

Advent: Giving God Our Hearts - Sunday 17th December 2023

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Date: 17 December 2023

Preacher: Dave Moss

- [0 : 0 0] Well, it's official. I suppose we can now say Happy Christmas to everyone. Happy Christmas!
- Of course, for some people it's been Christmas since the start of November, which is when I first started seeing some Christmas decorations in people's homes.
- And of course, we all know that for the shops, Christmas starts at the end of August, and no doubt I'll see my first cream egg on the 2nd of January. It's all become a bit topsy-turvy, hasn't it?
- Last week, we were happily singing carols, when only 200 years ago, they hadn't been allowed in church. They were considered too frivolous and belonged in the pub.
- And their folk song melodies, which is where they all come from, the pub is where you go and sing your carols. You certainly wouldn't be doing it in church. So much of the meaning of Christmas has been carefully edited out over time.
- [1 : 0 7] And now, like many other things in our society, Christmas has become a picture of extremes, of complete contrasts. And this morning, I'd like to take us on a journey through those contrasts.
- Well, let it be said, I just love Christmas, and I'm a great traditionalist with it. Of course, it's not Christmas yet.
- This is the season of Advent, as we know. And the build-up, which has its traditions before the big day, Christmas Day. A day like no other.
- And that, as I'm always very keen to point out, is only the first day of Christmas. For there are 12 days to go, until it's all over on January the 6th, with 12 drummers drumming.
- And that's my first complaint. We only ever seem to have one drummer in this church, and I can't understand what's wrong with you. So I'm expecting 12, please, on the 6th.
- [2 : 1 1] And then there's the tree, with its decorations. On our tree, some decorations are precious gifts. Some are handmade. Some come from afar.
- They're all glittering on the tree, with precious memories. And then there's the food. The turkey, the stuffing, the cranberry sauce, and the bread sauce.
- I've just found a new recipe for Brussels sprouts. And it's delicious. And then there's Christmas pudding, Christmas cake, and mince pies.
- And being a French enthusiast, I like to add in a chocolate log. And being a German enthusiast, well, why not add in Stollen, Liebkuchen, and Vanille Kipfel?
- Oh, yes. So now we're talking, I'll have them all. I'll have them all. A bit of snow would be nice. And I don't even mind meeting up with the relatives.
- [3 : 1 4] I'm just that great traditionalist. Okay. So, do you believe in Father Christmas? So, let's have a show of hands.

Who believes in Father Christmas? A few of you. Okay. Well, no presents for the rest of you, then, who don't believe. How can you not believe in Father Christmas?

I used to ask teenagers in school this question, and many said no. They didn't believe in him anymore, until I said that I'd inform their parents so they wouldn't need any presents this year.

So, suddenly, there were many more believers. So, be careful, though, because Father Christmas doesn't always get the details right.

Perhaps it might go something a bit like this. Oh, hello, Matt.

[4 : 10] Matt? Matt? I'm so lucky to have you join me during my little break. I like to come here to listen to the birds. Matt?

Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt? Matt?

Matt? Matt? Matt? th■y på enshilee wil then wogeme Elk loaded ■■■ olga Lessigman' ...
... Mo Tinder! Your friend wanted to send you a little something because you're such a good sport.

Ah, here it is. Thank you, Nora. What a great smile. Matt? It was a pleasure to see you at the North Pole.

[5 : 07] We send you all our love. Merry Christmas! So Father Christmas is indeed a real person.

He was a bishop with his red coat inside his coat and his red pointed mitre hat. In many countries such as the Netherlands and parts of Germany and much of Europe, he's commemorated on the 6th of December, St. Nicholas Day.

This day is a major festival with many traditions. And in England, 400 churches are dedicated to St. Nicholas. Nicholas was Bishop of Myra in southwest Turkey in the 4th century.

He's remembered as a gracious and generous man who cared for the poor and the vulnerable. It was perhaps his concern for the well-being of children that made him popular.

Stories abound of his generosity and particularly the giving of gifts to the poor children of the town to mark the birthday of Jesus. The principle which Nicholas followed was simple.

