

## GOD'S GENEROUS GIVING

This following text is Felicity Green's speaking notes from the fourth Sanctuary meeting held on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2005.

### INTRODUCTION

On the underground at the moment there is a poster showing a Sony music player ready to be gift-wrapped with the strap line 'it is better to give than receive...or so they say...'

It is probably a light hearted suggestion that someone would rather keep the present than wrap it up and give it away. But if we really did feel that way about giving it would be tragic.

As Christmas approaches, it's good to spend a bit of time thinking about gifts and giving. And as Christians, we need to reflect on whether culture is dictating to us what we think or whether we know the difference between God's ideals and example compared to what we may read or see through the media. For example with giving – do we get our thoughts on this purely from TV, radio, advertising, shopping – or do we let the story of our faith inform us and shape us?

The culture has a huge influence on all of us – we would be foolish to think we are not affected by the advertising, the beautiful shop windows, the radio jingles and the glossy magazines – and we need to identify how it influences us so we can then see if there is another perspective God may want us to see.

### GOD AS GENEROUS GIVER

Obviously the Santa Claus figure has a bit of overlap with how we think of God – the benevolence and generous giving is definitely a part of what the Bible, creation and church history teach us about God – BUT it's not the whole story!

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian, says 'a santa claus God gives simply so we can have and enjoy things; the true God gives so we can become joyful givers and not just self absorbed receivers'.

So, what kind of things has God given and how does that change us into joyful givers?

He has given us the gift of...

*Creation* – from the seasons as we see them in the UK to the undiscovered corners of the universe (Gen 1v1)

*Life-breath* - part of himself to make us alive (Gen 2v7)

*Sustaining the world by his power day after day after day* (Col 1v17)

*Relationship between God and humanity* – we can know him (Jeremiah 31v34)

*Promising his presence to all kinds of people* (Joel 2v28)

*Salvation and forgiveness through Jesus* (Romans 5v6-9)

*A new start, a clean slate and ability to begin again* (2 Corinthians 5v17)

*Strength to become generous givers ourselves* (2 Corinthians 9v8-11)

*Hope for the future as well as new life now* (Revelation 21v1-4)

That's only a few of the things God gives – you can probably think of more.

In a letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul says 'thanks be to God for his indescribable gift'. **INDESCRIBABLE** – They were discovering God to be an amazingly gracious, generous and extravagant God.

The lyrics of a recent song by Chris Tomlin put it like this:

*'Indescribable, uncontainable,  
You put the stars in the sky and you know them by name.  
You are amazing God!*

*All powerful, unchangeable,  
Awestruck we fall to our knees and we humbly proclaim  
You are amazing God, you are amazing God.*

*Indescribable, uncontainable,  
You see the depths of my heart and you love me the same  
You are amazing God!'*

2000 years ago and today, God can only be described as indescribable in his giving to humanity. So, at this time of giving, perhaps we could benefit by turning to God for ideas about giving rather than being informed only by the media!

### **RESPONDING TO GOD'S GENEROSITY**

It has been said that Gift Shops shouldn't be called that – after all they are really only full of 'stuff' with the potential to become a gift.

Similarly, God has given all those things listed above and much more but often it is not received or received without the giver being acknowledged.

We can respond to God the Great Giver in a number of ways:

1. Faith
2. Gratitude

At it's simplest – the first response to God's generosity is faith – belief that he is the giver. Then comes gratitude as we realise the immense grace he shows in all his involvement with his creation.

Is there more than that?

Miroslav Volf says 'God's gifts aim at making us into generous givers, not just fortunate receivers. God gives so that we, in human measure, can be givers too...'

One story in the Bible shows this very clearly – God chooses Abraham and says 'I will bless you and make you a blessing to the nations'.

Many of you will have seen the story of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* - either on TV or lately at the cinema - you may remember that Lucy received a beautiful bottle which contained a special medicine which was eventually used to heal others.

So, God's gifts are for us to enjoy but at their best, they can shape us into generous givers who reflect God's great gift giving.

So, the next two ways we can respond to God's generosity are:

3. Availability
4. Participation.

We say availability because it's not about going off alone to be generous to the world but saying to God, I am available as an instrument in your expert hands to bless the world around me. Think of a surgeon doing some life saving surgery – they use instruments to do the work. Think of a musician providing an awe-inspiring evening of music – they use an instrument to do that. Francis of Assisi in his famous prayer said: 'Lord make me an instrument of your peace'. God has given peace through Jesus: peace with him, peace in our own hearts and the hope that peace is possible amongst humanity – Lord make us instruments of your peace.

We talk about participation because God is continually at work in the world and we would be very vain to think he waited for us before acting. But he invites us to be 'co-workers with Christ' – to participate in building his Kingdom. Volf says 'when a gift is given, life becomes extraordinary because God's own gift-giving flows through the giver.'

## **WRAPING UP**

So this Christmas, don't be limited in your view of what a gift is based on what the TV ads say. Gifts can be in boxes wrapped in beautiful paper and those gifts can bring a lot of joy and happiness. There are other gifts too though – giving your time, mending a broken relationship, showing love where previously we may have been looking out for ourselves only, celebrating another's success, a timely phone-call or letter, there are all kinds of gifts which reflect God's generosity.

At this point you may well be thinking – it is easier to spend the money and give something which can be wrapped! It's probably true and in some cases those kinds of gifts are most appropriate, but be open to God challenging you to give in other ways too this Christmas. Remember you are an instrument in an expert's hands and he will help you.

Paul taught the early Christians in Corinth about giving when he said 'Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, no reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all time, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work... You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.'

May God's creative, generous gift giving inspire your giving this Christmas and flow through you to others.

## **CONVERSATION**

1. What do you think about the 1<sup>st</sup> stage in response to God's gifts to us – faith? Is there anyone who you would really love to know God's generous gifts and respond in faith this Christmas?
2. How do you feel about the idea of being an instrument in God's hands to bless the world?
3. Can you think of any non-shop-bought gifts you can give this Christmas?