

Mixed messages

Katharine Smith *reflects on* Isaiah 64:1-9 and Mark 13:24-end

Advent is a season of expectation and excitement, but also a season of unease and a sense that the world might soon be turned upside down. We look forward to celebrating the birth of a baby, but it's an unusual celebration in a stable alongside animals and shepherds – people who are near the bottom of the social ladder. They tell us that this baby is a saviour, Christ the Lord, but the parents themselves don't look like royalty or anything very special. In the quiet, in the dark and hidden away from public view, Jesus is born.

It's quite a contrast to the messages we receive from the prophet Isaiah and from Jesus himself. One day Christ the Lord will return and for that we have to be prepared. His coming will also be met with celebration and his glory will be seen by everyone. But it will be seen, too, with fear and grieving among those who just aren't ready to face immediate judgement.

Nobody knows when Christ the Lord will return, although as we see all the signs of his coming around us (wars, earthquakes and famines), we might well believe it will be soon. Whether or not that is the case, Jesus wants us to be awake and ready to greet his reappearance as joyfully as we greet and celebrate his birth at Christmas. ☺



Lord Jesus, as we prepare to celebrate your birthday, help us also to remember to keep awake and to live each day in joyful expectation of your return, when your power and glory will be seen by all people. Amen.

Animals in the Bible

The sparrow

by Caroline Fletcher

In biblical times many people struggled for food. Therefore, the sparrow being very common, was caught and then sold in markets as a source of cheap meat for poor people. In Matthew's Gospel (10:29-31), Jesus states that two sparrows could be purchased for a penny. Luke's version (12:6) goes further, saying that five cost only two pennies, so a fifth sparrow was thrown in for free!

Jesus uses this to make a deeply moving point. Even though sparrows were worth so little, not one of them fell to the ground without God knowing. If God tenderly watches over the humble sparrow, how much more does God care for us?

Today, in many places, sparrow numbers have dropped steeply. We too have been guilty of undervaluing this little brown bird. The sparrow reminds us that God not only cares for us but for all of creation, no matter how small and unspectacular. ☺

“How can God stoop lower than to come and dwell with a poor humble soul? Which is more than if he had said, such a one should dwell with him.”

William Gurnall (1616-1679), English author and Anglican clergyman

The Advent calendar

by Lisa Tulfer

It's that time of year again – day by day in homes across the world, the windows of Advent calendars are being opened to reveal their treasures.

Like so many popular Christmas customs, the Advent calendar originated in Germany, where in Lutheran households the countdown to the celebrations of the birth of Christ were marked by lighting candles, or by making chalk marks on the walls. Exactly who printed the first Advent calendar, in the early years of the twentieth century, is disputed,

but it is likely to have been either Gerhard Lang, of printing company Reichhold & Lang (inspired by one made by his mother), or a bookshop owner in Hamburg.

The first calendars had twenty-four little pictures, doors being added in the 1920s (chocolate did not feature until the 1950s). The idea was soon exported beyond Germany, even being shown in a photograph of President Eisenhower with his grandchildren in 1946.

Lisa Tulfer is a freelance writer and translator, who writes mainly non-fiction and poetry. Her passions are history, knitting and photography. ☺