

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

LOVE, PARTNERSHIP, CONNECTION

Year A – Advent 4 – Isaiah 7:10-16 - Mathew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us'). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Mathew 1:18-25

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Reflection

Christmas is a season surrounded by gifts. According to a YouGov survey, of the 88% of Brits celebrating Christmas 2024, 53% typically bought gifts for 6 or more people, with an average spend of £320.¹ I don't know about you, but I often find advent to be less of a season of reflection or waiting and more one of stress and rushing as I try to find the perfect gift for that relative I haven't seen for 3 years.

The paradox of this season is that even in this context of frenetic and copious gift giving the generosity at the heart of the nativity scene can feel far away. In contrast, today's readings draw us closer to the biblical understanding of generosity, driven by love not obligation, inspiring partnership not comparison and growing connection not stress.

Generosity Grows from and Towards Love

The story of Jesus' birth roots God's generosity in love. There is no obligation for the incarnation. God might have chosen to leave humanity and creation in our sin. He might have looked on our rebellion against him and left us to it. But he couldn't, not because some set of rules required him to act, but because his love compelled him to act. The gift of Christ

¹ YouGov, 'Christmas Gifting Consumer Report 2024', https://yougov.com/en-gb/reports/50927-gb-christmas-gifting-report-2024?utm_source=chatgpt.com, Nov 2024

is not a gift of obligation, but a gift born of love. One of the most famous passages in the Bible confirms this:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

It is out of God's love that Christ is born. This reveals something fundamental about generosity; true generosity is rooted in love.

While it is of course possible to give without loving, the kind of generosity we see in the Christmas story can only come from a deep well of love. It is a true generosity. Not concerned with how giving can benefit the giver, only concerned with the receiver. It is 'not self seeking'², but consumed with serving, delighting and loving the other or receiver.

Partnership of Generosity

Our gospel reading uses the phrase 'give' 5 times. Usually related to Mary's giving birth to Jesus. We see in our reading from Isaiah that God's promised gift will not simply appear but come through a virgin conception. In the Christmas story God's generosity is delivered in partnership with Mary and Joseph. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in Mary that enables Christ's conception and birth. St Anselm summed up this partnership in this way:

'Without God's Son, nothing could exist; without Mary's son, nothing could be redeemed'

As we see throughout the Bible, God chooses to partner with humanity in his generosity rather than delivering it in isolation. For me, the Christmas story is one of the greatest examples of this. Through Mary God delivers his gift; Immanuel, 'God with us'.

The Christmas gift is a reminder that generosity is an opportunity to partner with God. Christian generosity starts from the understanding that all is a gift from God. Life, love, money, food, shelter, work, family, it all comes from him who made us in his image and breathed life into our lungs.³ It is from these gifts that we give and are inspired to give to others. God is both the provider of the resources we give and inspiration for our generosity.

When we give we partner with him and live more fully into the image of the God who gives us life, his only son and through his son redemption. How is God inviting us to partner with him in generosity this week? What gifts (time, talents or financial) can we offer to others as a sign of God's love?

Generosity & Connection

It's often said that Christmas has been over commercialised, focused on growing profits and avoiding social embarrassment by ensuring the right level of gift reciprocation, rather than celebrating and spending time with others. One survey for an online gift retailer found that

² 1 Corinthians 13:5

³ Genesis 1:27 & Genesis 2:7

15% of respondents gave gifts out of obligation, while 20% gave to return the favour of a gift they'd been given.⁴

The author and theologian C.S. Lewis identified three things going by the name Christmas. First the religious festival, second the 'popular holiday' and third what he called 'the commercial racket' of gift and card giving. Lewis argues this practice of gift giving is mostly involuntary and 'gives on the whole much more pain than pleasure'. He sums up his feelings on the subject by asking: '*Can it really be my duty to buy and receive masses of junk every winter just to help the shopkeepers?*'⁵

Of course, Christmas is about much more than slavishly fulfilling social norms. The gift of Christ is a reminder that generosity often comes from a yearning and offers an opportunity for connection. As we discussed above, Jesus' birth originates in God's love for the world. It is as he seeks to repair the broken connection of creation with it's creator that God sends his only son, Immanuel: God with us.

More than that, the gift of Christ is not just a momentary gift of God's presence but the hinge point in history as it unlocks Jesus' later gift of redemption and connection through his death and resurrection. Christmas is a first step in re-connecting humanity with God it is a beginning which finds its end in the Easter miracle as God's ultimate gift and offer of connection is given. As St Athanasius famously put it:

'He (Christ) became what we are that we might become what he is'

God's generosity is often an opportunity for greater connection with our creator. In the gift of the incarnation we encounter more fully God's presence. When we give back to him we reorient our hearts away from the things of this world and towards the kingdom of heaven. This Christmas how can we give not out of obligation but as a way to extend or open up connection with others? What does it look like for me to extend God's generosity in my life to others?

⁴ Bloom & Wild, '*Thoughtfulness...or because we have to?*', https://www.bloomandwild.com/the-blog/gifting-survey-and-trends?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, '*What Christmas means to me...*' in '*God on the dock-Essays on Theology and Ethics*', William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970.