

**+ Christmas      Midnight Mass      Luke 2      2007**

A Christmas parable for you. Brenda was finding it especially difficult in the last few days leading up to Christmas. The children were getting more and more excited and even though it was their first Xmas without Dad they were fully caught up in the Christmas fever. Brenda didn't want to celebrate at all, it was the last thing she felt like but for the children's sake she was making a heroic effort. At work she was getting ever more impatient and short tempered and all her friends could see how deeply unhappy she was but she wouldn't talk to them about it – he'd gone and that was it. She felt nobody really cared for her at all, not genuinely – except of course for the children.

After lunch on Christmas Eve she dashed off for a last minute battle with the shops and as she opened her front door she noticed a parcel on the mat, addressed to her. She opened it to discover a large Christmas cake and a note that read ' I know you're busy and haven't got much time to bake yourself and as I was baking anyway I thought I might as well make you one as well. Happy Christmas.' It was unsigned.

Brenda's first reaction was anger – how dare anyone take pity on her – she was well able to look after herself thank you very much. And then she began to wonder who had actually gone to the trouble to think of her like this and to leave such a gift. Each person she recognised and spoke to in the way into town that afternoon could have been the donor – and thinking of each one as the possible giver made her feel grateful and warm towards them. By the end of the day she was elated and happy – people did care, life was worth living after all.

Brenda's whole outlook on life was changed by that single simple act of generosity; by a gift that had been given when none had been asked for. She had desperately needed to feel wanted and cared about and loved, without realising it, and that completely unexpected gift did the trick.

Well tonight we too celebrate the giving of a gift – a gift we didn't ask for but a gift we desperately need without perhaps realising it. Our benefactor is God and the gift is his son given to our care in the vulnerability of that Bethlehem stable. And the reason behind the gift is the same – a sign of God's unqualified love and genuine care for us as individuals.

The first to accept this gift were of course Joseph and Mary and for them despite the rather daunting context in which this birth occurred they knew that this gift was quite unique and that they had been chosen by God to receive it.

The second group of people to receive this gift were shepherds. More unlikely recipients would be hard to find – shepherds were looked down on by everybody else because by the very nature of their full time job away from home they couldn't keep all the religious requirements of their faith and as such were regarded as unclean – second class citizens. Yet it was to these Palestinian untouchables that God's gift was first given. They certainly wouldn't have been expecting it, doubtless they would have thought of themselves as being completely unworthy recipients if they had. They weren't deep in prayer or engaged in good works and yet God came to them. We're not told what happened to the shepherds subsequently, what difference this Christmas night had on them; when they arrived at Bethlehem and saw for themselves what the angels had first described presumably there would have been a slow dawning on them that something life changing had really happened even though they didn't fully understand what it was. But as they stood in that stable in their working clothes, in their ignorance and in their unworthiness they met with God.

Now it may well be that you too don't feel ready to meet God or not even be aware of your need to meet with God. But tonight's message is that God out of his great kindness meets you just where you are. You don't have to go somewhere special to find him, or do anything exceptional because he knows where you are and he knows better than you what you need. He's much more interested in your being open to receive him than he is in the quality of your lives and actions.

Because the truth is that there's a little bit of Brenda in all of us. A suspicion of other people's motives, a cynicism in how we face the world, a feeling that at the end of the day we're on our own – a self centredness that tries to protect us from the deep need we all have to be really cared for and loved with no strings – just for ourselves, as we really are and not as others would have us be.

Well the gift is here tonight and the only real question left is are *we* ready to have *our* lives changed by accepting it? And it's not a once and for all decision either. Sadly through human frailty it's a decision that needs to be remade perhaps at least once a year. There is no more precious gift than to receive Christ into our hearts and there is nothing more important

that we could ever do than to share this gift with others. So at the end of the day it's your choice, your decision – do we want to be a before-the-cake Brenda type person or the Christmas Brenda that emerged in the end? It's not that difficult a question to decide I would have thought.  
Happy Christmas.