

## Christmas 1: Being Present for Others

31 December, 2017

Reading: Luke 2:15-21

The Vicar, the Roman Catholic Priest and the Retailer were comparing notes about Christmas. "What do you do at Christmas?" they asked each other.

"When I have finished my last service I go home and my family all sit around the tree and open some presents." said the Vicar.

"When I have said my last mass I go home and the housekeeper has made me a lovely dinner," said the Roman Catholic Priest.

"When I have served my last customer," said the retailer I go home, look at the sales figures and we all sing, "What a friend we have in Jesus"!

Whether we like it or not, Christmas has become the time to give presents. They say the joy of giving is greater than the joy of receiving. That is until you get a Playstation.

Today we gather to continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus and we hear of the Shepherds. Even when Jesus was still a baby others wanted to be in his presence. We heard about the shepherds running to see this new born baby. They probably gave no thought to the risk they were taking to be in his presence. They were leaving their sheep to robbers, wolves and to just wandering off as the fences were generally very poor. Shepherds of Jesus day were not like our farmers who are the backbone of the country. I know they are the backbone of the country because my farmer brother in law tells me they are. Shepherds in Jesus time were very poor and smelt and broke the Sabbath laws, in fact they were not well liked by the community and they were accused of all sorts of things. It's typical of Luke the Gospel writer that these disadvantaged shepherds should be the first to hear the news, and that Jesus, when he grew up, would identify himself as one of them, describing himself as the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is God's gift to us today. Wrapped in human flesh. A special present. A present for each of us. For although he was born in a particular time and place Jesus is accessible in every time and in every place to everyone of us.

We think of presents as being material things: a set of socks, a new bike, but Jesus the gift is a non-material gift. When Jesus was present he gave gifts that never wore out: belief in self, healing, peace, compassion, forgiveness, dignity and justice. It was these presents that made an encounter with Jesus so life-changing. Shepherds would leave their sheep to be with him, others would climb trees, some tried and walked on water, others cut holes in the roof, broke social taboos, called out in crowds, questioned the authorities, or snuck around in the dead of night, all to be in Jesus presence. And those who spent most time in his presence were happy to go to crosses of their own to proclaim his message of unending love.

You may have known people who just by their very presence bring hope and comfort. I can't claim to have met her, but I did talk to someone who interviewed Mother Teresa. They said they had felt utterly present in her presence. That no matter what happened they had her complete and undivided attention. It's pretty hard to offer anyone your complete and undivided attention on a street in Calcutta.

My friend the Reverend Peter Sykes is like that. He has committed himself to working in South Auckland and he has this knack of making people believe in themselves. They come away

from dealing with him with new self-belief, a feeling that they can do it for themselves and for their families. The violence in Mangere, his part of South Auckland, has been like a huge shadow of darkness over his community but Peter and others have been a source of encouragement in their presence in that place.

For all the elaborate gifts you might have given your loved ones this Christmas, the most important gift you can give them is not what you buy them but your presence. How many homes will be without Dads this Christmas - because they have moved on? They have given gifts but not their presence.

When we are busy and rushed and stressed it is easy to forget that who we choose to spend our time with is the most important gift of all. Buy this the ads say and you will show love. The Gospel says, be with this person, really present with them, in their pain and need, that is the greatest gift.

When God wanted to show how much he loved us, he didn't send a text. He chose instead to send the presence of Jesus. This loving presence needs to live on in us and become a centre not just of Christmas gift giving but of the whole year.

The hardest day's work you can ever do is to really be with someone in their pain or in their joy, just listening and being present.

I wonder who God is calling you to be present for this New Year coming.

The newspaper ad went...

"Is there any place where we can borrow a little boy three or four years old for the Christmas holidays? We have a nice home and would take wonderful care of him and bring him back safe and sound. We used to have a little boy, but he couldn't stay, and we miss him so much when Christmas comes."

One woman was moved to answer the ad. She had a boy but had lost her husband to cancer. For the first time since her husband's death, this ad had made her pause to think of another's grief. Christmas promised to be a hard time after the death of her husband. So she answered the appeal. The writer of the letter was a widower who lived with his mother. He had lost his wife and his little son the same year.

"That Christmas," she recalls "My son and I shared a joyous day with the man and his mother. Together, we found a happiness that we doubted would ever return. But the best part is that this joy was mine to keep throughout the years and for each of the Christmases since. You see the man who wrote the letter, months later, became my husband."

A long time ago, Jesus became present to us. And everyone who met him had their lives changed for the better. Who is God calling you to be present for this new year and beyond? The Warehouse had a wonderful sticker. We used to have it on Rebecca's door. It read: "The greatest gift you can give your kids is your time. The best present you can give someone is your presence."

The best present God could give us was the presence of his Son.