

**St Mary Magdalen, Oxford**  
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And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!

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The Astronomer Royal, and now President of the Royal Society, Martin Rees, has made an extraordinary claim. It is his firm belief that, within the next thirty years, we shall receive signals from some form of extra-terrestrial life.

There is, I believe, an institute in The United States called SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) devoted to just this search. But something has been exercising my mind this last week: What if the SETI operators aren't listening when the message from ET finally comes through? What if they're in the kitchen making a quick tuna sandwich, or having a nap after lunch, or powdering their noses ... and miss ET's message?

You do not know when ET will come, whether at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning . What I say to you, I say to all the SETI scientists out there: Keep awake!

Well, the good news is that out on the Puerto Rican island of Arecibo there is an array of large radio telescopes linked to a very big computer that never eats tuna sandwiches, or sleeps, or powders its nose. And it scans the universe – scans some 20 million radio channels – across around 1000 of our nearest star systems – listening out for the equivalent of Radio 1 on Beetlejuice.

There have been some false alarms; some hopeful signals have turned out to be reflections from earth transmitters. They really were Radio 1! Then there's the sheer distances involved. Most of the star systems scanned are between 150 and 200 light-years away, so what we're going to hear is ET's Radio 1 from 150 to 200 years ago. Not very up to date – more like Radio 3, in fact. Besides which, if we wanted to send a reply, it too would take 150 to 200 years to return. Hardly an interactive conversation! But the whole thing is exciting enough for us to keep trying.

But why? Why do we long to hear a word spoken to us from beyond this world? Why are we fascinated by extra-terrestrials? I think it is because we humans are desperate to know that we are not alone; that we are not invisible; that someone is looking at us. It's true, there are some people who think they can do without anyone else; they can manage perfectly well on their own thank you very much. But stop and think about it for a moment and you realise what a nonsense that is. Can you alone teach yourself language?

Can you alone know yourself to be loved? Can you alone assure yourself of your worth, your interest, your loveliness?

That's the problem with finally hearing a message from ET. We may know we're not alone, we may know we're being watched – but can that extra-terrestrial voice assure us that we are heard, taken seriously, valued, understood, loved?

We live, as human beings, in an enormous hunger to be assured of our own self-worth; to know that we are not passing shadows that strut and fret our hour upon the stage and then are heard no more, but are actually known and loved and filled with purpose. We know we cannot gain this assurance from ourselves. We know we cannot rely on the assurance of others. We have lost faith in the ability of our corporate culture to furnish us with our own meaning – the guilt of the Holocaust, Colonialism, of 9-11 have all put paid to that. The collapse of traditional religion reflects a collective denial that we might hear something of our meaning from beyond our corporate culture. Where do we turn? Why not to little green men?

If only we could hear a word or even, as is more likely, a string of prime numbers indicative of an intelligence far, far away. If only ET really would phone home. Our home.

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And then, suddenly, a word is spoken.

A helpless and fragile word, spoken in a Bethlehem stable. A word of unexpected interruption, a word that establishes for good the difference between the extra-terrestrial God we expect and the God who actually comes.

*Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given* - A boy entirely at our mercy - something handed over to us. He is a gift; like any worthwhile gift, given not because the giver feels obliged, but out of gratuitous love.

But that is still to come. For the moment we just have to wait. We've got four weeks of Advent to do first. Like the frustrated operator at the SETI institute, searching through 20 million channels of nothing but noise, there's nothing to do but wait; to learn the hard way that we're not going to hear anything from out there. That is what this season of Advent is all about: a season of joyful expectancy and a season of abject 'poverty' – a poverty that knows that, of ourselves, we have nothing to offer. We can only stand helplessly before the outrages and miseries of our world, utterly at a loss for a word of meaning or hope to speak.

Like a child who can barely contain his excitement on Christmas Eve, we are perpetually 'on the eve' of God's coming, knowing and yet not knowing what it will be. Advent insists that we stay for a while in this tension of being 'on the eve' if only in order that the new thing we celebrate at Christmas may have a chance of being truly new for us, not

a stale and pious cliché. Advent is time to prepare ourselves to be truly surprised by Joy – by the Burning Babe of Bethlehem – lest it pass us by in the melee of Noel.

And so, just as I am excitable schoolgirls, may I urge you to resist the temptation to ‘do’ Christmas before you’ve properly done Advent. Treat this as a sort of Lent; a rain before shine; a pain before gain. For the Church has learnt, in her long, wise centuries, the necessity of Advent. It is a vital period of resting in the tension between our deepest and holiest longing and the reality of God; a gap which only grace can cross. Submitting to the strictures of Advent is the Church’s way of encouraging us once again to allow God to be God and not what we would have him be.

We long for a word – a signal. And there, in the manger, our fiercest longings and profoundest speculations will be met and exceeded. But first we must let God be God, longing simply for him to show himself in the total and unconditional love of the Word made flesh.

It’s worth waiting for.