

Sunday 15th December 2024 - The Gift Of Difference

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Date: 15 December 2024

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] So they were mentioned in that carol there. And as we saw in a Bible reading earlier, the wise men and the gifts they offered, they play a central part in that first Christmas story.

Indeed, this idea of giving and of gifts, obviously it continues to be at the heart of our seasonal celebrations to this day. I don't know if you're on top of your Christmas lists, buying for other people, perhaps if you're nearly there with that or if you've written your list to Santa as well with your selection of things that you would like.

Good news is still 10 days to go, nine days to go, something like that. So plenty of time to pop down and work out whether B&M; or home bargains are cheaper for that Lynx Africa box set of body wash and spray that may well be.

It's on my list, I tell you, may well be on yours as well. As I say, whether we're giving or whether we're receiving gifts this Christmas, this idea of gifts and of giving, you know, it's been key from the word go, stemming, as we saw, from these wise men who came bringing gifts to Jesus of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

As you may know, these weren't just ordinary gifts, though. There was something particularly special about them. Yes, they were expensive and they were precious, but they were full of symbolism as well.

[1 : 23] So you've got gold, a generous gift in and of itself. Yeah, and I'm sure Mary and Joseph were dead chuffed to be given gold on this particular day. But it's a gift which also spoke of the way in which Jesus had come to be a king.

And as we saw in that Bible reading there, there was already an existing king in those lands, King Herod. But Jesus had come to establish a different kind of kingdom, a new way of being a king, a new way of perhaps telling us and asking us how to live in a way which the Bible describes as living in the ways of the kingdom of God.

That's the goal. But then alongside that was frankincense too as well. Frankincense, which I'm sure you know, comes from the sap or the resin of a particular tree called the Boswellia tree.

It has all sorts of medicinal uses. There's frankincense. It's good to treat arthritis and chronic pain and so on. But in this instance, the incense part of frankincense is the key bit because it's also used in prayers.

It's that burning of incense as a fragrant offering to God. And just as our haze of smoke is rising up into the embers of the roof. So smoke rises up from the incense that is burnt as a way of symbolizing our prayers, rising to heaven.

[2 : 45] And so this was given to Jesus because the belief was perhaps that he'd come not just as a king, but also as a priest, you know, someone who would be both praying for us, but also in later life teaching us how to pray as well.

Gold, frankincense. And then there's myrrh as well, which again, like frankincense, is actually resin or sap from a different kind of tree. This one's from the comifora tree.

That's where we get myrrh from. And alongside having medicinal uses like frankincense, myrrh was an antiseptic as well. But in Jesus' day, it's perhaps most famous for being used to anoint dead bodies, reflecting perhaps in the way that it was given to Jesus, the way in which in years to come, Jesus' death would be significant to say the least.

So these three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh, they were precious, yeah, but they were symbolic gifts for which I'm sure Mary and Joseph were grateful. But if we put ourselves in Mary and Joseph's sandals for a moment, I guess the arrival of these wise men bearing gifts, well, that in

itself must have been quite the experience for them.

If we think about these magi, these wise men, judging by their gifts, yes, they had a bit of money, they were rich men, it seemed. But from what we also know about them as wise men, they were also immensely educated scholars.

[4 : 22] They also had high social status, status that enabled them to easily get an audience with the king. Not everyone can do that, but these guys seem to be able to walk into the palace almost as equals.

But they also knew their stuff, this scholarly side of them. They were studying the night sky as astronomers, you know, the sort of Brian Cox's of their day, perhaps.

But they were also reading the meaning of the stars as well. It wasn't just astronomy, they were astrologers too, it seems. Now, historians reckon that they were probably from the land of Persia, which is Iran, in modern day.

That meant, though, because of this idea of stargazing and the fact that they were from Persia, they would probably have followed a different religion. They were probably Zoroastrian religious followers as well.

And that's quite a different faith to the one which Mary and Joseph would have grown up with. So if you picture it, when these guys arrived, out of blue, to Mary and Joseph and Jesus, when these foreign, wealthy, Zoroastrian, stargazing scholars rock up to see Jesus, I guess you could forgive Mary and Joseph for being a little bit taken aback, a little bit suspicious even about them.

