ready to accompany us in our messy lives, whether we're in a car, at our desk, in our living room or, yes, atop a camel.'

James Martin, SJ, author of *Learning to Pray*

'An attractive and inspiring travel invitation. I immediately wanted to get a special journal to walk with the reflections through Advent. The questions at the end of each section are real gems – places to pause to consider the invitations hidden in the reflections. Indeed, the journey might even be richer if shared with a group of friends.'

**Bernadette Flanagan, spiritual director and co-founder
of The Spirituality Institute for Research and Education**

'Whether you want to find fresh ways to connect with God, with each other, with nature or with your own deepest desires, this book will inspire you. I do not know a wiser spiritual guide to ordinary Christian living than Gemma Simmonds. Here, from her life of immersion in prayer, wisdom-seeking, formation of individuals and communities, and practical service in some extremely demanding situations, she offers a deeply attractive distillation, focused through key biblical texts. This is far more than an imaginative, thoughtful and practical way to approach Christmas; it gives the essentials for a lifetime following Jesus.'

**David F. Ford OBE, Regius professor of divinity emeritus,
Selwyn College, University of Cambridge**



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A pilgrim's guide
for Advent

**Gemma
Simmonds**



Ministries

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To my wonderful brother-in-law, Anthony Gibbons, a resolute and understatedly faithful Anglican amid a gaggle of off-the-wall Catholic in-laws, who died just before Advent 2023. He would have been the best companion to come along with me on a donkey road or a camel trek. Travel disasters would have been calmly overcome, inns booked far in advance, animals cared for meticulously and food and drink relished, whatever their provenance. His Advent is over, the dawn has come and his God is truly with him now.

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Acknowledgements

I always approach writing, especially spiritual writing, with a mixture of excitement, reluctance and terror.

The excitement is because writing is a way of working out what I actually think, deep down, when I take sufficient time to look, and of understanding what God is up to in the world and within those who share their faith, doubt and searching questions with me.

The reluctance is partly because it awakens a level of imposter syndrome in me – why would anyone want to spend time and hard-earned money reading what I have got to say – and what have I got to say on this particular subject that is remotely new or interesting?

Writing inspires terror because, unlike Douglas Adams, I don't love the whooshing noise that deadlines make as they go by.

But if I can summon up the courage to get going, then I couldn't be in better hands than those of BRF Ministries, who take encouragement to a whole new level. So, thank you to Olivia Warburton, Felicity Howlett and Rachel Tranter, who, in their different capacities, have been immeasurably patient and kind, as well as superbly professional. You and BRF Ministries have done me great honour by inviting me to write these reflections.

And thank you to my colleagues past and present on the BBC Daily Service, especially Philip Billson and Claire Jaquiss, whose comments and consummate skill as communicators over the years have taught me so much about trying to speak of spiritual matters in accessible terms.

Finally, thank you to Sister Mary Richard Prendergast and the late Sister Francis North of the Congregation of Jesus, two consummate

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teachers who, at primary and secondary school level, taught me to love the written, read and spoken word in English and Latin and guided me through innumerable nativity plays, Christmas carols and Advent reflections to my huge enjoyment.

Introduction

I tend to approach Advent with mixed feelings. It is my favourite liturgical season, and I usually begin to feel a delightful sense of anticipation somewhere in mid-October. But as my time is ruled by the academic term, I also approach it with a certain dread. The beginning of December and the weeks that follow are among the busiest of the year, and I know before I have started that I am likely to miss out on the riches of the readings, antiphons, carols and prayers because I have so little time to stop and relish them. There's always something of a sense of opportunity missed, of time ill spent and of invitation not fully enjoyed and celebrated.

My sense of anticipation before Christmas is also countered by the knowledge that Advent and Christmas are not universally part of everyone's feel-good factor. Many find that Christmas increases any sense of loss or isolation they may already be feeling. Domestic violence always goes up over the Christmas period as families have more time together. Where alcohol, pent-up tensions and simmering anger are in close proximity, this can turn into a powder keg of violence that can explode at any time. Consumer pressure also pushes debt up within families when it's believed that love is proved by spending, so that parents feel obliged to spend money they don't have on presents their children don't need. This consumer pressure fills me with feelings of outrage when I begin to see mince pies, Christmas puddings and Advent calendars on supermarket shelves in September.

For me, at best, times and seasons are welcome opportunities for marking the wonderful variety and rhythms of the year. When they are hijacked, by-passed or ridden roughshod over by the demands of consumer consciousness gone mad, it fills me with disgust. I post enraged photographs of these ill-timed items on WhatsApp and Facebook and make Grumpy Old Woman comments to my patient friends,

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while ranting about the pointlessness of so-called Advent calendars, which, instead of being a means of increasing anticipation of Christmas through delayed gratification, are simply another excuse to turn the season into a bloated consumer fest.

