

## The Birth of Jesus

**2** In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.



## The Shepherds and the Angels

**8** In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,<sup>[a]</sup> the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,<sup>[b]</sup> praising God and saying,

**14** "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"<sup>[c]</sup>

**15** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." **16** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. **17** When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. **19** But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

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Christmas is here at last! What a strange Advent it has been - and what a strange Christmas it is too. But as I often say at this time of year: just as babies doesn't wait until everything in our lives has been sorted out before they turn up, neither does Christmas. Just like Mary, we celebrate

this promise of new birth in the midst of all kinds of complications, and the baby is not less wanted, not less needed, not less a focus of love, because of the complications.

This Christmas time, I hope you will be able to enjoy both giving and receiving gifts... and I am wondering... If you were truly honest, whether you would say you enjoyed receiving presents, or giving presents, the most. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands... but I would guess that there might be an age related thing going on here...perhaps the younger we are, the more we enjoy receiving, and the older we are, the more we enjoy giving. But even very small children can find it impossible to wait to give you what they have made because it is just so exciting.

What have you given this year? I think most people have given a lot. They have given time, and a listening ear, and a voice at the end of a phone, and all kind of practical support for friends and for strangers. We have all seen these acts of selfless courage and kindness played out throughout this difficult year and all this seems to bear out the well known phrase "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

This year we watched a programme about the influence that Dicken's A Christmas Carol had on how we keep Christmas nowadays. One of the most significant and important changes was that Christmas came to be associated much more with generosity and selfless charity. Scrooge, we are shown, needs to learn how to give and it is in giving that he finds his salvation.

So Christmas has become synonymous in our minds with being good and cheerful and generous givers and of course this is very important, especially in these days, but today I would like to ask another equally important question:

Are you a cheerful receiver...?

Here's an idea...perhaps Scrooge's primary problem was not that he didn't know how to give, but that he didn't know how to receive... Think of his reaction to the Fezziwig Christmas party – it wasn't even his money – it was a gift laid on for him, but it made him incredibly anxious to see money wasted on frivolities. Think of Belle, who loved him, and how he was unable to really accept that love... think of the way that he

denied himself everything but his most basic physical needs. Perhaps he couldn't give freely, because he hadn't first learnt to receive freely.

Many of us find it easier to give than we do to receive. Just think how embarrassing it is to find that someone has bought us an expensive and extravagant gift, when we hadn't thought to get them anything. Isn't it hard to receive something when you haven't got anything to give back?

And yet we have missed the whole point of Christmas if we forget how to receive a gift.

At Christmas, God gives to us knowing that we cannot pay him back. He gives his heart, his all, to a frail and fragile humanity, and he continues to do so every moment of every day. This is a present that we can never earn, and never pay back.

So at Christmas, like Scrooge, we learn not just generosity, but gratitude for all the things we have not earned but are given out of love. We say thank you – we accept the gift of God among us, and we celebrate all that he gives us. And as God gives his heart to us, so we give our hearts to him, and to one another, in celebration of the one who creates and sustains love itself. Amen