[5 : 48] I'm sure they asked, you know, who are these strange men who have come to visit us and why have they come all this way to visit us? And yet I think in the story, what we see is that by inviting them into their family home, you know, by talking with them, by learning from them, by watching them, as we're told, they bowed down to worship Jesus.

These visitors would have been unlike anyone else that Mary and Joseph had seen before. What an education, what an experience, what a head-scratcher that must have been for Mary and Joseph to try and work out the significance of.

Indeed, it seems from the word go almost with Jesus, it's almost like he's deliberately causing us perhaps to scratch our heads, almost like he's deliberately messing with any neat systems of understanding or belief that we might construct about perhaps who we'd expect to be in God's circle or not, who would be in or who would be out, perhaps ways in which we think God is or isn't at work. You know, Jesus might have been in a manger, but from the word go, it seems we can't box Jesus in to any small or neat understanding.

You know, if anything, I wonder if the real gift of these wise men was not the stuff they bought, the gold, frankincense and myrrh.

[7 : 24] Rather, I'd suggest that they themselves were the gift, a gift to Mary and to Joseph, to expand their horizons, to open their eyes, to broaden their view of just who this God of theirs was.

God who was much bigger, God who was maybe much better than they might have previously considered. Now, how might this idea, that the very people who are different to us or have different experiences or beliefs to us, how might they be a gift to us to help us broaden our understanding of life and ultimately of God?

How might that understanding of seeing people as a gift apply to us today? I know for me, and maybe for you, often the most meaningful and the most memorable, the most sometimes life-shaping encounters that I have are often with people who are very different to me. people who challenge me, people who open my understanding up in ways to sort of empathise with them and with something beyond my own limited experience.

For example, let me just briefly share about three encounters, three conversations that I've had this month in December here in Burntwood with people whose different background or experience of life than mine has actually been quite a gift for me to receive.

[9 : 15] So I'm thinking firstly about the conversations that I've had with Sam, who's the big issue seller outside Aldi in Burntwood. Sam's originally from Bosnia.

He now lives in Lazelles in Birmingham with his elderly mum and he's supporting her after his dad, her husband, died. Now coming here as a family off the back of the war in Bosnia, Sam's got a tough life.

He's got a tough life. You know, he's working for a living. He's trying to sell the big issue to pay his way, but that's, as you know, that's not an easy living to make. It's not easy for Sam.

And at the last time that I spoke to him, when Gemma and I, I shopped in Aldi, had a chat with him outside and we asked if he wanted any food. And he said, sort of head down a bit, but very hesitantly, he said actually, if we could buy him a fresh chicken so that he could treat his mum by cooking her, in his words, a proper meal at night.

Now in that situation, the gift is not the chicken. No, the gift is him sharing his story with me in a way that humbles me, that educates me, that opens my eyes to his life and helps me to grow in empathy and gratitude.

[10 : 41] He's the gift giver in that conversation. Equally though, I'm thinking about the conversation I had just a few days ago with the parents of a man from Burntwood who recently, very sadly, took his own life.

Now this guy had been to a couple of services here in the days before and so his parents came to see me to try and piece together his last days, to try and perhaps understand what was going on for him.

And as we talked, and we talked through grief and we talked through loss and all the emotions that come in such a situation as that, yes, they were grateful for my time and the attention perhaps that I could give them in that.

But again, that wasn't the gift that was going on there, no. Instead, those elderly parents, they were a gift to me, sharing with me their feelings of grief with such honesty and integrity that it was both moving and humbling but it was also a privilege, a privilege to have my ideas about life and faith and parenting and so on shaped by others who were holding on to their faith in the midst of such profound loss.

And the conversation that we had just in the office over there, I think that conversation will stay with me for the rest of my days. or then thirdly, I'm thinking about the encounter I had with a couple as we were setting up the other Friday morning for our Christmas fair here and this couple, well, it turns out his wife was waiting outside at the bus stop but the man, the husband of the couple, he came into church and asked to speak to me while we were setting up the fair as I said and he was a Jewish man.

[12 : 42] He's wearing a kippah on his head and he's wearing a Star of David badge on his coat and he was obviously upset and he looked to me pretty broken so in amongst all of our Christmas fair stalls that were being set up, I tried to find a quiet corner to sort of find out what's going on with him, kind of have a quiet chat with him.