I have a sense of God rolling divine eyes at me every year. ‘Not on about that again, are you? Do you still not understand that I’m willing to take anything I can get on the part of humanity, even if it’s the barest remnants of Christian folk memory?’ The fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich claimed remarkably that God is grateful when we remember him. This seems a shocking thing to assert. It sounds as if God is somehow content to take the crumbs off our table. Surely that can’t be true?

Yet we have ample evidence from the words and behaviour of Jesus, the Word made flesh, that this is exactly how God is with us. He takes the clumsy faith of a tax collector hidden up a tree, the reticent hope of a Roman centurion unsure of his welcome, the thanks of the one grateful leper and the despairing prayers of a woman outcast and shamed by her defiling illness, and transforms them into life-changing gifts of grace. Prayer and faith are never performance-related activities, nor are they things that we do for God. They are in themselves gifts that God gives and does for us.

We may think that our own or other people’s approach to Christmas covers the bare minimum, but the Christmas story, as it unfolds, is all about God’s lavish generosity encountering the meagreness of our poverty and transforming it into gift. Most of the characters in official positions are gloriously unaware of their own limitations. Think of Zechariah, Herod, Caesar Augustus and even the Magi. They are all men of power, but they have no idea or fail to recognise what is happening right beneath their noses. Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and the shepherds manage rather better, but, like the Magi, each of them also has to undertake a journey that consists in relinquishing set notions of who God is and how God acts in human affairs, accepting that, in this case, they are dealing with the God of surprises.

In nativity plays and Christmas liturgies where real sheep and donkeys appear, they are usually clean, well-behaved, soft-pelted and enchanting. My own experience of riding a donkey or a camel for any length of time is an entirely different matter. During a sabbatical visit to the Holy Land in 2019, I had the great privilege of spending a term at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, which stands above the checkpoint into Bethlehem. We travelled to St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert and were offered the opportunity to trek up the mountain and watch the sunrise. It seemed a wonderful idea at the time, but I knew my physical limits, so I agreed to ride up the mountain on a camel. I don't think I have ever had a more agonisingly uncomfortable journey, well-padded in the rear though I am. I don't know if, like T.S. Eliot's camels in 'The Journey of the Magi', they were galled and sore-footed, but they were certainly refractory. I came to have a healthy respect for the Magi themselves and an equal respect and sympathy for the heavily pregnant Mary journeying from Nazareth to Bethlehem on her donkey.

It all looks so calm and beautiful on the Christmas cards, but the reality is far harder, more uncomfortable, tedious and painful. I suspect that Advent and Christmas themselves are rather like this for many people. We love the idea, but getting down to it can be daunting for all sorts of reasons. Family dynamics can be tense, financial or social challenges can make what we offer seem paltry in light of the yearly expanding Christmas extravaganza pressed on us by the advertising industry. We want to exhibit faith, hope and love, but they can all waver before the bitter realities on the daily news. Yet I remember a moment, halfway up Mount Sinai, when we got off our camels with distinct relief and crowded into a little bivouac where local people plied us with herbal tea and vastly overpriced snacks. It was so cold that we shivered even though we were packed in like sardines, but there was a real sense of communion and of fellowship as we snatched a few minutes of comfort from one another while the camels groaned and snorted on their knees on the edge of the mountain outside.

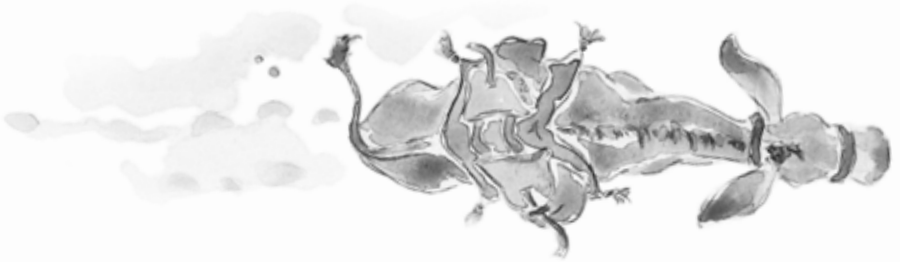
My hope is that these reflections might be of use not only for individuals once more setting out on the yearly road to Bethlehem, but also

