

Saint Mark's Armagh
Christmas Eve 2016
The Giver and the Gift

Most of us can probably remember a time when, as children, one of the chores in the aftermath of Christmas – before the days of snappy mobile texts - was to write the thank-you letters.. Under the eye of watchful parents, one wrote, fairly laboriously (obviously depending on age), “Dear Auntie and Uncle. Thank you for your Christmas present. It is very nice. Love..” One was not allowed to add, “And it would have been even nicer if I didn't already have 15 of them”.

At a deeper level, as we think of the giving and receiving of gifts at Christmas, it is surely the attitude of the giver which is as important as the attitude of the receiver. Is the giver being peremptory and careless? Is there the sense that this gift is at heart a necessity, for business or domestic reasons or because it's expected? (A friend of mine who was a quantity surveyor before retirement once explained to me that at Christmas he would be given some great Christmas presents by quite a number of builders. For similar reasons, however, he felt obliged to give some nice presents to architects. I did ask whether it might not have been simpler for the builders to give their presents directly to the architects, and not worry about the middle man.)

But more seriously, we do surely need to ask ourselves whether Christmas giving is always *thoughtful*, with the needs, pleasures or interests of the recipient *thought through* by the giver? (We may all want to take a break at this point to blush.. however decorously.)

This leads us, of course, into the giving that is at the heart of Christmas - the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. God did not *need* to give the world anything. It is of his absolute nature, however, to give a perfect love *to*, and to share a perfect love *with*, his creation. This may be theological in concept but it is given a total practicality in the event of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ did not need to come into the world; the world was made by him. But Christ entering the world is what gives meaning to the world, for humanity. It is the meaning that this world can only make any sense if it is related to that which is both beyond it and within it – the God who creates the world from nothing, and the same God who in love enters the world at its most dangerous, painful and needy, and carries through this logic of total love to the grim end of Calvary. And, thankfully for us, beyond..

So what, today, are the specific needs of this world for whom the Incarnation is the gift for all people, in every place and in every time.. If we were to name the needs, very quickly we might come up with the ideas - perhaps among others - of **bewilderment** and **isolation**.

A **bewilderment** in the sense of wondering just what is happening to the world in which we live – a world where, even in contrast to a year ago, it seems that any political stability and economic certainty *anywhere* has become dislodged and precarious.

An **isolation** that is not only individual isolation but also an isolation that comes from a total uncertainty as to just where our identity lies – the labels just don't fit any longer.

And perhaps with this dislocation - the isolation and the bewilderment - comes disenchantment and its attendant demon of cynicism. Jean-Paul Sartre explained it superbly in his autobiography when he wrote, “**Like all dreamers, I mistook disenchantment for truth**”. Disenchantment with their predicament can make men and women cease either to recognise truth or to care about truth. Whatever panders to their disenchantment, to their bewilderment or sense of isolation, becomes

their truth. It doesn't seem to matter that it bears no relationship to truth in any proper sense. Hence we now talk about post-truth. And in a world where truth has no objective quality but is what I want it to be, the disgracing, maligning and demeaning of those who happen to disagree with me is now understood as perfectly proper and reasonable. A world of seeking to demonise and disgrace others in the interests of post-truth.

And how does the Christmas Gospel end? Not with a call to disgrace and post-truth, but with the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. The Christmas gift of the Incarnation is the embodiment - the incarnation in every sense - of grace and truth.

The grace of love that places no boundaries on its reach.

The truth that all are made in God's image and carry an equal value and dignity in his eyes.

The gift is not one that we are called simply to admire and enjoy the sight of it. It is one we are called to be part of.. I'm a little chary (I have to admit) about the phrase, "Letting Jesus into one's life". I rather prefer to put it the other way around. The bible speaks of being "in Christ". We are called to enter into the life of Jesus Christ. In a world that despises truth, generosity to otherness, and even a modicum of true self-understanding, you and I are called not simply to admire Jesus Christ but to enter into that life, full of grace and truth.

This Christmas Eucharist is one of the ways in which we claim we truly wish to enter into that life. And so our worship tonight is not part of the Christmas pageant. It is the gift of God in which he calls us to enter into a fullness of life in him, full of grace and truth..