

## SERMON "SOME CHRISTMAS GIFTS"

by Rev Geoff Usher

Behind the Christmas story are truths of great significance for humanity. The whole story of Christmas is a mixture of symbol and fact, of imagery and truth - literal truth and prophetic or spiritual truth. The prophetic dreams, the wandering star, the song of the angels:- we may find it difficult to accept such elements of the story as historically true. We may be unable to regard the Biblical narrative as a complete and accurate account of what happened two thousand years ago.

And yet, they are more than simply a flight into fantasy. There is truth in such elements. And through them great truths are being communicated; and communicated in depth, not merely superficially.

We miss the meaning of Christmas if we fail to listen to its messages:- its message concerning the reality of God; its message about life, and about our part in life and about the purpose of history. The story of the child in a manger is more than the birth of another child of the year. It goes beyond simply relating the beginnings of the most influential figure of our western civilisation, and perhaps of the whole history of humankind.

Although many myths surround the story, at Christmas we celebrate the birth of a real man, not a myth:- we celebrate the birth of a child two thousand years ago, who came to be known as Jesus - although his real name was probably Joshua bar Joseph -- Joshua the son of Joseph.

Serious scholars do not question the historicity of Jesus. There are doubts, queries and inconsistencies about some of the details.

But there is almost universal agreement that he was a real person, not just a romantic fiction. It seems difficult to imagine that our calendar could be dated from a mere fiction. His birth, life and death are among the best attested facts of antiquity, even allowing for the paucity of contemporary written records.

It is worth noting that his birth effectively divides history into two parts. As a result of his life, humanity was given a new direction, a new impetus. We cannot easily dismiss his revelation of God, the quality of his life, his way of handling human relationships, the power of his teaching, the force of his personality, the courage of his death.

No other figure has influenced so many people or had so profound an impact on the course of history. His influence continues to expand, so that Christianity has become a universal faith.

Many people over the years have rejected the insights of Jesus and repudiated his way of life. In throwing out the bath water of organised, authoritarian religion - the creeds and catechisms, the inconsistencies between preaching and practice - many people have also thrown away the baby - the essential message of Jesus and his life.

The essence of the teaching of Jesus has never been a brake on progress. Indeed, while he is the contemporary of every age, with something relevant to say to everyone who listens, yet he has always stood - and still stands - ahead of humanity, calling people forward to new understanding and greater love. The world - we - have not yet caught up with the place he gave to women, his condemnation of racism in any form, his concern for the poor and the outcast, his vision of justice and freedom, his rejection of violence and war\_

Something special began with the birth of Jesus. The symbols of Christmas point to God intervening in personal lives and human history. The obscure birth of a child to a humble woman represented God in action in the world. Setting aside for today the whole theological question of what God is, what we mean by the term, And whether or not he/she/it exists, in any tangible, physical, real way:- the way by which God broke into history is significant. God did not come, for example, in the way a meteor shower falls on the Earth from outer space. Rather, God became manifest within the life of the world, entering through the common happening of the birth of a little child.

Many people believe, of course, that God becomes manifest through the birth of every baby, and in every human life. There is within each one of us a spark of the divine. It is difficult, however, to argue that any one human being is wholly divine or all good. Humanity is an arena in which a mighty drama is continually being enacted: the drama is the struggle between good and evil.

There are always forces of evil at work in individual lives and in society. Self-seeking exerts its pressures; violence, prejudice and hatred are always at hand to divide and destroy.

The prospect is not all bad. There are unknown factors in every situation. The world is not at the mercy of human decisions alone; nor is it trapped in a cast-iron system of inevitable, predictable cause-and-effect.

The unexpected and the wonderful can happen. New creative beginnings can emerge. The forces of redemption are at work in the world. God may come sometimes in judgement, sometimes in mercy, but there is reason for belief in a God who cares.

If we turn to God - however we define or use that expression; in our times of need, we can find comfort in sorrow, strength in temptation, guidance in perplexity, challenge amid complacency.

Hidden within the symbolism and beauty of the Christmas story, there is the idea that all life has meaning, and that a sense of purpose runs through history.

Two thousand years ago, the dominant belief was a cyclic view of history. The years' were like a turning wheel. Given time, everything came back to where it started.

The cyclic view was eventually replaced by the conception of progress. The development of evolutionary science was applied to society and the idea of inevitable progress found popular expression, for example, in the slogan "Onward and upward forever".

