

Christmas: The Gifts of the Kings and Workplace Chaplaincy.

God? What are you doing here?

At work, most of us like to get on with doing the things we feel confident about. We prefer the jobs that we mostly know how to do. We labour because enough of the time 'things work'. We get enough reward or satisfaction; we feel our skills are being used; we enjoy some of the collegiality. The pay makes it worthwhile. "If you look confident enough at what you are doing, you can get away with it.."

In Christmas Nativity Plays, the Kings stride on in their rich robes and crowns. They are dressed to impress; to dispel doubt. They want us to think that they know what they are doing. But perhaps even Monarchs sometimes ask themselves: "What am I doing here? Why am I doing this?"

The gifts that the Kings give are perhaps the best they could come up with. They were the best ideas they had given their experience and imagination. But they may not have gone down very well with a baby: what does a baby want with all that stuff - gold, frankincense, myrrh. The baby wants warmth, cuddles and feeding. We have all seen the disappointment in children's faces as they unwrap presents they don't want.

The Nativity Kings have given what they can. As it turns out, on reflection, by making connections with their cultural history and considering the needs of the parents, the gifts are good enough. Indeed they are inspiring. They tell us something about the much bigger picture. They have been say something about who Jesus is going to be. Future peoples have meditated on what they may be pointing to. They sort of succeed, even if they might have been a disappointment to the baby.

Workplace chaplains can be a tiny little bit like the Kings in the Nativity story. They turn up in strange places, carrying cultural and religious language and imagery. They bring gifts out of their limited imagination and experience. They bring the only and best gifts that they know: their faith, their time, their interest, their stories. Out of their resources they give their encouragement (gold); their mystery (frankincense) and their challenge (myrrh).

Sometimes our gifts are a flop. They don't seem to work. People are not interested or they are disappointed. But our chaplaincy gifts really are the best we can do. And perhaps on reflection, and taking time to think, to listen, they are not so bad after all. They tell of meaning that disturbs the status quo. They offer an account of hope that can stand alongside despair and disappointment. Chaplains get frequently asked: "What are you doing here?" - just like the Kings were asked?

Sometimes we need to ask God that question too: "What are you doing here? - and why are you not doing what we think you should be doing!?". In the Biblical story, God came as a little baby, 2000 years ago, in a foreign land. Perhaps that was the best way God could think of. It doesn't make a lot of sense now: in our age of atoms, bioscience, space travel and global cultures. Unwrapping that gift at Christmas sometimes disappoints: why doesn't God sort out our problems now? why doesn't he come again today?

But again, on reflection, taking time to listen and feel, the story does feed us and inspire us. It points to the deepest and most honest love that God has for us. He simply turns up as an anonymous family member in a place and time; and goes on to live as an example and changer. To love is to be as real as we can be: and that is what God does.

In some of our chaplaincies, at Christmas time staff are facing redundancy; shop workers are having to work as hard as they can with little time for family refreshment; and their future is uncertain. This is happening just at a time when God is supposed to be here. Some are suffering under harsh and difficult management decisions in places of restructuring; some are retraining to keep a job. "God, what are you doing here?"

A meaning of the story of the nativity baby is that Love can be bigger than all of these things. The birth of new life to a young couple somewhere on the planet is an event as big as the whole world. That meaning is also a hope to us when work is going well and factories are expanding. We will ride the expansion well when we keep our eyes on the whole picture. God's love for us is real and human.