What’s your favourite Christmas advert?
My Facebook friends seem pretty keen on Magic & Sparkles – though that may just be because they are hoping to win something amazing...
Perhaps you prefer the lonely, love-sick penguin?
Or what about football – and chocolate?
Or you may have another preference altogether – but I can’t help wondering what those adverts would say to a random alien, should such a being land in Coventry today and question what all the fuss was about...

There are an awful lot of very busy people, clearly getting ready for something – but what – and why, oh WHY?

Actually, you know, all those adverts are onto something despite themselves.
I don’t mean that Christmas is really all about deciding where to spend our hard-earned cash – of course I don’t – but if you pause for a moment to think about the themes of those high-profile adverts, you might just find yourself surprisingly close to the truth

Let’s start with the famous Christmas truce in the trenches, that moment when the guns were stilled and the sound of that carol we’ve just sung together floated in the air over No Man’s Land. Of course the experience of Christmas 1914 was about so much more than football – or even chocolate...
It was about a moment when peace and reconciliation became a reality, right there on the battlefield...a brief reminder that the baby whose birth this world-wide party celebrates was born to teach us how to live lives of generous humanity, lives in which the “me first” agenda that leads to war is set aside as we put others first and seek the best for everyone.
That brief moment of transformation 100 years ago was, and remains, evidence that the birth of Jesus did make a difference..., though we’re distressingly slow at getting the message.

We know that the Christmas truce happened during the War to end Wars...but just 21 years after it ended, we were at it again, and though this Cathedral stands as an sign of hope and peace, it is only here because of more pain, more destruction.
The trouble is, we just can’t seem to get it right ourselves,
I’m confident that if I asked for a show of hands in favour of peace on earth, there’d be a 100% response here – but it’s not our lived reality, try as we might. That baby born in an occupied country without a proper home has much to say to the children of 21st century Palestine whose parents have to negotiate armed checkpoints to get to work...while those grieving mothers whose lament we know as the Coventry Carol share their heart-song with the mothers of Peshawar.

It seems we just cannot break the cycle – so we must turn to something a lot more effective than either magic or sparkles – nothing less, in fact, than REAL LOVE
Love – so unshakeable and unbounded that no matter what we say or do, no matter how often or how badly we mess up, love never gives up on us.

THAT’S the point – the point of all the celebrations, cards, and candles...try as we might to bury it under piles of presents or disguise it with wrapping paper and tinsel.
At the heart of all we are about in this season of Christmas is a real live baby – a baby who is God in a manger, God throwing His lot in with creation so he can teach us how live and love fully.
We have sung about “Our Lord Emmanuel” - and Emmanuel is the name that sums up Christmas , for it means. God with us.
God with us in the midst of our mess and muddle, our fear and failure as much as God with us in the joy of a happy
family, the excitement of a full Cathedral.
God with us today – in Coventry...in our hearts, and our lives, if we are willing to open them to him.

Though more than 2000 years have passed since that night in the stable in Bethlehem, the light that shone there continues to light up the darkness of our world – and we share it whenever we choose the way of Real Love, instead of selfishness, pride and greed, whenever our lives and our actions proclaim “Emmanuel...God with us”

You see, Christmas is about a new world here and now...something we can, with God's help, live into as we try to make a difference in our turn by everyday kindness, - the sort of kindness that volunteers at the night shelter, donates to the food-bank, fills a carrier bag with Christmas treats for a refugee family...
God with us – the secret ingredient that transforms as magic and sparkle never can.

Sometimes it seems to me that Christmas is a bit of a battle between the views represented by two popular carols. It's your choice which you go with (though of course you can go on singing them both!)
On the one hand, AWAY in a manger puts Jesus at arms length...presents the Christ-child as an unreal baby who never cries and has to be begged to love us...one who is neither really human nor properly divine, but rather a soft-focus creation designed for Christmas cards.
I want of none of that.
In contrast, O Little Town of Bethlehem ends by inviting that child to be born in us – Emmanuel- God with us, touching each of us with that Real Love that changes us from the inside out, so that we too can shine as lights in the darkness.