

## Sermon for Christmas Midnight Communion 2009 God's Gift to You

I heard recently of a family who took part in a charity shoebox appeal. You know the sort of thing, you might even have done something similar, you fill a shoebox with presents for a family in Eastern Europe, with a toy for a boy or girl, and some Christmas food. As the pièce de résistance the family put into the shoebox a home-made Christmas pudding, with ingredients soaked over weeks in best brandy, and with a sprig of holly stuck in the top of it. Three months later they received a letter from the grateful recipients in Romania. It said this: Dear Friends, Thank you so much for your Christmas box. We loved the tins of food, the chocolates, and the gifts for our children. Thank you also for the plant with the ball of manure underneath. We have been watering it for the last 12 weeks, but sadly it has died.

Giving and receiving are central to Christmas. So what better time than Christmas to give gifts or to give a treat to someone who doesn't get many treats in life. And whether or not we make a small gesture or a grand one, we're all taking part in some way in the giving and receiving of this Christmas season. We've probably all given and received some Christmas cards, many of us will give and receive presents in a few hours' time; perhaps we've given or received hospitality of one sort or another, maybe in a party or buying someone a drink in the pub, or receiving one if we're lucky. And I guess all of us will have given and received many Christmas good wishes in the last few days. Christmas is a time of giving and receiving, a time of generosity of spirit, however it's shown.

But why do we give? Is it because we're caught up in the consumerist frenzy of the secular celebration? Maybe a little. Is it because we're recreating the magic of Christmas as manifest by Santa Claus or the wise men's gifts to the Christ child? Perhaps. But the real reason we give is summed up in that familiar and glorious passage from St John's gospel I read a moment ago. We give because God gives. Generously, extravagantly, maybe even foolishly - God gives not only all he has, like the gospel story of the poor widow giving her last penny at the Temple, but all he is. "The Word became flesh and lived among us" - the creator of all things, gave up all that he is to become all that we are. In St Paul's words, Jesus "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

I came across this quote recently that explained so well this mystery of almighty God giving himself to be with us as a vulnerable human baby: Like your landlord becoming your lodger; like your managing director up before you for an interview; like Beethoven queuing up for a ticket to his own concert; ... like a good architect living in a slum built by a rival; like Picasso painting by numbers - God lived among us. We give because we're reliving God's giving of his very self to and for us.

But what good is a present that remains unopened? Giving is worthless if there's no receiving. And God's extravagant generosity in giving himself to a world hungering for meaning, and lives thirsting for purpose and truth can make no difference unless we receive that gift.

One survey has shown that 90% of people think Christmas is too commercialised, and 80% said they thought celebrating the birth of Christ is an important part of Christmas. So many people, especially at this time of year, are searching for meaning, something beyond their everyday experience of life. I guess that's why many of us have are tonight – because we hope there is more to life than what's in our everyday experience. Whether our preparations for Christmas have resembled a trolley dash, or a chocolate-box picture of home-made Christmas puddings and cakes, or whether they've been somewhere in between, we're here because somewhere within us is the hope that the story of God born as a human child is more than fiction, that it's true, that God really does love us that much.

Well I'm here to tell you that it is true, God does love us that much and we know it because God did break into human history in Jesus and is here now, God with us, as he promised: "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory". And I'm here to invite you to recognise the gift and to receive it as a gift to you, to open your heart tonight, perhaps for the first time, or perhaps as you have done many times before, to say to God now or in the quiet of our prayers in a moment 'God, come and be with me'. And be assured - God loves you enough to be God with you and to share all that is in your life.

I want to end with a short story of an encounter with God I had a week ago last Wednesday when I wasn't feeling at all holy.

I was dashing out to the supermarket to buy a Christmas cake because I'd not got round to making one – again, and I'd failed to win one of Anne's cakes in the Children's Society raffle. As I was browsing the shelves for the right cake, a small child spotted a cake on the shelf near me, and ran up to it calling out, 'Mummy look, it's Jesus.' I hadn't given a second glance to a small cake iced with a picture of the Bethlehem stable. But this child had seen it. I'd been too lost in preparing for Christmas to see God's message to me delivered via the icing on a cake, and almost too lost in preparing for Christmas to hear God's message in the voice of a child calling enthusiastically, 'Look, it's Jesus!'

I don't know what the child's mother said, she was too far away, and I was in too much of a rush, and too conscious of being thought odd, if I'm honest, to pause and make time for God in that moment. It was only as I was driving home that I recognised God in the ordinary, wanting to break into my life if only I would receive him.

I hope and pray that you will recognise the gift God is giving you this Christmas and that you will open your heart to receive him.

Blessings  
Gill