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for groups journeying together in the global caravan of half-believers, dogged hoppers and random fellow travellers. The themes behind the Christmas story have never seemed as relevant as they do at the time of writing. The political regime in the United States triumphed at the polls with an anti-migrant, us-and-them rhetoric which has distinct echoes of the refusal of hospitality at the inn of Bethlehem. Legislation that would make it easier to kill the unborn, the terminally ill, the frail elderly and the disabled sits uncomfortably well within the story of Herod and his massacre of the innocents, as do the disastrous wars currently raging between Israel and Palestine, Russia and Ukraine, and in Sudan, Myanmar, Yemen and beyond. The failure of many religious leaders to listen to critical questions and to the voice of experience among the faithful is akin to the perturbation felt by 'the whole of Jerusalem' as those on the outside arrive with a message from God whose implications overturn all the comfortable assumptions of those on the inside about how God acts within the world and how religious systems should function. Once again, in our own time, it is the poor, the disregarded and the dispossessed who so often see more clearly than those in power, both secular and sacred, whose privilege can blunt their capacity to see things as they are and imagine how they could be.

Here and now, this Advent, we are invited to saddle up our camels or our donkeys and begin the journey anew. Even if we only get to spend a few minutes a day or a few snatched moments during the general Advent mayhem, God is more generous than we could ever ask or imagine. The scriptures, songs and themes of Advent and Christmas are so rich that we cannot escape being reminded that if we give God a millimetre, then a mile will be taken. Jesus, who fed 5,000 with a few loaves and two fish, will take what crumbs of faith, hope and love we can gather and will make a feast of them. That's why it's worth setting out with our companions and becoming Advent pilgrims in whatever way we can.

WEEK 1



FROM CAPTIVITY TO RECON- CILIATION

Liberated captive

1 December

Isaiah 52:1–2, 7–10

*Awake, awake,
put on your strength, O Zion;
put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city;
for there shall no more come into you
the uncircumcised and the unclean.
Shake yourself from the dust, arise,
O captive Jerusalem;
loose the bonds from your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion...
How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice,
together they sing for joy;
for eye to eye they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you waste places of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.*

I am an unashamed, absolute lover of Christmas and anything seasonal between Christmas and Candlemas. I remember visiting Oberammergau in Austria some years ago and finding there a shop that sold nothing but Christmas decorations all year round. It was definitely my sort of place.

But much as I love Christmas itself, it's completely overshadowed for me by Advent, even when that season engenders the anxiety that I'm not going to be able to dig out enough time to get the most out of it. Even despite those fears, somehow the anticipation is better than the event itself. This is unusual, as I'm not a particularly patient person, and don't in general take kindly to waiting. But the waiting of Advent is a very special process. The more we inhabit that waiting time and space, the more our capacity grows for receiving what we're waiting for. The wonderful Advent scriptures, hymns and carols speak not only of people but the whole of creation waiting in joyful anticipation for Emmanuel, God with us.

The prophet Isaiah calls on the 'captive daughter of Zion' to wake up as a powerful metaphor for Jerusalem's restoration, redemption and renewal after the disaster of the Babylonian exile. It's a call to spiritual and national renewal, urging Jerusalem to wake up from the despair and inertia caused by suffering and to recognise that God's salvation is coming. Isaiah's encouragement to the daughter of Zion to put on her strength and her beautiful garments is a promise of the renewal of her dignity. Jerusalem will no longer be shamed but, in shaking herself from the dust, will rise from humiliation and reclaim her honour.

Although this prophecy has a particular historical context in the return from long exile, Christians see it as foreshadowing Jesus, the Messiah who would bring spiritual renewal to Israel and the whole world in his gift of ultimate redemption to God's people. When Jesus began his public ministry in his hometown of Nazareth, he read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.'

LUKE 4:18–19

This carries strong echoes of Isaiah 52, with its invitation to loosen the bonds of captivity and embrace a new life and righteousness through faith in God. The prophecy depicts God purifying the holy city, and we remember Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple and promising to raise up the destroyed temple of his body in three days (John 2:13–22). Both the prophecy of Isaiah and the proclamation of the good news by Jesus are also summed up in the book of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.'

REVELATION 21:1–4

With the Daughter of Zion, we are invited during Advent to make the journey from captivity to glory, as the coming of Jesus invites us and the whole world to wake up and seize the spiritual freedom and renewal that he promises, of which the New Jerusalem is the final, glorious fulfilment of the whole purpose of creation. Advent seems to reconnect us with the material world, the cosmos itself, in a constant state of hope for a fulfilment that's yet to come. The fact that it hasn't come yet isn't bad news of frustration, or blighted promise, but good news of our capacity for growth. That capacity is what fuels our desire for God, and the waiting can actually increase our capacity.

