

Celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany. December 31, 2017. The gift.

A bag of nappies.

A casserole. Maybe a baby book, a set of children's Bible stories to grow into. A colourful fluffy toy. A voucher for babysitting once the immediate rush of the birth is past.

These are more practical gifts. It is joked that if they were three wise women instead of those oriental star-stuck guys then the gifts would have been practical and useful ... and they might have even arrived on time (since women are apparently less shy about asking for directions than men).

We know that the gifts which are mentioned in the account in Matthew chapter 2 all have symbolic meaning: royalty, offering to God, preparation for death. We get the symbols and the way that they are indicators of Jesus' life as he grows, yet at this point in his life they are more than a bit impractical.

The givers of the gifts also have important symbolic meaning. This is a stone thrown in the pond of Judaism to disrupt a settled surface and the beginning of a pattern of ripples which stretched outwards. Luke's Gospel takes up this theme even more than Matthew, but the message becomes clear. The birth of Jesus is not something for a select group. This is for everyone, the message of God, the embrace of God, the love of God is for everyone even those well and truly on the outside.

We come to celebrate the feast of Epiphany knowing that. Epiphany means something revealed and it was both Jesus being revealed to the rest of the world and the rest of the world being revealed to the people of God as people who are part of God's embrace.

Epiphany is a time for giving gifts. So, what did you bring? Any gold weighing down your pockets? Any frankincense sitting there, smelly, in your bag? Some myrrh perhaps, seeping its oily way through and leaving its mark? We may well have brought gold, in another form, ready for the collection, but that is not really what I mean.

We are not singing 'The Little Drummer Boy' today, but you know the song. He didn't have any gifts to give which seemed to him equal to the magnificent things that others were offering, so he gave his heart by playing a song. Parapapumpum. Did anyone, by any chance, bring a drum this morning? No? Good.

Though the principle that is there in the little drummer boy is a good one. Gifts which are worth paying attention to are the gifts from the heart. They are the gifts which reveal something about ourselves.

That is actually a theme which runs through the story of the interaction between God and humanity throughout the Bible. It starts first with God. As the story unfolds the gifts given by God to humanity reveal important things about God. As human life is first described it is a gift of God revealing God. In the image of God we are created. In the beginning, we begin, reflecting God at God's best.

As each of the covenants is revealed between God and humanity more of God is revealed. There is both the desire for humanity to find fulfilling lives and also the compassion and forgiveness at the heart of God revealed. To be honest, if most of us were treated with the same disregard, disrespect and blatant opposition as is revealed in the story of the way that the people of God have treated God, I wonder how many of us could be so patient or forgiving! Forgiveness offered over and over, a fresh start offered again and again, compassion and unconditional love returned to again and again ... these are gifts which reveal God to us.

That continues in waves, recurring patterns, throughout the thousands of years recorded in what we call the Old Testament. It also becomes the pattern that is expected of God, that God will be forgiving and giving and WILL act to bring about order and peace and justice and sort the mess which humanity continues to make of the world and life and relationships.

All the pattern of expectations which built up to the birth of Jesus were derived from God's gift giving, gift giving which revealed important aspects of God. All the way down to the gift of God's own Son. Jesus, human and divine, is, perfected and clarified, the image of God as humanity was created to be at the beginning. Even more, the gifts we see in the words and actions of Jesus reveal God to us. As Jesus said, when we see Him we see the Father. He is pure gift.

So what will be our gifts in response? What will reveal our true nature, the best of who we are? Some of us may even have a poor image of ourselves, even thinking we don't have much to offer or if we DO reveal our true selves then it may be more of a curse than a gift. There is still at the heart of each of us, though, that embedded gift which is reflecting God in us.

Like the gold and frankincense and myrrh what we offer might be things which show that we recognise who God is. Like the drummer boy's music it might be that we see a skill which has been nurtured in us which we can develop and offer to delight and inspire others. Like the symbolic presence of weird foreigners interposing themselves into this Jewish story the gift in us might be a celebration of radical inclusion across colour, race, language, sexuality, gender, or one of the other myriad of barriers which human beings use to box and divide and segregate ourselves from one another.

The gift in us, revealing our heart, may be the way we treat others when we are treated poorly. I was reminded yesterday of these words which Mother Teresa of Calcutta had inscribed on the walls of the children's home she established in Calcutta:

*People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.
If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.
What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.
Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.
In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.*

Might that be your gift? Revealing perseverance, forgiveness, hope, transcending pettiness, transcending even ambition. Simply to love, because love is the greatest gift, the most revealing gift.

Today, as we celebrate Epiphany, is a good day to think about gifts: gifts offered, gifts received, gifts discovered, gifts still to be revealed. What gift do you bring?

Amen.

Paul Mitchell