[6 : 18] We can't give presents to Jesus because he's now our risen saviour in heaven. But we can follow the Lord's advice given in Matthew 24.

What we give to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, we give to him. How has this become so distorted? Today, children are encouraged to ask Father Christmas for what they want.

We're more likely to say to children, what did you get for Christmas? Acts 20 tells us it's more blessed to give than to receive.

Perhaps we should be asking, who really needs some help this Christmas? In 1644, Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas for the reasons stated here.

Public gnosis, the observation of Christmas having been deemed a sacrilege, the exchanging of gifts and greetings, dressing in fine clothing, feasting and similar satanical practices are hereby forbidden, with the offender liable to a fine of five shillings.

[7 : 40] So, serious stuff indeed. And Christmas was banned until 1660. The Puritan group of Christians did not like all the frivolity. In fact, it may amaze you to know that although Christmas Day was reinstated, that it wasn't until 1958 it became a public holiday.

And Boxing Day didn't become a public holiday until 1974. You might have not been in work, but it wasn't an official holiday. Perhaps the Puritans have a point.

Perhaps we've come full circle and have become far too detached from its original meaning.

This is all we like to see at Christmas very often. This is what we promote. This is how it should be, we think.

But as I think we all know, there's another side to the mulled wine and the mince pies. Christmas has become a retail festival, and it shouldn't be.

[8 : 49] Christmas should be joyous, but causes some people unhappiness, debt and worry. Now, many people feel obliged to buy gifts for others that they know they won't use, with money they don't have, and cause themselves stress they don't need.

And I think part of the reason for this is that we have disconnected from why we give gifts. Now, gift giving originally, anthropologically, was actually a form of social banking.

Take a wedding, you'd go to a wedding, and older people, richer people in the community, would give gifts to younger people to help them start out. And as those people aged, they'd then pass it back to the new younger people.

You can see how it worked. But with Christmas, it's a zero-sum game. I give to you, you feel obligated to give back to me at a similar value.

Now, to fulfil that obligation, we do tit-for-tat giving, which means people end up with tat. Now, some people say to me, hold on, what about the gift of giving?

[9 : 55] But I have to be honest and say that can actually be selfish. And here's why. It can misprioritise people's finances and create a financial burden. So let me, I've got here.

If I give a gift to you, there you go, what do you feel you need to do? I'll take your scarf, thank you. There we go. Lovely. You give it back to me. Now, let's say I spent 20 quid on that, and I'm affluent, and I thought I was being generous to you.

I've effectively forced you to spend 20 quid on that scarf. And you might have chosen that your children need more new shoes instead. So I've misprioritised your finances by giving you a gift.

So what I think, it is time for us to get off this gift-giving treadmill. I think sometimes the best gift is releasing others from the obligation of having to give to you.

Let's work together to ban unnecessary Christmas presents. Not for your spouse.

[11 : 01] Not for smiling children under the tree. But that ever-expanding list of friends and cousins and teachers that we feel forced to buy. Do right now, if you're watching, use me as your excuse.

Agree to make a prenup, a pre-Christmas no unnecessary present, Pat. Or at least do a secret Santa and capital to fiver or tenner. Or even better, say, you know what?

I'm not going to give that extended list gifts. I'm going to give to charity instead. Less pressure. Less pressure.

Less cost. Less debt. And I hope more joy. And the reaction here shows you might feel embarrassed to raise it. But most people feel the same way.

You won't be able to see all the detail there, but I'll just explain it to you. If you're not familiar with Martin Lewis, he obviously does a number of things on money advice. But that video was released a few years ago.

[12 : 08] And it's now perhaps not surprising that a good number of people each year, when they're surveyed, want to cancel Christmas. Christmas has become a burden and an expensive nightmare.

If we're honest, that's maybe what's happened to us. It's all become distorted, over-busy, and very expensive. And when it's over, we just heave a sigh of relief.

The statistics on the screen there show basically that 50%, depending on your age group, want to cancel Christmas. So, what do we do?