The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas denied the role of the divine, but he spoke of this desire for something beyond ourselves as being ‘a distance more precious than contact, a non-possession more precious than possession, a hunger that nourishes itself not with bread but with hunger itself’.¹ How can being hungry be better than being satisfied, or distance be better than contact? Perhaps because it’s only when we receive the grace truly to know our need of God that a space gets hollowed out in our lives that only God can fill.

Most of us don’t see or experience ourselves as captive, but there’s a huge industry out there offering to help people overcome bad habits like smoking, overeating, overuse of alcohol and other substances. There are life coaches and therapists by the thousand offering support for those who want to realign their lives, their relationships, their attitude to work, sleep, social media use and other aspects of life that feel out of kilter. Christmas mirrors this for us. It can get full of stuff – presents we don’t want or need, rituals that have got tired, family tensions that flare up when we are all corralled together. Advent reminds us of how God can fill the tired and empty spaces within us or help to empty the overfilled ones, if only we are willing to empty them of the junk that often fills them.

Christmas advertisements ask: ‘What do you give the person who has everything?’ The only answer can be ‘Nothing.’ It can be a significant liberation to let go of the insecurities that lead us to cling to status, material success and other markers of having made it in life. Christmas is a time of paradoxes and apparent contradictions, the king of kings born in a stable, the greatest news in human history brought to the least important people. In Christmas terms, the best way to become rich lies in learning how to be poor by discovering how to long for what we can never fully grasp. The greatest gift we can ask for is a longing for God and the wisdom to recognise our captivities, great and small, and to learn the courage to let go of our fears and insecurities and embrace the glorious freedom of the followers of the Christ who became poor so that we could be enriched.

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REFLECTION

- If Isaiah's prophecy were addressed to you personally, what would waking up mean specifically?
- Is there anything in you that feels captive that you long for God to set free?
- Can you name any particular hopes or longings within your heart for yourself or for the world? Take time in whatever way works best for you to share these with God.

-

PRAYER

Loving God, your saving power sets us free from all that holds us captive. Help us this Advent to wake up to the grace you offer and put on the strength that is your gift, so that we can prepare in joy for the coming of your Son. Amen.

Becoming reconciled

2 December

Psalm 46

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God will help her right early.
The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

*Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has wrought desolations in the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,
he burns the chariots with fire!
'Be still, and know that I am God.
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth!'
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

The image in the Sistine Chapel of God creating the sun and moon is not for the faint-hearted. God points authoritatively in both directions, patriarchal beard bristling and a look of wrathful determination on his face that could melt the flesh off our bones. Trying to create planets might well give one a rather concentrated cast of countenance, but this portrait looks like the God of judgement that many inwardly believe in while paying lip service to the God of kindness and mercy. This is God the lawmaker who watches and judges our every thought and deed, punishing every infraction, however small. The idea of this God coming close to us is not a happy one, and few people would find the idea of taking refuge here a comforting thought.

After an extended and brutal period of conflict in Gaza and beyond, some may find it uncomfortable to read the psalmist's confident words about God's sovereign power emanating from Zion, the city of God. The Sistine image seems to express this exercise of power to maximum effect, but while Psalm 46 sings of the sovereignty of God over the whole earth, it is not a sovereignty of brutality and force. God is portrayed as ruling with a power which arbitrates definitively between warring nations – the kind of power many of our modern-day populist leaders can only dream of. But God rules according to a criteria of peace rather than aggression, and it is a peace which is not manipulative and based on self-interest, but a transformative power aimed at changing the fundamental dynamics of human relationships. We are invited to be still and know God. It's an invitation to know who it truly is that has creation in hand, an invitation to move from the enthroning of the ego or of one particular nation, culture or ideology to the confident acknowledgment that God is at the heart of everything. This puts into perspective human plans of petty conquest and leads to true freedom.

St Augustine of Hippo, who knew what it was to struggle with his inner demons, writes frequently about true freedom being found in obedience to God's will. He argues that human will is only truly free when it aligns with God's righteousness, because sin corrupts the will and leads to enslavement, whereas serving God in righteousness leads to true freedom: 'A man who is the slave of his passions is not free. But

when he begins to serve God, he lays down the yoke of servitude and takes up the yoke of freedom.¹² This is the inner freedom that gives us confidence whatever is happening in the world or in our own lives. Jesus does not promise that his followers will have an easy life – quite the opposite, in fact. But as he himself faces a cruel death and the apparent failure of his entire ministry, he reassures his disciples, ‘I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

This confidence in God, despite trial and tribulation, is central to the vision of the Rose Castle Foundation in Cumbria in the north of England. It houses a remarkable community dedicated to interfaith peace-making. Young people from nations and faith communities in conflict from all around the world come to learn the ‘twelve habits of a reconciler’. Reconciliation is one of those glib religious terms which rise easily to the lips but often fail to land firmly in our hearts and find expression in our daily interactions. The Rose Castle habits are: hospitality, curiosity, generosity, empathy, vulnerability, humility, forgiveness, lament, gratitude, hope, stewardship and creativity. The idea is that learning to internalise and practise these virtues, or habits, helps us as individuals to bring about reconciliation within society.