Humanity, it was claimed - and is often claimed today - was and is always moving on to ever greater affluence, justice, goodness and freedom.

The problem of course, is that humanity can as easily regress as progress. We can go backwards as easily as forwards; it is as easy (perhaps easier) to slide down the hill as it is to climb up it. In a nuclear age, the truth is dawning that everything could end in a catastrophic disaster that would throw humanity back into a Stone Age.

But: The message of Christmas invests every individual life with meaning. The essence of Christianity is that every life has intrinsic worth and is capable of coming into direct relationship with God. • The goal of life is personal maturity as well as social progress.

In Hoping Against All Hope, Helder Camara of Brazil wrote:

Lord

Why pray for the rich  
who have not only money  
but power, intelligence, and talent? . . .  
They already have everything.  
They seem to have no need of your aid . . .  
Yet we must pray and beseech you  
to let the scales fall from their eyes  
so that they may at last see ' that you alone are truly rich  
because you alone have life , knowledge and freedom . . .  
Other riches are false riches, piled up in selfishness . . .  
Help your human creatures to flee false riches.

Thirty years ago, Valerie Stephens, a member of the Cemetery Road Baptist Church in Sheffield and Chairman of the Sheffield Council of Churches, wrote:

Incredible! Here it is again- December, with Christmas only a few weeks away. Some people, of course, will have bought their cards and gifts in March and written them in October. Others (the majority?) will be dashing to buy and send them a week or so before the event.

One way or another, Christmas makes us very conscious of time - times past, perhaps, happy family Christmases of a few years ago, or the rush and lack of time as we cope with Christmas present. It reminds us that time moves on and there is a need to set priorities, to organise our time. As Christians we are sometimes no better than others in this, yet we are called to use our time for God's Glory and to achieve his purposes, not our own. As someone has said, "God always gives us time to do his will."

It reminds us also that life is change. Circumstances this year will inevitably be different in many ways from last year. Minute by minute and week by week, in personal lives, national and international politics, in the Church, times change.

Sometimes we may not like it and find it hard to adjust. But the Jesus whose birth we celebrate is "the same yesterday, today and for ever." He is Emmanuel, God within us. He is the one who leads us forward into the unknown, confident as we trust in him. This is the Christmas message. What a promise! Happy Christmas!

Valerie Stephens mentions cards and gifts. My title for today's sermon is: "Some Christmas Gifts". I have already mentioned some of them.

First: There is the gift of truth. Not necessarily the familiar "Truth with a capital T", but prophetic and spiritual truths which live behind the imagery and the myth of the Christmas story. The truth about the wonderful power and influence of Jesus:- his life, his message, his example, his revelation of God, his way of handling human relationships, the power of his teaching, the force of his personality, the courage of his death.

The truth of his constantly contemporary message, calling humanity forward to new understanding and greater love.

Second, there is the gift of God's manifestation within the life of the world, entering through the common happening of the birth of a little child. This gift reminds us of the constant presence of God as a source of strength, comfort, guidance and challenge - and of new creative beginnings, and redemption, and care, and wonder.

Third: there is the gift of meaning: Every life has intrinsic worth and is capable of coming into direct relationship with God. The goal of life is personal maturity as well as social progress.

There is a fourth gift: hope. A marked feature of the cultures of the first century to which Christianity came was an absence of anything like hope. Hope is in eclipse today. Young people facing unemployment and the threat of nuclear destruction are often bereft of hope. Many older people are similarly fearful and despondent about the future.

Christmas is a declaration of hope. It is not a hope based on wishful thinking; rather, it is a hope based on the love, power and purpose of the God that is manifest in humanity, in nature, in life. Peace and progress are not inevitable, but they are possible.

Human beings cannot put an end to death, but through acceptance of God's purposes, through personal faith and courage and endeavour, a new age could dawn.

Truth, manifestation, meaning, hope. These are wonderful gifts. There is another gift of Christmas.

It is the greatest gift. It does not lie under the tree. It cannot be bought in a shop. It is priceless, and yet freely available to all. The greatest gift of Christmas comes from ourselves. It rests quietly in our own hearts, waiting to be given. The greatest of Christmas gifts is love.

I hope that each one of us receives that gift this Christmas. But I also hope that each one of us is ready to give it, freely and in full measure.

May God be with each one of us.  
May God be in each one of us.  
May God be through each one of us.

May we and those around us know the joy of the true gifts of Christmas.

Amen.