

As we move into this Epiphany season, we are thinking for the next few weeks about how God's presence is revealed - or *manifested* in the world. As we adjust to the cold and wet weeks of January, Christmas may already seem like a distant memory. The trees are down, and the decorations packed away. The crib is still up at the back of the Cathedral, liturgically correct but looking a little as though the vergers have not had time to put it away. It will be there until candelas at the beginning of February, a quiet reminder of the glories so recently celebrated, and a challenge to us to bring our gifts to offer to the Christ child, along with the wise men.

I'd like this morning to talk about gifts. Not so much the gold, frankincense and myrrh of the crib scene, but of our whole lives as gift, and of the abundance and generosity of God. Epiphany is the true season of gifts - rolling out the greater implication of the gift of Christ's presence at Christmas. At Christmas, God gave us the gift of his Son, and many of us gave gifts to each other. During Epiphany, we have the opportunity to give gifts to God, and to become part of his gift of life and hope to the world.

The season of Epiphany began last week with the remembering of the wise men bringing gifts to Jesus to mark their recognition of who he was: gold for a king; frankincense for a God; myrrh for a sacrifice. Strange gifts, recorded in our scriptures to help us understand that Jesus' significance extended far beyond his own national and faith community. *Next week, we will hear how God takes our obedience and transforms it into celebration, as servants obediently fill six huge jars with water and discover that it is turned to the best wine anyone has ever tasted.* We will continue in the following weeks to hear stories of the mission of Jesus' gathering strength in the early days of Jesus' ministry and the early church.

*This week, we have sprung forward around thirty years to catch up with Jesus by the banks of the Jordan river, the Eastern boundary of the land of Israel Palestine. Today, that is contested land, surrounded by uncleared landmines from decades, indeed centuries of conflict. He has come to find his cousin John who is inviting people to begin new lives at the symbolic site of the entry into the Promised Land a millennia before. He takes his place in midst of the people lining up to be baptised, signifying death and resurrection - so much more than just washing, it is the sign of the end of the old, the start of something wholly new. For each person, to take up their role and responsibility in the Kingdom of God, to live not for themselves but for their creator and saviour.*

John didn't mince his words. He told his listeners that if they didn't turn around, their lives were heading towards death. If they turned their back on life as the gift of God, there was only one result. If they turned towards the light instead of away from it, their lives would be flooded with light and they could live the life God intended, for their own sakes and the sake of the world.

John knew about Jesus, of course. Perhaps he didn't yet understand the whole story, but he knew enough to be amazed when he looked up from his last candidate to see Jesus standing there, obediently waiting to be baptised. "What are you doing here, Lord," he says ...? And Jesus says, I need to do this, I need to share with everyone else here, offering my life to God. And in response, he receives the gift of the words everyone longs to hear from their parent: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Our faith is built on gift. The generous gift of God in creation, the generous gift of Jesus as saviour. The generous gift of hope. And to receive those gifts, all we are invited to do is to open our hands, and to keep them open - and that means trusting God, and reflecting God's generosity ourselves. It means taking our place in the economy of gift rather than possession as the basis for human life lived in the light of God.

Some years years ago, I was due to preach and a long standing member of the Cathedral community apparently was heard to say, "It's the Dean preaching their morning, I bet it will be about money again." One result was that I stopped preaching about giving, and I regret that - not just for any implications for the financial health of the Cathedral, but more importantly for the

spiritual health of this cathedral community. Please do understand before I continue, that many here give generously and sacrificially, and play an indispensable part in enabling the Cathedral to maintain its buildings and mission. But it's important to regularly review what and why we give, as part of the Christian community, and so I agreed with colleagues that I would do that today.

Giving is in the character of God: God the Father, who gave form and life the world, God the Son who gave his life to restore God's life to us, and God the Holy Spirit who breathes God's life and love into our lives each day, and whose gift is confirmed in our baptism. It's in our baptism, by the way, that our obedient offering of ourselves - either by our own decision or on our behalf by our parents - seals our eternal relationship to the God of all gifts.

So how do we continue to embrace the ecology, the economy of gift? How do we keep our hands and our hearts open to receive all that God longs to give us? We keep our hearts and hands open to God, by keeping our hearts and our hands open to others: we cannot receive from God, and grasp it to ourselves as possession, to be guarded and protected from others. By doing so, we close ourselves to the continuation of that gift of God's live, his life, God's provision.

My father told me a story many years ago of a young child, just 2 or 3 years old, with an unusual disability: their right hand was closed in a fist and nothing could be done to open it. The child was taken to a succession of doctors and consultants, and finally to an eminent and well dressed doctor in Harley Street in London. As the doctor leaned over his elegant desk for the examination, a miracle occurred. The child reached out and opened their hand to grasp the doctor's beautiful gold watch hanging from a chain on his waistcoat. There was a tinkling sound as the midwife's engagement ring, lost on the day the child was born, fell into the doctor's china tea cup.

To give is to live a healthy life, part of God's family, sharing with other members of the family. Giving is good for you: older members of the congregation may recall adverts proclaiming, "Guinness is good for you." All things in moderation, of course - so what does the right amount of giving look like?

Over many years I've reflected on, preached and practised committed Christian giving for myself. I like to start by saying that we start by giving what's right, not what's left. It makes quite a neat illustration, of course. If we send on ourselves, even on those we love, and then fish around for what's left to give to God, there will never be very much. If we set an amount and make that our first priority, we will find that other commitments fall into place. And it truly is our first priority, because our giving as Christians is a sign, a really practical sign, that we are giving our lives to God each week, each month, each year, each day - and in doing that opening ourselves to receive God's gift of eternal life. Not in return, because it's not a transaction, but rather as a way of living in God's economy of grace.

We give what's right, not what's left - but what's right? My second principle is that we give in response to God, not in response to need. It's up to God to take what we give and direct it to God's work of salvation, of reconciliation in the world. For centuries, Christians have taken the tithe, a tenth of what we earn, as a benchmark for giving. As is often said, some may find themselves in the position to give more. Many of us work from the basis of what comes in on a weekly or monthly basis to work out what a tenth might look like. Each person has to work it out for themselves, but you will find it hard to discover a Christian who practices regular committed giving who is unable to speak at the time of recognising God's provision for them. And if I were asked whether I would rather depend upon my own resources, however well guarded, or on God's - I think I know where the greater treasure is to be found.

Speaking very practically - and the subject of giving, like the incarnation itself, is nothing if not practical, and physical - a really useful way of enabling our Cathedral congregation to give is through the Parish Giving Scheme. Many of us choose to direct a significant proportion of our giving to our local faith community - for me, half of my monthly giving comes to the Cathedral, for example. Once we have decided how much we want to give to the Cathedral, the Parish giving scheme provides a really straightforward way to put that into practice for those with bank accounts,

with the option of a gift aid declaration, and another option of committing an annual increase in line with inflation. It's so easy somewhat to allow the value of our giving to erode over years, and selfishness makes it easy for me to somehow forget to increase. And gift aid, as I'm sure you know, adds a really significant 25% to everything you give.

If you want to know more about how the Cathedral uses the money that you give - and about our finances more generally - please do ask me or one of y colleagues, or a member of the Cathedral Chapter. We are preparing some information about that for our annual report, but that's not until April, so we will try to get something out at the back of the Cathedral sooner than that, and to offer a short meeting over coffee on an available Sunday in the next few weeks.

Life is a gift, and God invites us into that life -

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*