Well, let's go back to basics. When all this present giving started. Well, when the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus. Let's take a look. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

[13 : 24] When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, For this is what the prophet has written, But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod called the Magi secretly, and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose, went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

[14 : 34] Then they opened their treasures, and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt.

Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, Out of Egypt I call my son. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

[16 : 03] After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead.

So he got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.

Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

At its heart, the Christmas story is far from comfortable. As a video representation, it doesn't really make for good viewing.

Perhaps that is why so many avoid it and just home in on the cute things. First, the Magi, often referred to as the wise men, were dedicated people.

[17 : 19] It wasn't a case of, ooh, look, there's a nice star. Let's go and see what's underneath it. It was a result of careful research over years, looking for signs, and then a journey across inhospitable territory to ask questions of a cruel tyrant, Herod, who neither respected them or anyone else, but they journeyed to see nonetheless, and to wonder.

You see, God was calling, calling out to the Gentiles, whose knowledge of God was at best clouded. God was calling them to see God made flesh, and not, as the nativity stories have it, to see a baby in a manger, but probably some two years later to meet a toddler.

And here we are today. God has not stopped giving signs. If only we could do our research and listen to what God is calling us to.

Like Herod, the people in power are still there, making unreasonable demands. The wise men follow the signs and recognize where the true power is.

We too are being called to come to make a journey. The Magi brought gifts, carefully selected and prepared, not as a whim off Amazon, or a request to Father Christmas, but as an act of giving, to pay homage and to worship to someone greater than all their wisdom.

[19 : 00] They come with all their position in society to a small child with no position in society. They bring gold for a king and God's anointed chosen son.

They bring frankincense to anoint a priest of God himself. And they bring myrrh to prepare Jesus for his work as a prophet and to prepare him for his death.

These are no commercial gifts. These are gifts for an eternal God. What do our gifts bring?

Who do we bring them to? And why do we bring them? I've been asking myself these questions a lot. What do our gifts bring?

Who do we bring them to? And why do we bring them? Then, in some of the cruelest and most violent aspects of the Christmas story, Mary and Joseph take Jesus and flee Herod's barbaric slaughter of children under two years in the area.

[20 : 14] Violent acts were something Herod was prone to doing, far too often as he wielded his cruel power. This new family suddenly find themselves as refugees on the way to Egypt.

I've yet to see a nativity play that includes this. Perhaps it just doesn't fit with the happy Christmas narrative. Yet there it is.

Matthew wants us to know that when God came into the world, it was a world that was violent, unsafe, and difficult. Not much has changed, has it?

The number of refugees across the world continues to rise year on year. We like to pretend either it isn't happening or that there's a quick solution, but it just isn't so.

So, in the news this week, or a few weeks ago, while we enjoy our presence, refugees across the world have no such luxury. As one example, one million Rohingya refugees have been living in the world's largest refugee settlement at Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh.

[21 : 23] For six years, they've been there after fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar. Conditions in the camp were dire as food assistance was cut twice this year after international aid funding dried up.

Rising numbers of Rohingya refugees are fleeing from camps in Bangladesh by boat, taking entire families, including children, with them as they despair of ever returning home.

3,572 refugees have left Bangladesh and Myanmar this year, one third of them children. This is a sharp rise in the number taking to the sea by boat than the previous year.

The charity Save the Children report that the boat journeys to Indonesia is long, 1,120 miles, and perilous.

So far this year, 225 refugees have lost their lives or are missing at sea. And more than 1,000 refugees have arrived at the westernmost province of Indonesia this month.

[22 : 31] And to top it all, Indonesia is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, so it says they don't have any responsibility to take in refugees. Perhaps Christmas is more about refugees than presents.

While we enjoy the food, schools in the UK report they're now reeling in the face of child poverty. 79% of staff now spend increasing amounts of time in school on poverty-related issues.

Examples include dealing with dinner money debt, referrals to specialist service, sourcing food bank vouchers, hardship grants, and supplying children's clothes.

