

## Which Gift - A Christmas.Talk

Imagine or place two “gifts” at the front of the room. One is a carefully chosen box, of attractive proportion, wrapped to a really high standard with ribbons, bows etc. – perhaps even some tissue paper in the box and some silver confetti or similar. The key thing is that the box is empty, but beautifully presented. The second gift contains something very valuable, (perhaps a piece of gold jewellery) but it is badly wrapped in newspaper; the sticky-tape has not been put on well; there is no shape to it – the second gift looks a mess.

Which of these two are we most likely to want to receive? Some might well say “the newspaper gift” – recognising there is a point to the illustration, but nonetheless we would all recognise that the well wrapped present is more attractive.

There is a story told in the Gospels from Jesus’ adult life of when he was transfigured. Jesus appeared on a mountain top with Moses and Elijah; it was witnessed by three of his disciples. It is hard to be sure exactly what those who observed it saw, but they caught a glimpse of Jesus’ glory in a significant moment. The reaction of Peter is quite understandable. He wanted to build shelters for them; by human effort and resources to express his care, respect and veneration of these three characters. Peter wanted to capture and engage with the moment; we might even say that he wanted to gift-wrap these three characters, so that others could recognise them for who they were and give the honour and respect they were due. But he was given no such option, the vision of glory came quickly to an end and he had to climb back down the mountain and return to the realities of a messy and demanding world.

Peter’s reaction is quite understandable, and perhaps reflects to a degree how, as Christians, we have traditionally responded to Christmas. We want to ‘wrap Jesus up’ in something special; to ‘build a shelter’ around him and the events of his birth to help us recognise how wonderful he is. But unlike Peter, we have had thousands of years to construct our shelters. Perhaps we have become so used to them, that we are almost offended by the idea of them being taken away.

We have invented the stable, a kindly innkeeper and sweet smelling straw, yet in reality none of these things are recorded as having existed. We have glossed over the scandal of an unmarried mother in an orthodox, Jewish society; turned donkeys and sheep into quiet, calming birth companions, and gift-wrapped the entire scene as a wonderful example of God’s provision.

Yet all we know for certain is that Mary and Joseph were denied access to a place of hospitality, and that the new-born was laid in a manger – perhaps inside a stable, or maybe just a public feeding trough in the street, like the kind that we now plant flowers in at the entrance to English market towns. It would be a funny kind of innkeeper who was considered generous and welcoming by sending a young, frightened girl in labour to make the best of things in an animal shelter. Far more likely was that the stigma of Mary’s conception outside of marriage, and the fact that the whole family would have been in Bethlehem for the Roman census, meant that everyone knew about her situation and didn’t want *the likes of them* in any respectable establishment. The powerful, scandalous message of Christmas is not that God provided, but that God didn’t provide! – or at least he didn’t provide any wrappings, just the gift.

It was left to outcast Shepherds and second-class Gentiles to take care of this young, frightened and vulnerable family. But even this backfired, as the visitors from the East alerted the authorities to the unfolding events, resulting in a barbaric massacre and Mary, Joseph and the child rushing as refugees across the border into Egypt.

As we reflect again on the two gifts on offer, we might want a Christmas story that resembles the beautifully wrapped one, and perhaps, with time, we have even managed to construct it. But the reality that God offers us, far more resembles the untidy and unattractive one. We often use verses from Isaiah to speak of the death of Jesus, but they are no less relevant to the events of his birth.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind (Is 53:2)

These are important truths to grasp, because our understanding of Jesus birth, will influence and affect our understanding of his adult life and ministry, and therefore our understanding of God.

What kind of God are we looking for? Is it a God who can take the circumstances of life and always make them turn out wonderful? Like the attractive present, to wrap us up in tissue and ribbons and always make everything delightful.

At this point the presents can be opened. One might be attractive, but turns out to be empty and disappointing. The other looks a mess, but contains something of lasting and recognisable value. It is the second gift that we are offered through the Christmas story; an explanation and promise that though things might appear messy and unattractive on the outside, there is genuine treasure within. The gift of hope and life that we are offered at Christmas, was never beautifully wrapped; those wrappings are of human invention, but the gift is of immeasurable, eternal worth.

Like those disciples who climbed the mountain to catch a glimpse of Jesus in all his glory, Christmas gives us a chance to catch a glimpse of it too. Some of the wrappings might help us do that, but let us not confuse them with reality.

As we enjoy the celebration, reality will never be far away – waiting for us around the next corner even perhaps invading our festivities. But the promise of Christmas, made real in the struggle of a young vulnerable family is that whatever the wrappings of life might be like, God is with us! Salvation has come to us! God's eternal promises are being and will be fulfilled!

Happy Christmas!