

Epiphany 2009

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I came across an expression in a magazine article recently that I had not heard before: it was “turkeys under the tree”. Now you would expect turkeys to be in the fridge, wouldn’t you? Or by now chopped up in the freezer. But these turkeys are metaphorical turkeys. Apparently, a turkey is American slang for a stage flop or a theatrical disaster, so turkeys under the tree are that well-known phenomenon, unwanted Christmas presents. According to this article, in the days just after Christmas we exchange or sell on eBay 1.2 billion pounds worth of these turkeys. This remarkable fact calls to mind those lines of John Betjeman: “Bath salts and inexpensive scent and hideous tie so kindly meant” – though back then you could not exchange them. It also reminds me of that memorable Christmas in 1957, when both my aunts and my grandma each gave me a box of hankerchiefs: how many hankerchiefs does a ten year old boy need, -- when he has a perfectly serviceable shirt sleeve. Nowadays it is quite usual to include the receipt inside the wrapping paper, just in case the present turns out to be a turkey. Were the gifts of the so-called wise men another case in point? Gold, frankincense and myrrh, but presents for the under-twos should be non-flammable, non-toxic, and with no hard or sharp edges; these turkeys fail on all three counts; the best advice is a soft cuddly toy.

Was the Babe of Bethlehem himself a turkey under the tree? For Mary and Joseph, probably, this mysterious pregnancy was an embarrassing and inconvenient gift. For Herod even more, the birth of a rival to his throne threw him into a state of alarm and all Jerusalem with him, as the Gospel today recounts. And the magi must have been rather miffed at the end of a long journey to find themselves offering expensive presents to a peasant family hardly likely to appreciate them.

What makes for a good Christmas present, then? A good Christmas present, I suggest, is something that **both** expresses the character of the giver **and** meets the needs and desires of the receiver. This is why choosing presents for people is such a headache and such a challenge. We have after all to be honest about ourselves, how much we can reasonably afford and the sort of things we really approve of, but also we have to be sensitive to the person who is to receive our gift, to the ways in which he or she is different from us. There are obviously dangers here of choosing what we ourselves would fancy receiving, but which if we thought for a moment, we would realise the other is just not interested in, or of choosing something that will impress the other with our extravagance and make them feel small. The excesses that most of us are guilty of at Christmas are in sharp contrast to the poverty of the first Christmas and they are – we know well, by now – somewhat unsatisfying. When buying presents for our friends, what we should try to find are not the most expensive things but ones which somehow express the love there is between us. And if there is no love, then a present cannot make up for it.

We often talk at this time of year of God’s gift of his Son to the world: “Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given” and it may be interesting to apply what I have just said about Christmas presents in general to this very first Christmas present of all.

We said that a perfect gift would express the character of the giver and meet the needs and desires of the receiver. In what ways does this child express the character of God. Well, not in any obvious sense: the wise men and Herod expected a

king, not a peasant; and we also, when we think of God, think first of his sovereign power. We think of God as the one who can help us when everything else has failed; one not limited as we are by time and chance and lack of resources. But although these things are true of the God who created us and guides his creation to its ultimate goal, they are not from the Christian point of view the last word about God's character. That is that God is love: herein is God's love manifested to us, that God sent his only begotten son into the world, that we might believe through him."

One less well known but very beautiful Christmas carol written by Christina Rossetti, expresses this in the lines:

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all-lovely, love divine;  
Love came down at Christmas  
Love be yours and love be mine.

A helpless child perfectly represents the character of God as love, not so much because it bestows love but in the first instance because it elicits love; it pulls down upon itself the loving concern of those willing to respond to it. Its very weakness is the strength of the love it creates. The baby in the manger is an expression of love in the same way as the Christ on the Cross. He evokes compassion from the hard-hearted; he softens us and recalls the lengths to which our Saviour is prepared to go to win our affection.

This Christmas gift expresses the central truth about God in the Christian revelation; that God is love and this love is stronger than all the suffering of the world, and even stronger than death.

If then God's Christmas present suits God, does it also suit us? Has God been sensitive to us in choosing what to give us? Is a homeless and pitiful child what we most need and desire? Would we not rather have had a soft cuddly toy? But God's Christmas present to us does suit us. That is surely the most astounding implication of the Christmas story. Most of the time Christians probably feel just as depressed as everyone else about human nature and the state of the world. But God knows us better than we know ourselves. God has evidently discerned beneath all our pettiness and selfishness – all the things we want for Christmas and all the things we stop other people from getting for Christmas – the one basic desire of human nature – to return in love to the God who created us, to know that, in a sense, God actually needs us, and that he has given us a glimpse of our true selves in Jesus Christ, one with us in his humanity and one with God in his divinity.

The poem by John Betjeman I quoted at the beginning may be a suitable way to sum up the drift of this sermon.

And is it true? And is it true?  
The most tremendous tale of all.  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue  
A Baby in an ox's stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissued fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things

Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant.

No love that in a family dwells  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare –  
That God was Man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine.