

Epiphany: Gifts

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

President Jimmy Carter, who died aged one hundred a few days ago, swept to power promising never to lie to the American people. In the turbulent aftermath of Watergate, the former peanut farmer from Georgia pardoned Vietnam draft evaders and became the first US leader to take climate change seriously. On the international stage, he helped to broker an historic peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, but he struggled to deal with the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

On leaving office, Carter had one of the lowest approval ratings of any US president. But in subsequent years, he did much to restore his reputation. On behalf of the US government, he undertook a peace mission to North Korea which ultimately resulted in the Agreed Framework, an early effort to reach an accord on dismantling its nuclear arsenal.

In 2002, Carter became the third US president, after Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, to win the Nobel Peace Prize - and the only one to earn it for his post-presidency work. With Nelson Mandela, he founded The Elders, a group of global leaders who committed themselves to work on peace and human rights. What really drove his lifetime of public service were his deeply held religious beliefs. "You cannot divorce religious belief and public service," he said. "I've never detected any conflict between God's will and my political duty. If you violate one, you violate the other."

Barak Obama said about Jimmy Carter: "Jimmy Carter embodied decency. Elected in the shadow of Watergate, he was elected on the promise that he would always tell the truth. And he did... He believed some things were more important than re-election – things like integrity, respect and

compassion. Jimmy Carter...believed that we were all created in the image of God...He didn't just profess these values, he embodied them. And in doing so he taught us all what it means to live a life of grace, dignity, justice, and service. In his Nobel (Peace) Prize acceptance speech he said: "God gives us the capacity for choice. We can choose to alleviate suffering. We can choose to work together for peace." He made that choice again and again over the course of his 100 years, and the world is better for it."ⁱ

What a gift of a man. Not a saint but a man who spent as much of his life as possible to change the world, and not be changed by the world. We may be forgiven for looking around at some of the political leaders in our world today, in the United States, in Britain, in Europe, in Israel, in Russian, and wonder where are the women and men in the highest offices embodying even a fraction of the values espoused by people like Jimmy Carter?

Where are the women and men who offer to their worlds, their countries, their communities, their churches, their homes the light that comes from the glory of God, who hold the light high enough to pierce the darkness that covers our earth, and reveals to us that all is not lost, that hope is still there, that the strength and the resolve to persevere in the bleakest of times will lead to some difference being made. One does not have to sit behind a desk in the Oval Office in the White House to effect that. It is the work of everyday people in our communities, in shops and businesses, in schools and universities and colleges, in charities and churches who are still determined that despite everything, because of everything, they will persevere in not changing a whole world, but the part of the world where they live and work. They will use what gifts they have in kindness, decency, generosity and integrity to lighten something dark, brighten something dreary, soften something harsh, smooth something rough.

For Christians they will do this, we will do this, because the Christmas story of light arising and God revealed does not disappear when the decorations come down. It continues in what we continue to do and aspire towards. Come what may, the Lord will arise upon us and the light that shines upon us will draw people from dark nights to the brightness of the dawn of faith lived out by people just like us.

Not that we won't have dark days. Not that we won't mutter to ourselves, 'What's the point, what's the use.' But that from others, from ourselves, from God we are given gifts that will enable us to persevere, and to keep going on. If not in old ways then in new ways. But onwards, and upwards. Just when we feel like giving up because we can't do it anymore, something happens, something occurs, that reveals to us the reason for our faith, and our hope, and our love.

Those services throughout December. Where people came, and shared, and sang, and gave their money, to support some of the things we do. Who heard something that they could take away and reflect, perhaps, a little more deeply upon their lives. Things they needed to hear, or see, or feel. The woman at the church door in tears saying she'd never heard anyone tell her that she was named and loved by God. The young man who went up to the remembering tree and wrote something on a star about someone he loved, something he had not been able to articulate in his hurt and grief before. The 206 people (at the last count) who have watched the Lessons and Carols service online because some of that music spoke to them, some of that story read out loud actually read into their lives. Some of it made sense, again, or for the first time.

What a gift of a December this season of Advent and Christmas has been for our Church and the community we serve, locally and globally. The darkness in our world deepened by tragedy after tragedy is real and pervasive. But the gift of our glimmering faith, dim as it may seem to us, somehow invades the darkness and helps people to find a way. As it helps us to find a way, when

it all seems too much. Those who stand in the light have a responsibility not just to receive the light but to respond to it and to show it. To get into the darkness, and to start shining. Our gift of light, to the dark world.

In the nativity story we can rescue the Magi from conflation with the shepherds and angels. They arrive later, where Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus are no longer in a stable but a house. The gifts they bring are interpreted differently and symbolically: gold fit for a king; frankincense the symbol of prayer rising up in clouds to God; myrrh the costly spice often associated with embalming the dead and pointing to the fact that the Christ Child so full of life in the nativity will come to death on a cross and a stone tomb, before going beyond.

I think that is the point of these gifts – to point us beyond the cosiness of nativity scenes (though I doubt it was not all that cosy in Jesus' first days) to what was to come for Jesus in His lived-out life of teaching and healing, of loving and caring, of suffering and rising.

For what good is the gold of the kings if it is not used to help the homeless and hungry and clothes-less in need, the refugees and those on the fringes of society kept there by poverty? What good is the frankincense of the kings if it not used to help people see a far horizon where light will shine, a real place to travel towards where prayers are part of a lived-out faith in action, inspiring us to do something and be something because we are tuned in, however fitfully, to the mind and purpose and reality of God? What good is the myrrh of the kings if it does not repeatedly make us aware of the unjust and cruel suffering that our children, women and men endure across the world? Where the scandal of what the government of Israel is doing to Gaza, and the scandal of what Hamas did in Israel; and the scandal of a misguided murderous Islamicist on the streets of New Orleans; or the scandal of homelessness in our wealthy nation; or the scandal of the need for food banks in our wealthy nation.

The symbolic gifts of the kings, the gold, frankincense and myrrh were not simply 'nice' presents to give. But gifts with purpose, and agency, to point us towards the needs not of the Holy Family then, but the needs of our world now. Where such gifts, our gifts, must be deployed to make a difference.

Let me finish with more from Jimmy Carter, in his own words:

"I have one life and one chance to make it count for something... My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference."

What a gift of a man. And what a gift of a people you are, here today, doing the same thing.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Barak Obama, MSN news December 2024