

# What Can I Give Him?

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[ 0 : 00 ] St. John's Shaughnessy Church Well, it's a great privilege for me to be here today and to be able to speak to you this morning.

I'm acutely aware that there are some young people in church today, and I'm reminded of the little story that if all the boys and girls who fall asleep during my sermons were laid end to end in the pews, they'd probably be a lot more comfortable, and you may want to make that happen for them this morning.

I draw the line at adults lying horizontal, but children I can live with. What can I give him? It seems to me it has a very contemporary ring to it.

I wonder if, like me, you struggle to know what to buy people year on to year. Brothers-in-law who have everything. Parents who are elderly and seem to need nothing.

Even my darling wife, where I've just run out of ideas about what to get that's innovative and new. And wandering around the shopping mall simply brings confusion rather than inspiration and closure.

[ 1 : 43 ] I once, back in the 1980s, came across a British poet who rather summed things up for me when he wrote this poem.

While yuppies watched their stocks by night in the heart of London town, the chairman of the board came in and cigars were handed round. God rest ye merry chaps, he said, let nothing you dismay, for here in Royal London town, the index rose today.

I've come from the realms of glory on the 14th floor to rouse you with a tale of what Christmas is really for. There lived a man whose name was Bob.

And his sales were high, his profit margins huge. He worked for all the hours God gave and his name was Mr Scrooge. Now Scrooge employed a junior clerk, a pale young man called Bob, who seemed to lack ambition and devotion to his job.

His humble work in the counting house just kept him in the black. But on Christmas Eve, as he rose to leave, his boss gave him the sack. Thus spake the chairman.

[ 2 : 54 ] And forthwith appeared a well-groomed throng of eager young executives who joined his Christmas song. Low in the dark streets shineth still the everlasting light of countless hosts of VDUs winking through the night.

Blessed are those whose hours are long, who make their money fast, and wealthy those who exorcise the ghosts of Christmas past.

So I am thrilled that you are here at all this morning. You could have been in front of the TV watching your latest video from Aunt Ethel, or in bed wearing your new pair of bed socks, or out with friends sipping a delightful cup of hot coffee or chocolate, or away at Whistler skiing.

But you are here. And I am glad you have come this Christmas. This post-September the 11th Christmas. Where once again this planet echoes with the sound of gunfire.

And yet again friends of mine are separated from their families, away keeping the world at peace for you and for me, as I once tried to do as I served in Northern Ireland and Bosnia.

[ 4 : 17 ] So perhaps you are here just because you have agreed to come with family to keep the peace, or because Granny says so.

Perhaps you are here because services like this conjure up deep memories of your childhood, or earlier happy days for you. Or perhaps you have come this year especially, because you wonder quite what is going on in our world.

And you are wondering whether the church has any answers. Well I believe we do. And I want to make three little points from our Gospel reading in St. Luke for you to think about, and I would hope to act upon, in 2002.

If you'd care to turn to it, Luke is the third Gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, in the New Testament section of the Church Bibles. We've gone to chapter 2 this morning, and I'm going to make three short points from these first 20 verses, familiar verses, from Luke's Gospel.

But I hope that I might draw out some fresh truths for you. My first little point is this, that it is rooted in history. Dr. Luke was a medical doctor, with a keen interest in history.

[ 5 : 36 ] He wrote two volumes in the New Testament, this Gospel, and the so-called Acts of the Apostles. And in Acts chapter 21, we're told that he, along with the Apostle Paul, arrived in Jerusalem.

And he stayed with Paul, in Palestine, for two years. Paul, unfortunately, spent most of that time under house arrest, or possibly even in prison. And so Luke had a lot of time to travel around Palestine, researching his book, and speaking with people.

He was a careful scholar, and his works are steeped in verifiable historical data. So if you are a little skeptical about the historicity of the Christian message, Luke is a good place to start your own spiritual journey.

And chapter 2 of this Gospel begins with clear historical evidence. We are in the empire ship, or the reign, or we are under the lordship of Caesar Augustus.

He was better known as Octavian, and he ruled from 27 BC through till 14 AD. And he issued an edict that everyone should go to their ancestral home for a census to be taken.

