

The Joy of Christmas - gift and reconciliation

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20); Psalm 96

Tonight is a wondrous night, a night to celebrate. In the readings we have truly heard tidings of great joy.

A few years ago I knew a teacher called Joy. She was Joy by name and by nature, and all her students loved her. At the end of each year, some students took great pleasure in finding a special Christmas card for her, one that featured the word **JOY**. Fortunately, this was not difficult because Christmas *is* a time of great joy.

This joy bursts forth in our celebrations – we love to have special Christmas decorations, music, gifts, and food, and we love to share all this with our family and friends.

Tonight I would like to talk about two joyful aspects of Christmas – the giving and receiving of gifts, and the experience of coming together with those we love. Both of these are human pleasures and signs of joy and love.

When we choose gifts, we try to find something that is just right for that person – not what we would like ourselves, but what they would like to receive. It is not always easy to find the perfect gift.

We give gifts to family and friends but God gave to us the ultimate gift, the perfect gift, a gift freely given, one that we needed, one that would bring joy to our hearts, one that showed the love of the giver – the birth of Jesus into a world in great need. The world is still in great need of the gift of love in Christ Jesus.

Many of the gifts we give and receive do not last long. The toy breaks; the socks wear out; the chocolates vanish in a very short time. But God's perfect gift and sign of love and grace was one that would last forever – Paul says in his letter to the Romans (8:38-39) *I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This great gift of God was also a gift of peace and reconciliation.

Christmas is a time of family reunion but can also be a time of separation. We may be separated by distance, by dispute or misunderstanding, by loss and grief, by illness or by inability to take the first step to reconciliation. Some of these can be overcome, but not always easily.

When we are separated from others, how do we achieve reconciliation? Who takes the first step? Do we wait for friends and family to make the first move for reconciliation? Or do we show our love freely despite any difference or indifference?

God came to us, and comes to us, *as we were, where we were*; and as we *are*, where we *are*.

We spend a lot of time at Advent on repentance, a turning again to God. Can we now turn in love to others despite anything that might divide us? Not just for their sake, but also for ours, that we might be the people God calls us to be.

From our relationship of love with God, we can bring peace, love and reconciliation to our relationships with others.

What did the angels say to the shepherds? They sang *glory to God* – we also can recognise the greatness of God's gift to us and give God the glory – we can praise God for what God does and what God is. For God's faithfulness, love, and grace. Not what we deserve, but God's gift to us.

The angels also sang of *Peace on earth to those whom God favours*. Can we share in the coming of God's peace and reconciliation? Can we bring peace to our hearts, to our families, our friends, to those we meet in our daily lives?

Peace is not a one-way Christmas gift, given by those who desire it to those who do not care about it. This can be a beginning. But peace is a gift that sometimes needs some groundwork. True peace comes from the heart that is ready to give it, to the heart that is ready to receive it.

We know that peace talks in war-torn countries may take months, years and even decades.

As recipients of God's peace, we may need to do some groundwork in our own hearts to fully receive this great gift.

Peace and reconciliation are not cheap gifts for the giver either. There may be a price to pay. We may have to give up pride and the self-righteousness of thinking, or even knowing, that we are in the right.

We know that Jesus did more than be born for us; he also paid a price. He died for us, for our salvation, our reconciliation with God, our wholeness, healing and fulfilment.

Such sacrifice and love is beyond human comprehension.

All we can do is join the angels in joyful praise of the King of kings. In the words of a much-loved carol, *“Glory to the newborn King; Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!”*

May the peace and joy of Christmas be with us all this night and evermore.
Amen.