

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8.9.

We all know what happened at Christmas: the manger in the stable, the angels on the hillside, the shepherds, the wise men. That's all to be found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. If there are two gospels which tell us what *happened*, there are two scripture passages which explain what it all *meant*. The first is the sublime opening of John's Gospel. Let's turn to p1063, to *John 1.1ff*..

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth.*

In other words, at Christmas God entered this world of time. God, the Word, became flesh. But why? Well, another scripture passages, not so well known, explains. P1163, 2 Cor 8.9..

*Though he was rich, yet he became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich.*

Of course, it's nothing to do with the riches of money. It refers to the riches of divinity. Though Christ was God, yet he stooped down to become man, so that through his becoming man as a baby in Bethlehem, he might make us divine. Or, to put it another way, Christ came down from heaven where he belongs to this sinful world, to bring us up to heaven where God has destined us to be eternally. It's a wonderful verse which explains why the Christian gospel is such *good news*. We human beings might live our little selfish lives, and think that's all life amounts to, but God has planned a glorious destiny for us, to live in splendour with him for ever. Why?

simply because he wants your company - for ever! Amazing, isn't it? It's all grace, all undeserved, a gift to us.

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

That obscure little verse hidden away in 2 Cor 8 explains Christmas for me. Christ is the reason for the season. There is another more well-known passage at Phil 2.6-11 on p1179..

The point is that Jesus gave up something vital for us. He left heaven to come down to earth for us. He laid aside his eternal glory to become a man in the Child of Bethlehem. He entered this sordid, twisted, selfish world in a backstreet stable. There was no room for him in the inn; and at the end of his life, there was still no room for him in people's lives, and that's why they crucified him. But Jesus took this risk, and was prepared to enter this grubby world in order to save us and bring us back to God. He put himself out for us!

Let's go back to p1163, to 2 Cor 8.9... Why is that wonderful gospel verse there? It's because Paul is talking about *giving*, vv1-7... He is commending the Macedonian Christians to the Corinthians for their generosity. And he continues this theme through to chap 9, where he comes to that famous verse in v7 about God loving the *cheerful* giver. 9.6-7...

In other words, Christians should stand out from the world by their generosity. The Minister shouldn't have to appeal from the pulpit, and put his congregation on a guilt-trip to give more. The *world* might be into me, me, me, but *Christians* should actually be *looking* for opportunities to give. Why? Because God himself is a giving, generous God.

Didn't God so love the world that he gave his only begotten Son...? Didn't Christ, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor so that we might become rich?

St Paul's church doesn't run on fresh air. It needs your money. You might be staggered to learn that HQ in London takes a huge whack of money from this congregation reckoned on about £350 per member. That money goes towards keeping smaller congregations going, so we shouldn't begrudge it. The strong churches should *want* to help the weak. 8.2-5... £350 per member! That's a lot, isn't it? £700 per married couple. Wow! But is it really a lot of money? £1 a day. It's a newspaper a day, or packet of fags a week! (And I haven't included our own bills at St Paul's), but it all comes down to priorities, doesn't it, for what you choose to spend your money shews what you think is most important. If church isn't very important to you, then giving money will be an imposition, I suppose.

Actually, I'm not sure that *money* is the most pressing thing, difficult though these economic times are. I think today it is *time*. We're cash rich, and time poor. We never have enough time, do we? Time is the really precious commodity. We're all working far, far too hard, doing our own job *and* the job of the person who's just been made redundant! Our children don't want our money. They want our *time*. Giving them expensive presents at Christmas won't make up for not giving them your time. Even our children are too busy. There's something on for them every night *and* weekends. What will they do? Play the school football match on Sunday morning or come to church? Again, it's priorities. You must choose what you

think is more important. Do I come to church only if there's nothing better on? Priorities, priorities, priorities. Do I give to God the money that's left when all the other more important things have been paid for? Who comes first here?

I am delighted that we have welcomed Kate Westwater and Steve Caldwell on to our eldership. Kate and Steve are two hugely gifted people who clearly put their church first. They are both people-persons. Kate keeps our church and hall clean and tidy, while Steve, as a former member of the staff of Windsor Castle, is our Property Convener. God clearly gets the first call on their time. Years ago I decided that God would get the first of my money and the first of my time.

St Paul's has always been a generous congregation, and I want to thank all of you for giving your money and your time to keep this place going. Apart from me, a mere hireling, you are all volunteers, but because you love St Paul's, you give so that this place may flourish as a living witness to the world of the living Lord Jesus. I see so much commitment around me, and I want to thank you for it. Many of you give money by Direct Debit so that even when you are not here, you are still giving on a regular basis. I am always impressed how many of you go the extra mile whether it's the choir, the flower rota, Coffee Shop, Elders, Management Committee, audio-visuals, Newsletter distributors, Junior Church, 11+ &c &c on.

But that commitment shews your priorities. Your church comes first, not last. But we give not because we are *forced* to, but because we *want* to. And we give, because *God* gives, willingly. And *that* is what Christmas is all about - giving.