[ 6 : 51 ] Now, a journey to an ancestral home would have fitted in well with Jewish practice, and therefore you could argue he was culturally sensitive.

Though the very nature of the fact that he was taking attacks would have been a sharp reminder that Israel was occupied, soldiers were evident, and the rule was from Rome.

Joseph and Mary had to leave Nazareth and travel to the ancestral hometown of Joseph, Bethlehem, some 90 miles away, a journey which would have taken them three full days.

I did it in a coach trip two years ago, and I noticed for myself that the terrain they had to cover was and is pretty rugged.

Now, Dr. Luke just devotes seven of the 1,000 verses in his gospel, just seven of them, to the nativity itself, and we have them here in chapter 2.

[ 8 : 00 ] Luke tells us that the shortage of residential accommodation in Bethlehem at the time was so acute that it was a bit like trying to get a bed for the night in Whistler on New Year's Eve.

So they had to stay in a stable, or more probably a cave nearby, and the baby was born and placed in an animal's feeding trough.

This is what an author called Harry Blamires in a book called *The Christian Mind* says of this. Into just such a situation as this our Lord came.

The world was rotten, vice was rife, the wealthy lived in luxury, the poor were oppressed and downtrodden, there was debauchery and corruption in the cities of the Roman world as now in our own cities.

There was slavery and injustice as in the darker parts of the world today. There is no evil now which didn't exist then, 2,000 years ago. Nevertheless, our Lord came.

[ 8 : 59 ] He came into the midst of it, and he found the shortage of residential accommodation so acute that he had to be born in a stable or cave, like the child of refugees or squatters.

But he came and he grew here, talked and taught here. He didn't come in style, he didn't wear an old school tie, he didn't flourish duplicated testimonials, he didn't have a good Oxford accent or an assurance bread of private school conditioning.

He came from a lower middle class home, he spoke a provincial dialect, and he had a body of followers, some of whom might well have failed their grade 12 exams or their college entrance exams.

He came here at the humblest level because as God, that was where he wanted to be, where best he could work and serve and love. So my first point today, ladies and gentlemen, is that this book and this story is rooted in history.

And my second point is that it is explained for us by angels. The contrast between the commonness of Jesus' birth and the child's greatness couldn't have been greater.

[ 10 : 12 ] And it is interesting that it is left to Luke, Dr. Luke alone of the four gospel writers, to tell us about the shepherds, while Matthew tells us of the visit of the Magi.

I enjoyed working among British soldiers for some 16 years of my life. Most are very down-to-earth, ordinary guys who like to call a spade a spade.

Well, actually, they normally call it an F-shovel, but I can't say that in church. And I loved being among them. And I can imagine shepherds 2,000 years ago huddled around a campfire like soldiers joking and laughing around a heater on an operational tour.

Or as Bedouin tribesmen with whom I lived in the Sinai desert two years ago as a part of a trip that I made there. And suddenly, into the midst comes a heavenly messenger and God's glory surrounds them.

Understandably, the shepherds were terrified. I would be in the same circumstances, wouldn't you? One of the greatest things, however, that we learn from this passage is that the Bible is its own interpreter.

[11:32] We don't have to struggle inventing theories with our minds about what happened and, more importantly, what it meant. The Bible gives us the explanation as well as the details of the events themselves.

Luke tells us in verse 10 here that they are not to be afraid because he brings good news of a great joy that will be for all people.

Well, who wouldn't want good news whether you're a shepherd on a Judean hillside in the cold of the night or someone here this morning on Christmas Day 2001.

As the commentator D.L. Bock reminds us, the major offices of Jesus are confessed here in one sentence, verse 11, Today, in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is Christ, the Lord. He is saviour, he is Lord, he is Messiah. Or, in other words, he is the one who will be the deliverer.

[12:40] He is to be our master and he is the anointed king. And, in effect, this angel messenger says, guys, this is a sign.

If you go to Bethlehem, you will find this baby and you will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Well, I've asked myself this week how many babies were born in Bethlehem.

