



## Sermon: - 1<sup>st</sup> January 2017

# He came from heaven to earth

*Isaiah 60: 1 – 6;; Matthew 2: 1 – 12*

Happy New Year! 2016 is over 2017 has begun! And what a year 2016 was! All the sporting triumphs; all the sporting scandals! All the celebrity deaths, all the political turnarounds, all the wars and the rumours of wars. It has been a momentous year, a troubling year, and a year of incredible change. And now 2017 has begun and all over the world people are celebrating the start of another year, making resolutions and looking forward in hope. Christmas seems but a distant memory! In fact my husband David had a conversation with someone on the checkout in Tesco on Christmas Eve who said that before they closed that night the Christmas decorations would be taken down. Christmas is over, roll on Easter! I wonder, can anybody guess when this photograph was taken? (Display of Cadbury's Crème Eggs)

It was taken in the Co-op in Kingussie on Boxing Day! It does seem that for most people, the Christmas season starts well before Christmas, perhaps as early as October, ending on Boxing Day. But for the Church, Christmas ends on Friday seventh of January on what we call Epiphany.

Epiphany marks the visit of the Magi - the Wise Men - to the stable at Bethlehem to see the new baby.

You know what would have happened if there had been three wise WOMEN instead of three wise MEN, don't you? They would have asked for directions, arrived on time to help deliver the Baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and given practical gifts!

Christmas has come to be synonymous with giving; we focus on all the gifts that the various visitors brought to the stable, but also on the greatest Gift – Jesus coming as a baby, coming in human form. Leaving the glories of heaven to be born in a stable. But I wonder what that might have been like? What does it really mean?

Just the other day I read an article about a soldier in Syria who claimed to have a Near Death Experience. Now, whatever you think about them the interesting thing about NDEs is the similarity between each of them. They all involve a long dark tunnel, a bright light at the end, an overwhelming feeling of peace and love, a profound joy, a welcoming, loving

presence and a feeling of having “come home”. Many of those who have such experiences say that they didn’t want to come back, they would much rather have stayed in that place where there was light and peace and love, where trouble had seemed to disappear, where there was no pain. Coming back was, apparently, difficult and unpleasant.

People say things like, “I knew that this radiant being was powerful. It was loving me with overwhelming power. To be completely known, accepted, and intensely loved by this being of light surpassed anything I had known or could have imagined.”

Or, “It is a space where grace knows no bounds and only infinite love abounds.”

Is this Heaven? It could be. Who knows? It sounds like the heaven we imagine. It has echoes of the Isaiah passage we read. If we were to experience something like that, would we be prepared to leave it? Perhaps this is the closest we can get to understanding what Jesus did. He left a realm of total peace, love and joy, a place where there is no pain, and no condemnation, only total acceptance and love; he left this place, which was all he had ever known, he left a sanctuary, an experience of utter contentment, a truly blissful state, to come down to pain ... and darkness ... and rejection ... and condemnation ... and death.

Christmas is about giving, and this is what Jesus gave – he gave peace for turmoil, safety for pain, joy for trouble, love for fear, hope for despair, life for death...

And so we give in return ... In the face of what Jesus gave for us, how can we fail to offer something in return? On that first Christmas others gave; there was the worship of the shepherds, and of Simeon and Anna, and of course the gifts of the wise men...

These were significant and meaningful; they were highly symbolic. Gold represented kingship and was a gift for a king, incense represented spirituality and prayer and was a gift for a deity, and myrrh was a spice used in burials. So all three of the gifts foreshadowed both Jesus' life and his death. And in the face of Jesus' great sacrifice for us, great gift to us, do we also not want to offer him a gift at Christmas? So what gifts can we offer to the King? The Christmas carol suggests that we offer our heart. The gospels invite us to offer our lives, but what does that mean? Perhaps there are other ways of looking at the gifts the wise men brought, other meanings that we can attach to them which might model for us gifts that we can give.

