

Advent Bible Study – Little Town Big Story 3

This Advent study takes as its theme the well known carol, 'O little town of Bethlehem' written in 1868 by Phillips Brooks an Episcopal priest as a suitable carol for his Sunday School. Each study takes its theme from a verse of the carol.

Study Three 'How silently, how silently'

'How silently, how silently'
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Gifts and traditions - Matthew 2:1-11

Gifts play a big part in the Christmas story, both in the Biblical narrative as the Magi bring their offerings, and in the tradition of exchanging gifts. Our gift giving has its origins in the Roman festival of Saturnalia (in late December) which was Christianized by the early church and included, as well as much excess merry-making, the giving of small presents. Christmas gift-giving during the Middle Ages was usually between people with legal relationships, such as tenant and landlord. Charles Dickens's book *A Christmas Carol*, published in 1843, played a major role in reinventing Christmas as a holiday emphasizing family, goodwill, and compassion as opposed to communal celebration and excess.

But what of the gifts of that first Christmas?

1. GOLD - a gift for a king.

There is a tendency to lose touch with the fact that Jesus was in a very real sense 'a child born to be king', who would rule by love rather than force, and from a Cross rather than a throne. We may consider ourselves equal with our earthly friends, that's not something we can do with Jesus. We can know friendship with Jesus, but only after submission to his rule of love in our hearts and lives.

2. FRANKINCENSE - a gift for a priest.

The perfume of frankincense would fill the air of the Jewish Temple at the time of sacrifice. The priest's role was to open the way to God for men, to be a bridge-builder. What a lovely image of Jesus' role in coming to earth in human form, opening up the way to God for humankind, building a bridge between humankind and God.

3. MYRRH - a gift for one who is to die.

Even at Jesus' birth there were signs of his destiny. Here was a child who would be the one true King, the perfect High Priest and the Saviour of the world.

A gracious gift

We cannot leave the discussion of gifts with those of the Magi, because in doing so we forget the greatest gift of all, that God should freely enter into human form in the person of Jesus so that humankind should begin to understand the depth of God's love, a love that surpasses knowledge. This is the gift of Grace, freely given but never deserved, but which like all gifts can remain on the shelf unless it is accepted and unwrapped. The gift of forgiveness, love and acceptance from a Heavenly Father to his prodigal children. A gift wrapped up in the body of a little child.

"There is a simple cure for people who doubt God's love and question God's grace: to turn to the Bible and examine the kind of people God loves. Jacob, who dared to take God on in a wrestling match and ever after bore a wound from that struggle... The Bible tells of a murderer and adulterer who gained a reputation as the greatest king in the Old Testament, a 'man after God's own heart.' And of a church being led by a disciple who cursed and swore that he had never known Jesus. And of a missionary being recruited from the ranks of Christian-torturers. I get mailings from Amnesty International, and as I look at their photos of men and women who have been beaten and cattle-prodded and jabbed and spit on and electrocuted, I ask myself, 'What kind of human being could do that to another human being?' Then I read the book of Acts and meet the kind of person who could do such a thing - now an apostle of grace, a servant of Jesus Christ, the greatest missionary history has ever known. If God can love that kind of person, maybe, just maybe, he can love the likes of me."

Philip Yancey, What's so amazing about Grace

Questions

1 Is the Christmas message actually more about receiving than giving? If so, then how do we then translate that to our everyday lives?

2 Where can we see evidence of Grace in the world? Where does it break through?

3 How can the local Church reclaim the idea of gift giving and relate it to the Christmas story?