

Christmas Day Sermon 2022, Titus 3.4-7

“But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy ...”.

Some of us will have opened our presents last night at home after gathering around a crib set and a Christmas tree, possibly we will have read the Christmas story according to Luke, sung a hymn and said a prayer and then with a glass of sparkling wine wished each other a Merry Christmas. Others will have opened their gifts early this morning still dressed in pyjamas and a little bleary-eyed. Others will open their presents when they get home after church and others after Christmas dinner and King Charles’s first Christmas broadcast.

We have different ways and customs of marking Christmas, but mark it we will with joy and most often with the giving of gifts. The origins of the gift giving in the Christian faith are tied to the birth that we mark and celebrate today and will continue to celebrate in the coming days and weeks: the birth of Jesus, whose name means God saves.

When we think of giving presents at Christmas we are soon reminded of the giving of gifts by the Magi (the kings/the sages of our Christmas cribs) to the Christ Child, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, which point to how we are to understand the significance of this birth. One of the set readings for Christmas is taken from Paul’s letter to Titus one of his companions in the faith. Paul writes, “But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy ...”. The attributes and dispositions of God as reiterated by Paul are goodness, loving-kindness and mercy in relation to us human beings. This is the God we know and adore and before whom we kneel in wonder at Christmas. To us who are made in his image God gives salvation

from sin and death the last enemy, out of goodness and loving-kindness and according to his mercy.

In many homes across the world the giving of gifts is a central part of today's Christmas celebrations. There can be a sacrificial element to our giving of gifts as memorably told by the American writer O. Henry in the short story *The Gift of the Magi*, which I invariably think of at Christmas. Many of us know the story. Here follows a brief recap of the O. Henry story for those who are unfamiliar with it. Della gives Jim a chain for his pocket watch having sacrificed her beautiful hair earlier in the day so that she could buy the chain and gift it to Jim. Jim in return gives Della a beautiful set of combs with which to comb her hair, having sold the watch to buy her the set of combs. The point of the story is that both husband and wife love each other so much that each is ready to make sacrifices for the other. The sacrifice is costly, but they do it gladly, because it is their desire to give expression to their love for one another through the giving of gifts. In the end their love proves to be foolish or does it?

O. Henry concludes the short story writing:

'The magi, as you know, were wise men - wonderfully wise men - who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, ... here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.'

The giving of gifts has a high value and by that I do not mean the material worth, but the spiritual/emotional/psychological/sacrificial aspects of giving. Della and Jim give sacrificially out of love. I am always moved by this story. O. Henry is right as far as it goes that Della and Jim 'of all who give gifts and receive gifts, such as these two are the wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.'

Although O. Henry doesn't simply focus on the giving, but also importantly on the receiving, and also on the sacrificial element of giving he has lost sight of why the Magi bring their gifts. They bring their gifts because God has acted. No birth no Magi. No Magi no presents. And so forth. The custom of giving and receiving of gifts at Christmas begins with God and ends with God. God gives us his only Son out of love, out of love for the world, as John writes in his gospel memorably, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (3.16)

In the litanies of the Church, a prism through which she gives expression to our faith, she the Church sees and includes the totality of Jesus' life as a gift from conception to death and what follows: the harrowing of hell, the resurrection, the ascension, the glorification and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Briefly one such Anglican litany does so as follows:

'By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by thy Baptism, Fasting, and Temptation,

Good Lord, deliver us.

By thine Agony and bloody Sweat; by thy Cross and Passion; by thy precious Death and Burial; by thy glorious Resurrection and Ascension; and by the coming of the Holy Ghost,

Good Lord, deliver us.'

The greatest gift of all is God's gift of himself for the world, a gift that gradually becomes visible, little by little, step by step, to the world and perhaps to us. It is always worth noting that the word we translate as world is *cosmos* in Greek, which has a wider meaning taking in ultimately all of creation. There is an unfolding. It is gradual. And this gradual unfolding can be already traced in the New Testament and finds to my mind its fullest expression in Paul's letters to the Colossians and Ephesians and in the prologue of St John. Can you sense this unfolding marking and gracing your walk with God in faith?

On this Christmas Day in the year 2022 of our Lord we have arrived again at the place of God's birth on earth so that He might dwell among us as one of us. Dwelling amongst us he grows, he is dependent on others for his daily needs, he learns, he matures, he teaches, he heals, he rebukes, he calls people to follow, he visits homes, he eats with sinners and outcasts, he takes time for prayer and reflection, he converses with God, he finds favour with people, but not all, he makes friends, he feeds, he is obedient, even obedient unto death out of God's love for the world: his loving kindness, his goodness, his mercy,

He doesn't have a mobile phone, a PC, a bank account, etc. He doesn't watch S.W.A.T. He doesn't listen to podcasts. He doesn't read Private Eye, the Spectator or the Guardian. He doesn't enjoy Bach or Händel. He doesn't listen to the Beatles or the Stones. But the political realities of his own day do impinge on his life. The religious realities impinge on his life. He lives in a context of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multiethnicity. He is a human of his time. He has to make his way in his time, as we must make our way in ours, but now inspired by his example, while knowing Him as Saviour born for us.

Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

And we who know him as Saviour because of Christmas also know him as Emmanuel, God with us. In the words of Paul the theologian who knows God to Titus, "But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy ...".

Today we are grateful beyond measure for the assurance of sins forgiven and the hope of eternal life. For the sun of righteousness has been born with healing

in his wings. (cf. Malachi 4:2) We bring our gifts, the gift of our lives to kneel with people gathered here, around the world and down the ages before the Word made flesh: young and old, women and men, children, wise and foolish, needy and not so needy, rich and poor, the loved and the unloved, happy and sad, soldiers and peacekeepers, shepherds and sages ... And all who have need of a heavenly Father.