Staffing cuts in schools also mean that they struggle to provide adequate support to vulnerable families. The Silent Nightmare Campaign, you see the advert on screen, is a shared health foundation which has a number of key charities working together.

Reports that there are currently 131,370 children living in temporary accommodation in the UK. The All-Party Parliamentary Group reports there have been 34 sudden infant deaths over a three-year period where temporary unsuitable accommodation has been shown to be the contributing factor.

[23 : 56] All is not calm. All is not bright. And I don't know if you saw this this week on the BBC News. How is Santa going to find me if we're homeless?

The words of eight-year-old Marcel, pictured here, after he and his widowed mother, Sarah, were moved into a hotel room by Cardiff Council following eviction from a rented flat.

Sarah and Marcel are waiting for the council to find them somewhere permanent to live after they were evicted when their landlord sold up. Marcel has learning difficulties and does not understand why he is no longer in his own bedroom.

The Welsh Government said the rising numbers living in temporary accommodation amounted to a health crisis. His mum, Sarah, described how Marcel had asked her the Santa question.

No could should ever say that, she said. He shouldn't have to worry about whether he's going to get presents or not. There are now a rising number of charities, politicians, and celebrities campaigning on behalf of such children.

[25 : 07] Dare we dream this Christmas? Dare we dream? Dare we demand? Dare we pray that this situation will change? God comes to us in person no matter what our circumstances.

He sends no representatives and no substitute. He comes to us in person. Matthew, in these stories, vividly reminds us that the good news of God's redeeming activity had from the very outset to make its way through the disorderly and dangerous world of violence and conspiracy.

God comes to ordinary people in lowly circumstances. The rich and powerful don't actually get a look in. Jesus, born in a manger, certainly a cause for joy and celebration, but also a time to ask some serious questions about God's purposes for us all and the struggles and difficulties we face.

In the Bleak Midwinter is a poem by the English poet Christina Rossetti, commonly performed as A Christmas Carol. The poem was published under the title A Christmas Carol in January 1872 and in 1906 the composer Gustav Hulse composed the music setting to Rossetti's words.

The poem is one of Christmas contrasts as Christina Rossetti sums up the difficult world we live in and draws our gaze to the God who chooses to be born into it.

[26 : 48] So in verse 1 Rossetti describes the physical circumstances of the incarnation in Bethlehem. It's a reminder of how difficult life is in the winter rather than the winter wonderland theme of the Christmas cards.

it's a time when the outlook is indeed bleak and she keeps using that word bleak. In verse 2 Rossetti contrasts Christ's first and second coming in the first in the humblest of circumstances and in the second when all will see his glory when he comes to reign.

The third verse and in our church version we don't have this third verse this third verse is often a victim of that Christmas editing.

It's carefully left out by many. Perhaps the image of Christ that is too vulnerable and dependent is too much for some people. Here Rossetti dwells on Christ's birth and describes the simple surroundings in a humble stable watched by beasts of burden.

This simplicity and vulnerability of Jesus' birth is clear and everyone in heaven and earth from angels to the beasts of the fields comes to worship.

[28 : 14] And then in verse 4 Rossetti achieves another contrast this time between the incorporeal angels present at Christ's birth with Mary's ability to render Jesus' physical affection.

There's intimacy love and compassion alongside worship and adoration. The final verse shifts the description to a more introspective thought process.

Here we're challenged. If we were there what would we do? We'd come to worship like everyone else and everything else.

But we're here living in the here and now what can we do? Well the question is always the same we can give him our heart.

It's perhaps the biggest challenge we ever face to give him our heart. When we do we see the world as God does.

[29 : 22] we share in his compassion for the world. We spend more time in the stable and not around the Christmas tree.

We share in his love but give him our heart. Many people simply cannot do that. Others do give him their heart and then simply snatch it back again.

Perhaps we don't expect our encounter with God to be so gritty so fleshy but this Christmas as every Christmas he has come our Emmanuel our God with us.

This Christmas what can I give him? Give my heart. Watch D Yoo