

Year C Christmas Day HTK 2021

It's all but over. The shopping is all done, or we are past caring. The presents are all packed and under the tree. The pudding has been boiling for hours. The food is all prepared if not already cooked. The table is possibly set, and the relatives are on the way, maybe?

You have probably spent considerable hours, perhaps also money and care on the needs of others for this Christmas. We are of course rightly to be encouraged to think beyond our own families and friends, to consider the needs of the poor and refugees, those who cannot anticipate a laden table or presents to unwrap.

But I want to ask you to be selfish for a moment. What did you really want for Christmas? Really? What were you hoping for?

It's a question that may evoke more in the way of fond memory than specific hope. Children, after all, are those who can realistically want something for Christmas. Their hopes are concrete enough to become the centre of this celebration, standing a reasonable chance of fulfilment. But their hopes function for all of us, in some way; even those who at this time have less hope in this particular child of Bethlehem find the faces and hopes of children evocative, representing something true, if difficult deep within us all.

What the very young want for Christmas may sometimes be granted, but maturity brings the realisation that while Christmas gifts may continue to be tokens of love and thanksgiving, they are not actually the fulfilment of our deepest wishes.

Readings, Chemist Warehouse or even boutiques and the like no longer seem enough. Our dreams become more expansive, and perhaps even expensive, we learn, sadly, over time that most of us do not fulfil our dreams or else we lose them.

Christmas is thus a sad time for many. We feel the loss of loved ones, or the absence of those from whom we are estranged, more keenly at a time when so much emphasis is placed on family and togetherness. The pandemic that has swept the globe has separated families in ways that we could never have imagined.

More generally, we also sense the passage of time, the narrowing of opportunities that remain and the cost of choices once made. Bringing this unchosen wisdom of our own lives to the manger, we may be very conscious of what has and has not been fulfilled of what we once asked for.

This child of Bethlehem is an evocative figure amid such reverie; he does not, however, come simply as the bringer of the gift of nostalgia, let alone regret. This child brings

his own innocence and hope with a purpose: to recall our own.

While we may today celebrate what we find and recall of hope in his face and those of the young, consider for a moment your own face in that child's gaze. God always sees infinite potential in us, and new hopes. God meets all of us as though we, too, still have that same promise and potential we see in the child. This is the truth of Christmas and the truth of the Gospel.

I don't mean to suggest that we can return to past hopes as though our intervening lives have not taken place. The Gospel is not a scheme for self-help, but a gift of unflinching truth. Faith - the acceptance of this truth about ourselves, God and the world - is being willing to view our real lives, our pasts and our futures through a different perspective governed by hope.

God's view of us is not the picture provided by our CV's or our bank accounts or even of our families and relationships, all those things we acquired or achieved in our own efforts to fulfil those wishes of years past. Our efforts to win, to possess, are not what makes us who we are, whether we seem to have succeeded or failed; they are not what makes us worthy of God's love or of one another's.

The shepherds, first witnesses to the incarnation a sign of this truth. These men who came to the manger at Bethlehem ahead of us are not of any particular social standing or power, quite the opposite; They are humble, landless people without obvious accomplishment, chosen despite this or even because of it.

There is of course another Christmas story, in which the Magi also come, bearing gifts to him; but there is no implication these grander visitors are more welcome at Bethlehem than the shepherds or that their gifts are what the Christ child most wanted. Rather these men from afar and their precious gifts symbolised who he already is and who he will be for us.

Together shepherds and Magi demonstrate the God's interests in us, God's call to us now, is as indiscriminate as a child's unconditional acceptance.

A newborn cannot distinguish between a shepherd and a king; in and as this newborn, God will not.

God always sees that possibility in us, beyond the false dreams with we have put in place meanwhile, and calls us to see it in others too. The one who was entered into human life among the poor invites us now to live our lives free of the baggage we've been carting around imagining

that it was what we really wanted, and to live into the possibility that that freedom offers.

What did you really want?

What we all really want for Christmas, I suspect, is to be known just as we are, and to be accepted as we are.

This is the gift Mary and Joseph receive, that the shepherds receive and that is offered to us.

And, you see what Jesus wanted for Christmas was you.