The daily practice of any one of these virtues on a personal, let alone an international, basis is a daunting challenge. But the psalmist has no doubt that the bedrock of God’s law is the gift of grace given to each one of us to become a practitioner of reconciliation, to learn to be still and to become an instrument of peace. *Hospitality* entails embracing whoever is other with openness and generosity, recognising our shared humanity despite differences. *Curiosity* encourages us to cultivate a deep desire to understand differing perspectives and experiences, so that we can become more open to them. This and all the other habits require the *generosity* on our part to be open-minded and open-hearted without expecting anything in return. We learn *empathy* when we step into another’s experience so as genuinely to come to understand their feelings and viewpoints. All of this requires of us a level of *vulnerability*, a willingness to open ourselves emotionally, accepting the possibility

of discomfort for the sake of genuine connection with the other. We begin this from a basis of *humility*, maintaining a balanced sense of self while acknowledging our own strengths and limitations.

One of the aims of these habits is to come to a place of understanding and *forgiveness*. Some of those who come to Rose Castle come from places of agonising conflict and have suffered personal loss and trauma. Forgiveness doesn't come easily to any of us. It's a lifelong process, part of which is *lament*, recognising and mourning injustices and suffering, both personally and in the wider world. That truthfulness is a necessary step towards letting go of grudges and resentment and fostering healing and restoration. The fruit of this healing is *gratitude* in which we learn to appreciate the goodness received from others and from God. This experience leads us to learn and nurture within ourselves and our societies the virtue of *hope* as we come to believe in the possibility of positive change and strive towards it.

The final habits of a reconciler are *stewardship* and *creativity*. Creativity enables us to engage in imaginative processes to develop new solutions and expressions that promote reconciliation. We do all this because of our fundamental belief that God has made us partners with all creation, so that we can learn responsibly to manage our gifts, resources and environment for the benefit of all.

The 1972 song 'Peace Will Come', by protest singer Tom Paxton, includes a call for peace to start 'with me'. We tend to prefer thinking that it's others who need to change rather than ourselves, but, like most things, peace is built brick by brick, step by step in the hearts and lives of ordinary people. The psalm makes a direct correlation between our own inner stillness and the breaking of patterns of aggression throughout creation. What happens in the depth of our hearts has resonances beyond our own small sphere. During Advent, God invites us each year to take a few small steps in whatever transformative mind set and practice we are called to at this time. This is how all relationships are built up or destroyed. And as we know from the moon landings, one small step for a human being can become one giant step for humankind.

—


REFLECTION

- Find an image of the painting of God creating the sun and moon from the Sistine Chapel. How does God look there to you? Is this a God that you recognise, either from your own personal image or that of others? What would you like to say to this God? How does this image contrast with the baby in the manger? What feelings and prayers arise in you as you contrast the two?
- Look at the list of the Rose Castle habits of a reconciler (rosecastlefoundation.org/habits). Which ones appeal to you most? Which do you find most difficult to practise and why?
- Take time to think about what you most need in light of today's reading and ask God for the grace you most desire.


—

PRAYER

Loving God, as we set out on our Advent journey, fill our hearts with the desire to walk in your paths and learn your ways. Give us the grace we need to build relationships of peace and reconciliation, one step at a time. Amen.



The lectionary readings for Advent speak of making a straight path towards God, but many of us find our own route decidedly winding. Biblical characters in the story of the incarnation are called to set out on the road to discipleship using any means of carriage they can. This book offers user-friendly encouragement (with the occasional spur onwards) to explore what helps and what hinders us in this journey to deeper encounter with the flesh-and-blood God we find in scripture, in our lived experience and in the least of his sisters and brothers.



Gemma Simmonds is a Roman Catholic theologian and sister of the Congregation of Jesus. An ecumenical canon of the Church in Wales and chair of trustees of the Community of St Anselm at Lambeth Palace, Gemma has trained candidates for religious life and ordination in the Catholic and Anglican churches, working as a spiritual director and retreat giver for over 30 years. She is a regular broadcaster on religious matters on the BBC and other radio and television networks.