I think that the joke about the three wise women is just a little unfair to the Magi. Their gifts were not as impractical as they seemed!

Gold represented kingship and so was a gift for a king, but it was also a very practical gift in the face of what the next few years were to hold - the flight into Egypt. For the several years that this little family spent living in exile, they would need this gold, to keep them on the journey, and until they were able to establish some form of livelihood, and perhaps also to enable their return when the time was right. Gold, symbolic and practical!

And we too can give practical gifts. It is easy to see the Magi's gold as a symbol of the money that we give to the king, whether in the offering plate on a Sunday, or in giving to charities and good causes. But we can also give of our precious time, and our talents. Gold is the symbol of the wealth we give, in whatever way we give it, the giving of what is precious to us, whatever that is.

The Wise men also brought Frankincense. This, when it was burnt, created a calming atmosphere and ground down to a fine powder it could be used as talcum powder, so perhaps it wasn't as impractical as it seems. And it represented spirituality and prayer, it heralded Jesus' deity. And of course we can offer worship. We are worshipping now! But we can worship in other ways too, more profound ways. The bible gives us a picture of worship which encompasses the whole of life. The Psalms are a biblical picture of worship, and yet there are many ways in which that picture of worship is very different from what we see in church on a Sunday morning. The psalmist brings everything to God; thanks and praise, hopes and dreams, longings and disappointments, but rage and curses too. The Psalms give us a picture of the whole of life lived out before God, all its ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies, successes and sins... and in the midst of this, God's help is sought, his mercy is looked for, his understanding is presumed, and his responsibility is taken for granted – “how long, Oh Lord, will you allow this situation to continue ... my enemies to triumph ... the evil doers to prosper?”

Worship in the psalms encompasses birth, death, life, sin, war, want, need, despair, joy, hope, reward ... The whole of life for the psalmist is an act of worship to God, the creator who made us all. And in the same way we can live out our lives as an act of worship to God. We can tell him when we are happy, we can cry to him when we are sad, we can shout at him when we are angry ... These are the gifts that we can bring to the king – the

worship of a life lived in his presence, the gift of honesty about our feelings, and an openness before him that doesn't pretend that things are fine when they are not.

And this leads me to the last gift that the wise men brought to the baby Jesus. The strange offering of myrrh, the spice used in burials, but it also had antiseptic properties, a useful gift for a mother with a young baby. This gift foreshadowed Jesus' death; it foresaw his pain and passion. And we too can bring the gift of our pain and our passion, and lay them at the manger before the baby.

There is not one of us who will not have known in the past year moments of confusion, suffering, and pain, be they physical, emotional, spiritual, and not one of us for whom the coming year may hold just such suffering. Because to be human is to suffer. Indeed for some of us suffering is an ongoing and dark reality. Illness, loss, confusion, doubt, broken relationships may, for many of us, cast a shadow that threatens to obliterate the light of this Epiphany season, the light that Jesus brought into the world. And yet this shadow need not obscure the light. Suffering need not lead us away from God. Thirty years after the visit of the wise men Jesus entered the darkness of suffering, and this darkness he endured mysteriously carried within it the means of our peace, our hope and our redemption. Can we offer the myrrh of our suffering to Jesus? Sometimes that might be in cries of pain and anguish to a God whose ways are confusing and bewildering, far beyond our understanding. Yet in offering our suffering to God we may be offering a gift that carries within it the seeds of redemption, we may be offering a submission to God which might ultimately lead us through despair to hope.

Jesus came to share this life with us, he came to demonstrate to us the love of God, he came to learn what it means to be human with all the pain and suffering that too often is part of that. And in his coming, in his learning, in his experience, he offers us compassion and understanding of all the dark emotions that plague us, all the hurts and pains that beset us, and in ways that we cannot understand, he offers us the hope of redemption, not from suffering, but in it and through it. In 2017, whatever it holds, let us offer it all to God, for, as the hymn writer said, "better are these treasures to offer to the King, than richest gifts without them, yet these we all may bring!"