

“Gifts, alternative gifts and the gift of life”

<u>Occasion</u>	Christmas Morning Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 25 December 2005 at 11:00
<u>Basis</u>	Matthew 1 & 2; Luke 1 & 2; Romans 5:12 - 6:23
<u>Readings</u>	Matthew 1:20-21, 2:1-2, 9-11; Luke 1:29-32a, 2:25-30; Romans 6:23
<u>Carols</u>	13, 3, 8, 12 from Bethlehem Carol Sheet
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

So how did you get on with the Christmas shopping this year?

Did you enjoy fighting your way through the crowds in the Grafton Centre,
Oxford Street,
Blue Water,
or wherever else you decided to spend your money.

I was queuing at the pay desk at Marks & Spencer one afternoon,
when the woman in front held up the queue while someone else changed the
size of a pack of men’s socks,
and she turned to me apologetically and said:
“I’m sorry, they’re not for me, they’re for someone else.”

I didn’t think *anyone* bought people socks for Christmas any more!

But it reminded me of my childhood.

When I was young,
the most likely thing you would get for Christmas was a new shirt,
or a pullover
or a pair of socks.

If you were really lucky,
you got a new tie,
or some handkerchiefs.

One year my younger brother and I received matching lavender-coloured cardigans.
We hated them,
but we had to wear them!

But it wasn’t all bad.

One year I got a small train set.

You know the clockwork sort that goes round and round a small circular track.

I was so excited, I woke my parents up at 4am that Christmas morning with the noise
I made playing with it.

Talking of socks,
at another Christmas,
when Lois was small,
my mother gave her a pair of Union Jack socks with toes in them,
like gloves.
Rumour has it that she still wears them secretly at night
to keep her toes warm!!

But did you know that you can buy 'holy socks'?

No, not socks with holes in.
Holy socks from www.holysocks.co.uk !
I printed their home page off to show you.
You can buy burning bush socks,
pharaoh's cows,
the ark & the rainbow.
They'll even sell you a biblical broly as well.
Presumably to use when you're wearing the ark & rainbow socks.

But the real question is
'Why do we give gifts at Christmas time at all?

The wise men from the east brought gold frankincense & myrrh for the baby Jesus,
but apart from gold jewellery, perhaps,
no one seriously suggests that these are appropriate gifts today.
In an age where the average person can afford to buy all of what they need
and most of what they reasonably want,
most will admit that buying Christmas gifts is a nightmare,
yet we do it either out of custom
or because we genuinely wish to celebrate the birth of Christ
by sending gifts to one another.

Yet if we are not careful it all gets so mercenary.
The commercialisation of Christmas is a fact of life,
even though many people find it objectionable,
yet the joy of giving and receiving should never be underestimated.

This year I noticed for the first time some charities proposing alternative giving.

Instead of giving aunt Molly a gift she can use,
you send her a cow.
However she never receives the cow
it is sent abroad to somewhere like Uganda
where the cow provides vital nourishment for the local poor.

Actually this is not a new idea.

I first came across '*send-a-cow*' in a book entitled

'The man with the key has gone'
about a young Irish doctor working in Uganda with AIDS
victims in the early 90's.

They received a cow from *send-a-cow* and even though it died,
it inspired them to set up a small farm
to help nourish the poor and vulnerable people they were treating.

Since then *Send-a-Cow* has developed and you can not only send a cow,
which would set you back £750,
but for £40 you can send a beehive full of bees,
for £50 four rabbits and a hutch
and for a mere £2000 you can send a whole farmyard, comprising:
1 cow
2 pairs of goats
a team of oxen
3 sheep
4 flocks of poultry
5 hives of bees
600 fruit trees
and 8 rabbits

You must admit that this is a welcome relief from the undeniable stress of finding a
suitable gift for every member of the extended family.

Yet surely if all this giving has anything to do with the Christmas story
there must be more to it than the benefits to the poor and needy
or a healthy contribution to world trade,
both of which are in my view worthy causes.

Helping the poor and needy has always been the Christian's responsibility
as taught by Jesus himself
and the apostles after him,

but also trade,
though much maligned by some
is in fact a necessary part of the modern world
providing an income and a livelihood for everyone in the supply chain.
Admittedly some get richer than others,
but they in turn spend extravagantly
and many benefit again from the trade they generate.

To find the answer
we have to look at what God was doing at Christmas 2000 years ago.

Of course we need to understand that God is not one person,
but three.

There is only one God,
but he has revealed himself to us as three distinct persons.
And it was the second person,
whom we know as 'Jesus' or as the 'Son of God'

who came to earth as a baby,
born of the 'Spirit of God',
the third person of the Godhead,
and the virgin Mary.

Listen to what the angel said to Mary,
when he told her she would bear a child:
"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name
Jesus. He will be great and will be called the *Son of the Most High*." (Luke 1:31-32a)

Listen to what the angel said to the shepherds when Jesus was born:
"I bring you good news of great joy that will be to all the people. Today in the
town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is *Christ the Lord*."
And then the angels sang:
"Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests."
(Luke 2:10-11, 14)

And then when Joseph and Mary took the infant Jesus up to the temple in Jerusalem
to consecrate him to God in accordance with the law,
the godly Simeon recognised who this baby was, saying:
"Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen Your salvation."
(Luke 2:29-30 KJV modified)

Clearly this was no ordinary baby.

Indeed, he was not.
For he would grow into a man
who is perhaps the most famous man the world has ever known.
He emerges again at the age of 30 to be baptised by John the Baptist.
He turned water into wine;
he brought the dead back to life.
He confounded the distilled wisdom of the religious leaders of his time,
turning their ideas upside down
and provoked outrage by his claims to be the Son of God.

Not only that,
but he used the forbidden sacred term '**I AM**' many times with reference to
himself,
infuriating the Pharisees and the incumbent priesthood.

You see, up to the time of Christ,
God had revealed himself only as the great "**I AM**".

So sacred did the Jews regard this term
that they never ever spoke the words 'I am'.

Not only that, but they never even spoke the words 'HE IS'.
Yet here was Jesus actually saying, "**I AM**".

No wonder they were infuriated and as a result they had him put to death for
blasphemy.

But again I ask, "what was God doing?"

What God was doing was giving us the gift of life!

He was orchestrating the means of our salvation.
Again remember the words of the angel to Joseph;

"You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins."

(Matthew 1:21 KJV modified)

The Father, by sending the Son into our world, to be one of us
and allowing him, the Son of God himself, to be killed by sinful men,
let him pay the price of sin for all mankind.

He died that we might live.

That is why, the apostle Paul can say,

"For the wages of sin is death,

but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus." *(Romans 6:23)*

At Christmas time we recall that God gave us Jesus to be the Saviour of the world.

All life comes from God.

Within the last two weeks I have attended two funerals.

The one, held here, of John Bonnet who died of lung cancer at the age of 66,
and the other of an aged aunt of mine who lived to the grand old age of 92.

Yet in both cases I was impressed at the gift of life.

Of how much can be achieved and indeed is achieved in one short life,
and we thanked God for the gift of those lives.

Yet on the other hand,

life is so brief and always cut short by death.

But Jesus came to give life and to give it more abundantly.

A different kind of life,

an eternal life,

a life spent with God where he dwells in joy and peace for evermore.

This is the gift of God to all who love him,

who repent and accept his offer of forgiveness

and receive in return the true gift of life everlasting.

As we unwrap and receive with thanks every gift that we receive today,

may we know that each one represents a gift from God.

May he bless you and give you joy this Christmas day in Jesus' name

Amen