

Advent, like Lent, is a time of looking inside, looking within ourselves. For a lot of people this isn't an easy thing to do. Our modern society almost never looks within itself, mainly because it's frightened at what it might see: boredom, emptiness, lack of meaning or purpose, the dread of dying. In order to take its collective mind off it, society makes noise – and lots of it. A lot of music these days is just that: noise with a rib-shattering beat. Acid rock, hard core rock, heavy metal, punk rock; Black Sabbath, Def Leppard, Iron Maiden, Poison, Guns N' Roses. You might be surprised that I know these bands: I do, because very unfortunately, I spent much of my youth with them.

And why does everyone onscreen seem to shout? Sometimes, watching something on the computer, the film programme is interrupted at a crucial moment by someone shouting about something called 'Grammerly' – which seems to assume that anyone who buys it must be only semi-literate.

Our present-day society has to have noise like a fish has to have water. If the noise were to stop tomorrow – all of it – a lot of people would be left gasping, like

fishes *out* of water, because there would be nothing left for them to do but listen – maybe for the first time – and to the voices within themselves. There are a million-and-one voices within ourselves – some pleasant, others not so nice. Others downright nasty. Every one of us has them.

Advent is a time for looking within ourselves and, for this, silence is necessary: no noise, no distraction, no shouting. Because deep down beneath and beyond the noise and distraction is that place where God and us meet, where God and us are one and have never really been two. The living symbol of this place of oneness within us is the Christ-Child in the manger at Bethlehem. The American theologian Frederick Buechner put it like this:

“In the silence of a midwinter dusk, there is a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen. You are aware of the beating of your heart. The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just

before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”