

JOHN 3.16: THE GIFT

(Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford: 17 December 2006)

The wise men gave their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; and ever since, people have been giving gifts to one another to celebrate the coming of Jesus.

How much will you have spent on Christmas gifts this year?

According to the British Retail Consortium, this year each person will spend an average of £390 on Christmas gifts – this is up 18% on 2005.

The most popular gifts this year are music and clothes, with gift vouchers, books and cosmetics and fragrances all making it into the top five.

The top children's toy is predicted to be the 'Bratz – Forever Diamondz'.

Christmas is an expensive business. It's also a stressful business.

For its not just buying a present, but getting the right present.

Will my loved one really appreciate the rolling pin I have bought her?

Not surprisingly in the midst of all the stresses and strains of buying and giving the rights presents, we can forget the 'reason for the season'; we can forget that Christmas is ultimately a celebration of God's gift to us – Jesus.

At this point, I guess, that we all feel pretty pleased with ourselves.

For we have not forgotten. Here we are in church, listening again to the familiar story, singing again the familiar carols – and reminding ourselves again that at the heart of Christmas is Jesus, God's gift to us.

Indeed, according to one survey, 59% of the population said that celebrating the birth of Christ would be a central part of their family's Christmas.

In spite of the best efforts of militant secularists, as a nation we don't want to celebrate a politically correct 'Winterval' – we want to celebrate a Christian Christmas.

We want our children to have nativity plays at school– we want to be able to send cards which say 'Happy Christmas', and not just 'Season's Greetings'.

And yet, even although so many people say that celebrating the birth of Christ will be a central part of their Christmas, I fear that many people will be in danger of missing out on the heart of Christmas.

For although we may celebrate God's gift of a Saviour, not all of us go on to take the gift out of its wrapping.

Let me explain. By Christmas Eve in our home there will be a host of beautifully wrapped Christmas gifts around our tree – they will be a delight to look at – and as far as my grand-children are concerned, of great interest to feel - but in fact they will only have any meaning once we open them up.

In sending his Son God has given us all a fantastic Christmas present, but have we actually unwrapped the gift?

Does this gift make any difference to you? Does it have any meaning to you?

Listen to the way in which the Apostle John talked about God's gift:

“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die, but have eternal life” (John 3.16)

Notice three things:

1. God's gift in Jesus is for everybody – **God loved the world** – God's love includes not just the wise men & the shepherds, but you & me. Yes, God loved you so much, that he gave his only Son
2. God's gift in Jesus is **eternal life**. Or to personalise it, God gave his Son that you might have eternal life – that you might be freed from your past, that you might have a purpose for your present, that you might have hope for our future
3. God's gift in Jesus needs to be received - God doesn't force his gift of love and life on anybody. His gift needs to be received – and we receive by believing, by trusting. “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone **who believes in him** may ...have eternal life”. Or to personalise, to receive the gift you must stretch out your hand in faith to God and say, Yes Lord, I believe in Jesus – I believe that Jesus came for me, that Jesus died for me, that Jesus rose for me – Come Lord Jesus into my heart and life, and let me know the difference you alone can make.

There is so much more that I could say. But time is against me.

If you would like to know more, then I want to suggest two courses of action:

1. Action 1: Ask me for a copy of this leaflet which I have written especially for this evening. It spells out in greater detail the amazing nature of God's gift to us. I'll be by the door – all you need to do is to ask for a copy, and it will be yours.
2. Action 2: In addition you could also sign up to receive details of a 40 day course which begins in February, and will end just before Easter. In the words of Rick Warren, who pioneered this course: *“The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfilment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purposes”*. At the Reception desk, as also at strategic points in the Upper Hall and the Friendship Centre, there are blue cards for you to fill in with your name, address and e-mail – you can either give the filled-in card to me or post it in the red box by the reception desk. At the beginning of January we will then send you further details of this course.

The heart of Christmas is God's Gift of his Son.

Yes, enjoy the turkey and the trimmings, enjoy the partying and the making merry.

But don't miss out on the heart of Christmas – don't miss out on the Gift!