

## A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

*By Ruth Grayson*

**They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.  
(Matt. 2:11)**

Well, it's all over for another year. January 6<sup>th</sup>, celebrated as Epiphany in the Church, is the last of the 12 Days of Christmas and is usually the day when the Christmas decorations finally come down. We heave a collective sigh of relief, put the indigestion tablets away, give thanks that the credit card statements have not yet arrived, and settle back into our normal routines. The shops are all open again, offices and schools are functioning, and public transport is running as regularly as it ever does. Christmas 2005 is finally at an end. And the Church has again missed a golden opportunity to make a united statement about its faith and a positive difference in the world.

In an earlier article ('Preparing for Christmas', *Methodist Recorder*, 24 Nov. 2005) I argued that most churches in this country appear to be preoccupied with having most of their Christmas celebrations in Advent, and focus comparatively little attention in the period following Christmas Day – precisely the time that we are proclaiming Christ's presence among us. Churches have scheduled in extra services, carol concerts, nativity plays and other events to heighten the sense of excitement. Most clergy are exhausted by lunchtime on Christmas Day and are relieved to go home to their families and to a well-earned rest for the next week or so. And most congregations do nothing on a collective level to celebrate the presence of their Lord after the Christmas Day service is over. By the time of Epiphany, the day on which the early Church traditionally celebrated Jesus' manifestation to the Gentiles (and therefore one of the most important festivals in the entire church calendar), there is no energy left to celebrate anything at all. Is it surprising, therefore, that non-Christians do not rush to embrace Christianity as a result of Christmas Day?

On the contrary, it is more likely that non-Christians, and some Christians too, will have been put off by the whole experience. There will be very few people who are left unscathed by Christmas. Those who are may have been lucky enough to be able to leave the country altogether over the Christmas period – and increasing numbers of us do so – or may actually enjoy the whole experience (as children, for instance) and are not aware of its social and economic consequences. For most people, it is a time of rushed activity in the weeks beforehand and general anticlimax afterwards, a time when overindulgence is followed by regret, overexpenditure by debt, overexuberance by social and family stress giving rise to marital breakdown, depression, and even suicide. What is the Church doing about any of this? Reorganising and rescheduling church services is only one aspect of the responsibility all churches have in focusing attention on the real meaning of Christmas.

I believe that the Church has a very clear role to play here, and actually it is quite a simple one. It should be calling on all Christians to forego personal giving at Christmas and to concentrate instead on *social* giving. This would at once remove much if not all of the stress of preparing for Christmas Day itself, substantially alleviate the problem of personal debt, make a significant difference to both national and world poverty, and most importantly be in accordance with the Gospel message.

The current, prevailing practice of giving personal presents to friends and relatives who do not really need or even want them, and of receiving gifts in turn, is not.

Why do we give gifts at Christmas at all? Christians do it, in theory at least, to symbolise God's gift of his Son to the world (John 3:16) and to imitate the gifts the Wise Men or Magi brought to the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:11). But neither of these examples should be taken as the trigger for a massive, mindless spending spree or a gift-giving bonanza. Instead, both emphasise the sacrificial nature of giving and the fact that these were examples of the rich giving to the poor, whether in material or spiritual terms. This is surely the kind of giving that Christians should be seeking to emulate. Personal gifts can be reserved for birthdays and other individual occasions.

Many Christians, and non-Christians too, give – often generously – to charity at Christmastime. But how much more of an impact this would make if such giving were to become the norm, rather than the exception? The Church should take the lead in encouraging it. Chris Coe, Oxfam's trading director, stated recently that 'conscience shopping' still only accounted for around 2.5% of the total £14.7 bn estimated to have been spent this Christmas. Many people (including many non-Christians) already favour alternative giving. Many others would do so but for fear of bucking trends and of appearing to be anti-social or ungenerous as far as their own families and friends are concerned. Individual churches, church leaders, and officers at national level could all play their part and make a stand on this, which would encourage more people to do likewise. If whole families, whole churches, whole communities pledge not to give gifts to one another but to give their equivalent financial value to relieve poverty wherever it exists, this could make a huge difference in the world.

If all churchgoers gave to charity rather than to each other at Christmas, even small struggling churches would probably be able to raise over £1,000 and larger churches many times that amount. If that 2.5%, donated to charity rather than to the tills of retail stores, could be increased to 10% of all national Christmas spending next time, this would make an incredible difference to poverty in this country or to third world debt. It might also make the rest of the world realise that the Church is actually prepared to put its money where its mouth is and practice the Gospel that it preaches. Christians are called to give up everything to follow Christ. It should not be hard for us to give up things we have not yet had. Indeed, it would be very worrying if we were not prepared to do so. The growth of materialism, concurrent with the growth of easy credit, has led to excessive generosity that is both misguided and misplaced.

Christmas Day 2005 was barely over before the television commercials started to feature detox kits and diets on the one hand, and Christmas 2006 savings clubs and catalogues on the other. In light of our national obesity problem and the level of personal debt, and especially in light of the extent of world poverty and starvation in many countries, this is intolerable. But there is a golden opportunity here. The Church has a responsibility both to speak out and to do something about future Christmases that will make a real difference to the country, to the world and not least to its own followers. It should not hesitate to do so. The countdown to Christmas 2006 has already begun. The time to act is now.