

## Carol Services 2021

There are a handful of presents under our Christmas tree now. One of them is, quite frankly, appallingly wrapped! The Christmas wrapping paper is crumpled and indeed a bit torn in places, and the Sellotape has been used with enthusiasm but perhaps not too much skill. But it is without doubt sent to us with love and affection, and when we open it we will do so with joy and thanksgiving.

I was looking at that Christmas present the other day and what sprung into my mind was the John Lewis Christmas advert. Not the one from this year, with the alien, although that is fairly gorgeous too, but the first one. I don't know whether you remember it: when it first appeared it caused a real commotion. For those who don't know it, or those who can't remember, it follows the passage of a young boy, perhaps six, sevenish, through Advent. He starts, excitedly, on day one, flipping open the door of his advent calendar. And then we see him get progressively more impatient and frustrated as the days click by. We see him sitting on the swing in the garden, in fine weather, in snow, frustratedly swinging. We see him sitting next to his dad watching TV, with his leg twitching frantically. We see him gobbling his food, as if the faster he ate, the quicker Christmas would come. He spends the whole 24 days wishing the time away, desperate for the arrival of Christmas morning.

Finally we see him pile into bed on Christmas Eve, switching the light off and snuggling down to await the arrival of Christmas morning. And then, in the daylight of Christmas Day, he wakes up, ecstatic, jumps out of bed, straight past the bulging stocking at the foot of his bed, and opens the door of his cupboard, and pulls out a pile of really badly wrapped presents, and pads across the corridor to his parents' bedroom. The

parents wake up, see him standing there with a pile of gifts for them, and the caption comes up: John Lewis: For gifts you can't wait to give.

I think it's wonderful. It was a remarkably touching advert, and actually one that rather redeems the materialism of Christmas – the old adage, which comes of course from Scripture: "tis better to give than to receive" (Acts 20).

Christmas is, if you like, the gift that God couldn't wait to give. And when you think about it, it's not particularly well wrapped – no home, swaddling clothes, straw, and more than likely a bit of donkey poo.

But God is so excited about what he is about to give to the world that the very sky erupts with angel voices, and a brand new star rises in the east. Foretold for hundreds of years by excitable and insistent prophets and noble Kings, but given to you and me, by a God who longs to give good gifts to his people.

Carol services, for some reason, always seem to end with Hark the Herald. Which we are about to sing. That is probably the purely practical reason that the descant, and indeed the tenor line, is so eye bleedingly high that you need an hour to warm up to it. But I like to think that it is because Charles Wesley makes this exact point about presents, extraordinary wonderful presents, wrapped in disarmingly simple and messy paper. 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate Deity.'

The gift is no more and no less than to turn the world you and I live in upside down. To give light and life and peace. It's not packaged particularly professionally – but it is the greatest gift you and I will ever be given. The gift God can't wait to give – donkey poo and all. Amen.