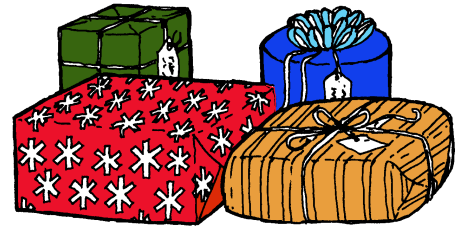


AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

After all the excitement and stresses of Christmas shopping, the presents sit under the tree waiting to be opened. As givers, we worry the gift will not be suitable, even though we have carefully followed a Christmas wish list. As receivers, we are concerned that someone has spent too much on ourselves and we cannot match their generosity. Perhaps we have forgotten to buy a gift for a relative, or left it too late to go shopping for our loved ones. These are some of the anxieties and expectations we experience when giving gifts at this festive time.



The main reason for giving gifts at this time of year is to celebrate the birth of Jesus around 2000 years ago in an innkeeper's stable in Bethlehem. Shepherds were the first to visit Mary and Joseph and their new baby; they may not have had gifts to give him but their admiration, being poor shepherds. They were followed a while later by Wise Men from the East, who presented Jesus with gifts from treasure-chests: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These represented symbols of the story of Jesus' life to be. Gold is a gift of richness for a king. Myrrh is precious oil, used to anoint the dead. Frankincense is incense used in worship, fitting for a holy child (see Matthew 2.7-12).

The wise men had their treasure-chests containing physical gifts, but gifts cannot always be seen. Each of us has gifts and talents within us, and each of us can make an offering of our own. Our gifts are part of our own story in our work, our homes and our communities. Our gifts show who we are and what we bring to the world around us.



The shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem were the first people to be told of the gift of Jesus. A spectacular fanfare involving angels invited them to see this baby, with a promise that he was special. An angel told the shepherds 'I am bringing you news of great joy for all the people'. The angel went on to explain that a Saviour had been born who would bring peace and joy to the world. They visited baby Jesus in the stable and told everyone they met what the angel had said about him, praising God before returning to their fields and their work (see Luke 2.8-20).

People have always given each other gifts; they would have helped to maintain friendships between different groups in early society. The Christmas traditions that we enjoy today were influenced by the Victorians when Christmas trees and Father Christmas also became popular.

Gift giving and receiving can be stressful but we must not forget that through the birth of Jesus we are given the greatest and most unexpected gift of all. His presence in our lives shapes how we use our inner gifts for others in our communities and families helping them to feel loved and valued. We are all invited to receive this wonderful gift.

