

John 3.1-17
Matthew 2.1-12
Boxing Day 2021

God's generous gift of Jesus

Read on the internet the other day that we Britons were expected to spend £476 on presents this year. If I were an RE teacher I think I would just put the word, Discuss after that statement.

Gifts and giving have been much on our minds over the last few days.

The origins of the one we call Father Christmas is based on the theme of giving. You'll know he is supposed to be a Turkish bishop called Nicholas from the fourth century. One day he heard of a poor family who could not afford the dowry for any of their daughters – and that was a disaster in their country. Bishop Nicholas wanted to help, but without anyone knowing it. So, as each daughter grew up, he dropped a bag of gold at her window by night. The father saw him on his last visit, but the bishop swore him to secrecy. Later Nicholas was made a saint and so the custom began in some countries of giving presents either on 5th December, St Nicholas' Eve, or the 6th, St Nicholas' day itself.

History lesson over.

Christmas speaks to us about the self-giving nature of God.

I love the story behind the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. Perhaps, like me, you've walked across it from Brooklyn with Manhattan. It was begun in 1870 and used totally new technology – the pylons had to be really deep and the span so long. Washington Roebling was the brilliant engineer behind its design. He was rich and now with this commission he was powerful. He could have stayed in his New York office directing operations. Building the bridge pylons was dangerous – the men were submerged below the river in some thing called a Caisson, a watertight chamber filled with compressed air. There they dug, and even exploded rocks. In these Caissons men got sick with Caisson fever, or even died from flooding or fire. Washington Roebling spent the first two years of the construction of the bridge down in the caissons with his men. Not behind a desk but in the caissons. He never asked them to do something he wasn't prepared to do. In the end his health failed – in a sense he had been reckless in his leadership. He had given his all.

God showed his great love for us by coming amongst us – going, as it were, into the caisson with us – this is the wonderful reckless giving of a generous God – not counting the cost but giving us his Son to be the Saviour of the world.

I suspect that most of the time our giving is calculated. But there are times when all of us instinctively and willingly go the extra mile. We get a telephone call to say a friend or family member is very ill – well it won't matter what's in the diary that day, we'll drop everything and if its appropriate go to the bedside.

Such giving, such loving echoes the reckless giving and loving of our generous God.

It was such a precious gift.

John Betjeman's poem, so often quoted at this time of year never gets jaded for me. He seems to grasp the idea that the best response, indeed perhaps the only one, to such a gift is to receive it with outstretched hands, thankfully:

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

It was a precious gift. My mind goes forward some thirty years to the baptism of Christ in the Jordan by John. As he emerges from the water those looking on heard a voice from heaven saying, *This is my beloved son – in whom I am well pleased. My beloved son.*

I think worship is central to Christmas.

In many ways I'm a bit of a fan of Oliver Cromwell – but I can't be doing with his abolition of the feast of Christmas. He got it the wrong way round when he decreed that on December 25th the shops should remain open and the churches closed. Charles II soon sorted that one out.

Worship is the way we give something back to God. In worship as we contemplate his great gift to us, we offer him ourselves.

The Rossetti family moved to London as Italian refugees. Mr Rossetti taught Italian at King's College and his son Dante Rossetti became a painter. Christina was his beautiful daughter; so beautiful she modelled for the painter Holman Hunt. Christina was a devout Christian and wrote poems, which we have turned into hymns and carols. She turned down marriage twice, once because her intended became a Roman Catholic and once because her suitor finally declared he had no faith and was an agnostic.

Against that background that famous last verse of her poem in the bleak midwinter becomes even more poignant: *What can I give him, poor as I am, If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb, if I were a wise man I would do my part, Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.*

Yesterday we celebrated the God who came among us at Christmas. Yet this is the gift that keeps on giving, it's significance is as great on Boxing Day as it was on Christmas Day for its message is for everyday of the year. God shares our life alongside us. And for such a gift, such a presence, such daily grace and strength, surely our only response is to fall on our knees and say: Thanks be to God.