

## Midnight Mass 2013: SJEBP

‘To you is born in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’ (Luke 2.11)

Last week some children from Parkwood Primary School came to church to learn about the Christmas story. The previous day I had attended the school nativity play, entitled *Hey, Ewe!* – a retelling of the story from the perspective of (yes!) a sheep – so I was confident that the children would have a fairly good grip of the narrative. But, when working with children or animals, it is always the unexpected which catches you out... One of the children took one look at the Christmas tree, turned to me, and, dumbfounded, asked, ‘Where are the presents?’

It was one of those rare moments when, having paused for a second, I realised I had a really good and robust response. But, of course, he had rushed off to colour in a paper bauble before I could give him the answer. Having been denied the chance to answer the question ‘Where are the presents?’ last week, perhaps you’ll forgive me for giving *you* my answer this evening.

So, where are they? As I speak, Father Christmas is scaling down a thousand chimneys in Finsbury Park to ensure *domestic* Christmas trees canopy an array of presents, yet here there is none.

‘Where are the presents?’ The answer, of course, is that the gift we celebrate at this Midnight Mass is not under the tree, but under the star. It is not wrapped in patterned paper, but in bands of cloth, and laid in a manger. The gift we celebrate is the gift of Jesus Christ: ‘To you is born in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’

The tradition of giving and receiving presents at Christmas is, of course, symbolic of the gift that God gives us in Jesus, and also echoes the gifts of the magi, the wise men, which we will celebrate in twelve days time at Epiphany. But I wonder if there is a danger of losing the significance of the gift we celebrate at this Mass, amid the other gifts we will gleefully open in the morning. And, by this time tomorrow, will we still be celebrating the birth of a

Saviour, or will the baby Jesus be pushed to one side with the unwanted socks and boxes of truffles, as we furtively tuck away another mince pie?

So what makes *this* gift different?

Most importantly, this gift is *God himself*. In the Incarnation, God becomes a human being. This is not just a 'special' baby, nor even is this a baby merely invested with some mysterious, magic powers which cause angels to sing to shepherds, and wise men to follow a star. No, this baby *is God*. This gift is God's gift of himself to us.

And so this gift is perfect. It comes unwrapped and vulnerable to an unwrapped and vulnerable world. And, while some of the gifts we receive at Christmas maybe unwanted or badly-chosen, this is the gift which was *longed-for* by the people of the Old Testament, and foretold by the prophets. God knows exactly what we need. The Prince of *Peace* comes to a world ravaged by war and violence. The Sun of *Justice* comes to a world where there is oppression and inequality. The Wonderful *Counsellor* comes to a world where 'beneath the angel-strain have rolled / two-thousand years of wrong'. This is because, in Jesus, God fully embraces the human condition. God has skin and bones and flesh. God cries and wees and poos in the manger.

And so, in the poverty of his coming, God identifies himself with the struggles and tribulations of being human. God identifies himself with the Syrian refugee; with the victim of ethnic killings in South Sudan; with the family whose Christmas lunch will come from the food-bank this year; with the asylum seeker, not entitled to benefits; with one of the men in temporary accommodation who sits drinking by the bus-stop outside NatWest; with the sex-worker who stands on the corner of Brownswood Road desperate to fund her drug-habit. God comes as one of them. God comes as one of us.

To all these situations, and a million others, this gift brings hope. Because in this new-born infant is the essence of God: peace, forgiveness, new life, and – above all – love.

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And what of us, here beyond our bed-times to worship the new-born king? The gift of God Incarnate, again unlike perhaps some of our earthly presents, requires *nothing* in return: God's love is as free as it is unmerited. Yet, as we draw near to the crib, and draw near to receive the Lord's body and blood in the Eucharist, surely our hearts are stirred to offer something to the God who offers us himself?

Well, the presents that *will* be under the tree tonight and tomorrow are a reflection of the gift that we receive from God. But what else will the birth of the Christ-child inspire in us? Maybe it will mean us taking five minutes out of our Christmas schedule to make an online donation to Crisis-at-Christmas, or Christian Aid, or another charity. Maybe it will mean making a telephone call to someone we know to be on their own on Christmas Day. Maybe it will mean setting another place at the table. Maybe the most meaningful Christmas present you give this year will be the one money can't buy.

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So, 'Where are the presents?' Tonight, heaven touches earth; angels sing of God's glory, and the peace he brings to earth; shepherds rush to Bethlehem to worship a baby. As we join the song of the angels, and kneel with the shepherds at the manger, may we give thanks that God has become one of us in the babe of Bethlehem, and as we praise him for this gift beyond price and beauty, may we offer to him the gift of our lives and our love in his service, and the service of those whom he came to save.

'To you is born in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'