How on earth were these shepherds to know whether they'd gone to the right house, whether they'd gone to the right inn, whether they'd found the right baby? They are told to go and find the one baby that has been laid in a feeding trough.

That will be the sign for them. A birth in very humble surroundings, indicative of God's care for all people, regardless of social status, race, or vocation.

Isn't that good news? God sent Jesus in a humble way because of his care for ordinary people like you and especially like me.

[13:50] Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appear, offering honour to God and peace to men. The host of angels reflect, as it were, God's commentary, the commentary of heaven on the events of verses 1 to 7.

For the Bible through this latter part is its own interpreter. This event is to be the turning point in history. But it would have no meaning for us unless God gives it meaning, unless he reveals.

And that's what this amazing incident is all about. Well, understandably, the shepherds have a typical sort of response for men like this.

Their curiosity encourages them to say to one another, let's go and check it out. Let's see if this thing really is valid. And so, verse 16 tells us that they hurry off, hopefully, leaving at least one shepherd behind to look after the sheep.

But they go and they find Mary and Joseph, just as it has been told to them. So, my first point is that it is rooted in history. My second point is that it is explained for us by angels.

[15:01] And my third and final point is that it is believed among the people. Luke is making clear for us that it is not just about the safe birth of a baby, great though that is.

But after 500 years of silence, God is speaking again. God's word is coming to pass. His plan is strategically at work.

What was promised to Micah 500 years earlier is being fulfilled here in Bethlehem. And the shepherds simply cannot keep it to themselves.

They are, if you like, the first evangelists. They go and they tell all of what they have seen and heard. And Luke tells us from verses 18, 19 and 20 as I draw to a close, three little things that happened as a result.

In verse 18, all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. It's quite a story. And nobody then dismissed it as the deluded ramblings of drunken shepherds.

[16:06] No, they were amazed by this story. And we're told that Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. What a year she was having.

And she rightly needed time to process it all. And that, I suspect, will be true of some of you here today. You will need to take time to ponder for yourself this message of the angels as it comes to you, I hope, afresh at the start of the 21st century.

That's why in the life of this church there is a fabulous course. We call it DC, Discovering Christianity. A fabulous program that you can take to help you on your own spiritual pilgrimage to enable you to take time to reflect and to ponder as Mary pondered these things in her heart.

And thirdly, from verse 20, the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all the things they'd heard and seen, which were just as they'd been told. J.H.

Mormon says, when Christ first came in glory, we pushed him into an outhouse and we've done our very best to keep him there ever since. And I want to suggest to you that in contrast to that reaction, which is so often our reaction, Dr. Luke tells us that the first people to encounter Jesus pondered, were amazed at this incarnation, glorified and praised God for this incarnation, for it was and has never been the same sins for anybody who will come and look and examine the evidence again.

[17:54] So I conclude, Luke, the historian, has given us some great details to help us understand what was going on 2,000 years ago. The message of the angels is a message we still desperately need to hear as a wider culture, as a nation, as a community in Vancouver, and as individuals.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you and he is Christ, the Lord. I hope and pray that this Christmas you will be able to hear again the message of the angels and to see perhaps for the very first time that in this baby is the solution for the problems not only for the wider planet, but in your personal world.

For the heart of this world's problems is the problem of the human heart. I don't know what's going on in your personal world. Have you, like me, lost your job this year?

Is your marriage on the rocks? Are you mentally or physically ill? Are you alone in a lonely world?

Are you desperately worried about your kids or your friends or your family?

What can you do? What can you do? What can you give? What can you give to Jesus? As the carol puts it, what can I give him?

[19:26] 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.

I wonder if you're prepared to give your heart to Jesus this Christmas. As it were, to cast all of your cares upon him, to lay them at the foot of that manger and at the foot of the cross.

For the manger is inextricably linked to the cross. It makes sense to think about doing this. For it is rooted in history, it is explained by the angels and it is believed among the people.

So I commend this Christmas message to you once again. I pray that you will hear it for yourselves.

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[20:47] [www.stjohns.org](http://www.stjohns.org). [www.stjohns.org](http://www.stjohns.org). On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St.

John's Shaughnessy. We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you very