

Brancepeth sermon

25 December 2025

Isaiah 62:6-end

Luke 2:1-20

Psalm 97

May I speak in the name of the Father,

and of the Son,

and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

When I was young, I remember a lot of talks –

certainly in church, but I think also at school and at home, –

telling me that Christmas was not just about presents,

that it was not just about what you *get*.

And, yes, I think I did recognise that that was true –

or at least, I knew that it was what I was *meant* to think

and certainly that it was what I was *meant* to say

and that it was probably what I *ought* to feel.

But, still, it was really mostly about the presents, wasn't it!

I didn't lie in bed on Christmas Eve,
a bit too excited to get to sleep,
because I was thinking of the church service the next morning,
filled with eager anticipation of the sermon I might hear;
I didn't lie there with my thoughts focused on
all the food that there would be to eat,
still less on the relatives who might be staying.
I was *definitely* thinking about the presents.

And in our house, whilst we would have stockings first thing,
the main presents didn't happen until
after the morning service, after Christmas dinner
(which was *much* later than a normal lunch),
after the interminable washing up,
and after the Queen's speech
(which I therefore, as a child, deeply resented)
and so the build-up to the presents was long and excruciating:
but there can be no doubt about it:
present-opening was clearly the focus of Christmas day for me.

And rather than trying to fight that,
trying to persuade you that the most important thing
is something *other* than the presents
I'm just going to go with the flow:
And so I'm going to talk about presents.
In fact, one better than that,
I'm going to *give* you a present.
So, in a moment, I'm going to need a volunteer
to open a present
though I should warn you that I need a volunteer
who is ready to *share* what they have opened
with everyone else here this morning,
because it's a present for the whole congregation.
So, is there a volunteer to open this present?

Present unwrapped; volunteer takes two coins; leave present with me

I'll put this at the back for people to take coins at the end.

Now, there was an important part of my family's present-giving ritual that I left out just now.

You see, there was a *tag*,
and you *have* to read the tag or the label when opening a present.

And this one says,

'To everyone at St Brandon's, with love from Mike'

And the tag is important,

Not just so you know who you have to say 'thank you' to

(and my mum, when I was growing up, would be the keeper of the list, the list of everyone who needed a thank you letter, and exactly what presents they had given).

But the tag is important for another reason, too.

Because, you see, every single present you receive is actually two presents.

This present of chocolate coins, for instance, as the tag says, it comes with my love.

You get the coins, *and*, a little less tangibly, you get a reminder of the love of the person who gave them, too;

That after all, is why we have that phrase,
‘it’s the thought that counts’,
especially for those presents where the thing *inside* the wrapping paper
is perhaps not *exactly* what you wanted,
or might perhaps fit someone rather larger, or with more limbs, than you;
but the *other* present, the one represented by the label or tag,
is just right: the thought, the care, the love of the person who sent it.

So, yes; every single present is actually *two* presents.

When you receive a present from someone who loves you,
you receive *the present itself*,
but you also receive *the love with which it was chosen*,
the love with which it was prepared and wrapped,
the love with which it was sent.

You get something of the person who sent it,
shared with you.

And that’s what the label on the present points to –
who it is, who in giving this present to you,
is sharing something of themselves with you.

And that is one way of thinking about what is happening
in the original Christmas story, too.

The Bible tells us that all good things come from God;
God is the great giver, the ultimate giver of gifts.

The whole world is a gift.

Everything beautiful within it is a gift.

Our own lives are a gift.

Everything that we can enjoy, everything that builds us up,
everything that helps us grow, is a gift,
and God is the great giver.

A large part of the Christian faith is simply
our calling to recognise that we are the recipients of all these gifts,
our calling to live our lives in gratitude, to live in thankfulness,
to recognise all these gifts *as* gifts,
to recognise that they have always been and will always be gifts,
and to live, when we can, with something of the
excitement, the joy, the gratitude that a child
experiences on Christmas day, when opening their presents.

But God did not leave it at that.

God wanted us to know *who* it was who gave us all these gifts.

God wanted us to know that all these gifts
were not just given so that we might enjoy them,
but so that we might know the one who gave them to us,
and so that we might know the love with which they were given.

So within the gift of the world
within the gift of life
within all the gifts of good things that God gives us,
God gives us *another* gift, a *second* gift,
because God as it were *signs God's own name with love*
on the gifts that God has given.

And that's what Jesus is
the baby lying in the manger
who will grow up to tell us about the love of God,
who will grow up to *show us* the love of God.

Jesus is God signing God's own name
on the gifts that God has given us,

Jesus is God's name in the flesh,
God's name written in the form of a human life.

And, yes, it's easy to miss this label
when we're opening up all the presents God has given us,
easy to forget who all these presents are from,
easy to forget why they have been given,
easy to miss the label or the tag that accompanies them –
but that's why we celebrate Christmas,
that's the whole point of the festival –
to notice Jesus, who is God's own signature,
written out in the midst of all that God has given us,
telling us, showing us
who the giver is;
telling us, showing us
the thought and care with which they are given –
the baby whose whole life says to us,
'From God, with love –

Happy Christmas!'