A few weeks ago now, I was in South Africa. I was visiting a Christian Aid partner, working with the poorest shack dwellers around Durban, men, women and children facing hardship and violence on a daily basis. It was an amazing experience.

I had a long journey home though. A few hours on a bus to the airport. Then a flight to Johannesburg. Then to find that our plane had to be repaired and a long walk and ride to eventually find a bed for the night. Finally landing in England many, many hours later than planned, tired and longing for home. Then riding the coach back up the M40, texting my wife who I was longing to see. Coming under Tom Tower, the front door opening. And I was home!

As Paul Simon put it in that beautiful ballad Homeward Bound,

Home where my thought’s escaping,
Home where my music’s playing,
Home where my love lies waiting
Silently for me.

Our first reading talks of Going Home. It’s God’s people, you and me, who are coming home. As the reading from Zephaniah goes on, ‘At that time I will bring you home, says the Lord.’ Driving home for Christmas is such an image, such a strong pull, or memory, or hope in our hearts. Whether realised or not. Going home to those we love.

Advent is about finding our way home to God himself, the power of love at the heart of all things. Advent is all about returning to God, finding our way home to him. Just as Christmas is all about God making his home with us, opening his door to us for all eternity through Jesus. God makes his home with humanity in Jesus, so that all people, for all time, will be able to come home to Him, their living Lord.
To find your way home to God, is to find the deepest joy. It’s a joy we know from every other loving human homecoming. But those joys will come and they will go. But with God that deep joy can last forever, because God is unchanging. Human lives come and human lives will go. But God’s love and life never changes, and in the end we will go home to him forever.

I do a lot of saying prayers, leading worship, singing hymns and being churchy. But if I’m not careful, it can be days before I really come home to God. During Advent I’ve tried to end each day just with 10 or 15 minutes sitting in silence. Stilling mind and body. Resting in God. Coming home to Him. I can honestly say, it’s been such a joy!

Something I look forward to. Something that stills me, as scripture says, like a child upon its mother’s breast. Something that stays with me into the next day.

Home where my thought’s escaping,
Home where my music’s playing,
Home where my love/my God lies waiting
Silently for me.

St Paul was very active, and argumentative. But if you read his letters more closely you find a contemplative in there as well. Someone who came home to God in mystic experience, in the deepest forms of prayer.

As he says in Philippians today. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice.’ Feel in your soul the joy of the Lord! Why? Because, as Paul says, ‘The Lord is Near.’

That’s what he discovered on the road to Damascus. That God was real, and that God loved him. ‘The Lord is Near.’ That’s what took him on his travels all over the known world. ‘The Lord is Near.’ That’s why he debated, and struggled and faced death for his beliefs. Because ‘The Lord is Near.’

And he wanted others to know this God for themselves. The God who is Near. Not high and mighty Jupiter. Not a far distant deified Emperor in Rome. But ‘Jesus, good above all other. Gentle child of gentle mother. In a stable born our brother.’

Come home to this God, who made his home with us. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always,’ Paul said to whoever would listen, ‘The Lord is Near.’ Beside you now. Within us and all about us. ‘The Lord is Near.’
Faith isn’t all joy and peace of course. Coming home has its challenges too, as most of us know at Christmas. John the Baptist is a new testament prophet. He’s calling God’s people home, as they come to be baptised. He’s calling them to repent and receive God’s forgiveness. But he doesn’t dwell on the rejoicing, the singing and all that stuff he probably takes for granted where God’s love is concerned. John the Baptist gives this command, ‘Bear fruits worthy of repentance.’ Live a life that shows you’ve changed, that you’re coming home to God. ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.’ No cheating, or fraudulent practices in this new world, ‘Do not extort money by threat, but be satisfied with your wages.’

So, this Christmas, amidst all the coming and going, make time to be still and know the joy. The Lord is near. Make time to give to others, as the Lord gives himself to you. And as you feel the love of others, know the love God has for you, his precious child. When you turn the corner, open the gate, and walk into his arms.

Advent to Christmas. Homeward Bound.