

A TOTAL GIFT

Matthew has told us about a configuration of three gifts that represent the highest and best gifts that humans can bring to Christmas. But we still compare and contrast that with the gift God brings to Christmas: the Son, the Companion, the Friend, the Savior. A total gift.

Music can be a great carrier of the Word. I suppose this has always been known, but King David made it formal. He seemed to have learned on some kind of folk harp while still a shepherd boy. And then he sang the madness out of King Saul for a time. His psalms are songs as well as poetry, and as soon as he became King, he called together musicians and formed choirs to sing to God's glory. And we have been doing it ever since.

Jesus Christ not only came – He is perpetually coming. Though we celebrate a season together, your own personal Christmas is whenever He reaches you – whenever and however He breaks through into your own consciousness. It is not really a group effort or a communal affair. Community forms afterward, among those who have experienced His presence. And it is fun to remember once a year that He has come for each one of us, and that He will continue to come in ways ever new – always calling us to more light, truth, possibility, adventure.

The Christ comes with a Kingdom, in the name of a Kingdom – a Kingdom not of this world. He comes for this Kingdom or not at all. Advent means we try to prepare for His coming. We should know by now that it will come in ways unexpected, and cause us unexpected awakening. If it does not knock us for a loop, we have been duped. If it does not call for at least everything we have and are, we have been conned by the counterfeit Christmas.

The greatest learning point in history is when this Unexpected One walks into our lives. If we survive the shock – if we do not run or hide or reject – it all starts to match the secret, unpublished pattern built into our brain waves long ago by the Creator. Get the roads ready! Prepare Him room! Maybe even paint a “For Sale” sign to put up in front of your inn, just in case.

The following is just a story. At least you may take it as that, if you wish. We're not sure of its exact origins, but a version of it was read on the radio years ago by the late Paul Harvey.

The man lived on a farm outside a little town in Minnesota. He was a kind, decent, mostly good man – generous to his family, upright in his dealings with others – but he just didn't believe all that stuff about "Incarnation" that the churches proclaimed at Christmas time. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus story about God revealing himself in a man, coming to earth in Jesus of Nazareth.

He told his wife and kids, "I'm sorry, but I'm just not coming with you this Christmas Eve." He tried to explain that it made him feel like a hypocrite, and that he would be more peaceful and loving if he stayed home and didn't get all annoyed or angry inside. So it made them sad, but they went to the midnight service without him.

Shortly after the family drove away, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries growing heavier and heavier, and then went back to the fireside chair to read. Minutes later, he was startled by a thudding sound, then another, and another. At first he thought someone was throwing snowballs against his living-room window. When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably on the ground in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter, they had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. He thought that if he could direct them to the barn, they could keep warm. He hurriedly put on his coat and boots and went out to open the big barn doors. But the birds wouldn't come in. He hurried back to the house and fetched bread crumbs, sprinkling them on the snow as a path to the safety of the barn. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread and continued to flop around helplessly in the deepening snow.

He tried catching them; he tried shoing them; he tried walking around them waving his arms and herding them toward the barn. But they scattered in all directions, panicked by his assaults. He was too frightening to them, and the barn obviously did not represent to them any safety or warmth that they had ever known.

The man became quite engrossed in the plight of the birds, and in his own inability to help them. "To them, I am a strange and terrifying creature," he thought. "If only I could think of some way to let them know they can trust me – that I'm not trying to hurt them, only help them. But how?" No matter what he tried, every move he made tended

only to scatter them, confuse them, make matters worse. They were simply too frightened of him.

“If only I could be a bird for a few minutes,” he thought finally, “and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe, warm barn. If only I could be one of them so they could hear and understand.”

At precisely that moment, the church bells began to peal out from the valley below, announcing that Christmas had come. Like an electric shock in his brain, the light turned on. “Oh my God,” he murmured. “There was no other way.”

From that day on, he loved Christmas. And even years later, people would come to the old Deacon when they were troubled by their doubts, and he would tell them: “If you believe that a God of love exists, Incarnation is inevitable. Christmas is not just mystery or miracle or the creed of some human church. Christmas had to happen. There was no other way.”

PRAYER

O God most high, most near – open the deep places of our hearts, that our joy may not be shallow in the hour of Christ’s coming, but instead, with the knowledge of this world’s sorrow, may be uplifted and transformed by the timeless grace of His Spirit. Deliver us from all quibbling unbelief, and set us free by the swift flight of our soul’s aspirations to enter into Christmas as people humbled to a joy greater than they expected or earned.

Wherever there are children,
 may gifts be holy in the name of Christ.
Wherever there are families,
 may the coming of Your Son bring a purer love.
Wherever there are men and women of any kind or station,
 may eternal hope break in upon them.

Honor and glory, praise and joy be unto You, O God of this strange and wondrous new Peace. It is in Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.