Thought the kitchen might be quiet and we walked in there to have a chat but then I realised it was covered with pork sausages out on the counter which were being prepared for the cafe the next day so I don't know a huge amount about Judaism but I know that that's probably not quite kosher so I figured that wasn't perhaps the most sensitive of places to have a chat so instead trying to find a quiet spot with all the buzz of the Christmas fair preps was going on that was tricky but in the end the only room I could find that was a bit vacant was Santa's Grotto which had been set up in our church office so we sat there we were surrounded by smiling snowmen and fairy lights all that kind of stuff and he proceeded to share with me how since October the 7th last year and the Israeli response to the attacks by Hamas he and his wife who'd been living in the UK for seven or eight years now they'd faced all sorts of hostility and persecution so he'd got a job but they'd had to move home twice to escape ill treatment and at the latest place they were renting their belongings had suddenly been taken and they'd been forced to leave even though they'd paid quite a lot up front for the deposit and rent to come so money had disappeared and so having to have to move out of their latest rented accommodation they'd been staying in various cheap hotels locally and he was waiting for a work transfer to an office down south to happen but now they'd run out of money and he only had a suitcase of possessions but with no money coming in until the following week when he would be paid he said to me

I don't know where we're going to sleep tonight and so they'd walked from the hotel googled us and come to find us to see if we could help now as we sat and talked this guy I've only just met I might look daft but I don't think I am I was trying to work out if he was an elaborate scam you know could happen happens occasionally to us trying to work out if he was trying to scam us or trying to work out where the police might have been involved in this my mind wanders to the attacks by Hamas and then the subsequent in my view atrocities committed by the Israeli government that kind of stuff is entering in my head as we're talking I'm wondering what do we do with this guy to me and Jem put him up in our house until he can get sorted with his wife and all sorts of thoughts are going

around my head at this point but in my gut I felt he was being honest and straight with me I knew the actions of the Israeli government were nothing to do with him he wasn't even Israeli he's from Eastern Europe that he had every right to wear the outer signs of Judaism without fear of attack and that most importantly this was simply a couple who were hungry and homeless and in need of help now the irony of sitting in Santa's grotto at Christmas time with a homeless foreign Jewish man who was asking for somewhere for him and his wife to stay that night well the irony of that wasn't completely lost on me and normally there'd be time to check this through with other people from the church other leaders and so on but time was of the essence so I agreed that on the spot there that as a church we'd get him and his wife on a train with tickets to where they needed to go so he could start his job the next week we booked them a travel lodge for the weekend and gave them a bit of money to cover food until his wage came through and he could start his new job as I say and yet as I told him by this time his wife had come in to join us she was very quiet as I told him and his wife what we'd do he whispered to his wife through a face full of tears he said see I told you there'd be a miracle now you see in that the gift that wasn't the train tickets it wasn't the travel lodge it wasn't the food money that we were able to give them no the gift for me the gift I'd say for us was the privilege of being able to hear their story to help a couple in need at Christmas and to share a small part of the funds with which we've been blessed as a church so that this couple may know that their plight has been seen and responded to not just by us but by God and I won't put this online but here they are took a photo of them when we dropped them at Canuck station it's another reason why I know they weren't scamming us because they were very happy for me to take a photo of them and I've spoken to him since and they're doing okay they're grateful for the help but I simply underlined on the phone to him that it was our privilege it was our privilege to be able to help you see in all of this

[18:20] I think it seems to me that alongside everything else that Jesus coming to be God with us at Christmas means the story of the wise men shows us the importance of receiving the gift God gives us through the opportunities that we have to encounter to welcome and to share in the lives of those who are different to us indeed I suspect it's actually through difference and through diversity that we might get the fullest glimpse of a God who has come into this world to be the light of all humankind the one who grew up to draw all people to himself so that we might see each other through the eyes of a God who loves us who loves you and who loves me more than we could possibly imagine and so this

Christmas time I guess my prayer is that you and I will be open to receiving the truest of gifts God gives us gifts which may well be given to us in the most unlikely of ways or through the most unexpected of people Amen Amen