

Have you ever been given a present that's been so well wrapped, so stuck down with sticky tape that you've struggled to get into it? It's from your great aunt Madge and she's not used the cheap wrapping paper that you or I would, that rips as soon as you look at it, she's used that posh gold or silver foil stuff that you have to use your teeth on, and she's used more sticking tape than you'd use in a lifetime of present wrapping.

Well, sometimes it can be just as difficult to get past all the wrapping of Christmas to the truth underneath. I read a story last week of two old ladies who went out to do their Christmas shopping and they came to a large department store and before they went in they stopped outside to admire the decorations and the window display and seeing this nativity scene, with a baby Jesus in the manger and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds standing around, one of the ladies turned to the other and said in disgust, 'o it's disgusting, now the church is even trying to muscle in on Christmas.' For her, the truth was so buried under wrapping paper she couldn't see it.

And in our drama tonight, Isabella, who played Mary, struggles to see past her own story, and all the wrapping of her own life, to whose greater story Christmas is really about.

But before any of you oldies start wishing for the good old days when Christmas wasn't so commercialised, nothing much has changed, because in 1644 the Puritans banned Christmas. They got so fed up with the decadence of it all that they banned the celebration of Christmas completely. Now generally I'm a fan of the Puritans but even I have to admit they made some mistakes, like banning Christmas, or leaving England and starting America for one.

But in wanting to ban Christmas the Puritans have a strange bed-fellow in George Bernard Shaw the British atheist of the last century. This is what Shaw had to say on the subject of Christmas: 'I am sorry to have to introduce the subject of Christmas... It is an indecent subject; a cruel, gluttonous subject; a drunken, disorderly subject; a wasteful, disastrous subject; a wicked, cadging, lying, filthy, blasphemous, demoralising subject. Christmas is forced on a reluctant and disgusted nation by the shopkeepers and the press; in its own merits it would wither and shrivel in the fiery breath of universal hatred; and anyone who looked back to it would be turned into a pillar of greasy sausages.' Well, you wouldn't like to have him for Christmas lunch!

But what both Shaw the atheist and the Puritans were objecting to was all the wrapping. After that, they part company because for the Puritans, underneath all the wrapping was a glorious truth that was being suffocated by the wrapping. For Shaw there was no truth. It was all wrapping. Wrapping he wanted to throw in the trash can.

And which version is right has profound implications for everyone of us in the room. If God really did come as a human being, and was born as a baby in poverty, in a barn, in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, that has profound implications for each of us. And if He didn't, that also has profound implications.

And the writers of the gospels we've had read to us tell us plainly which it is, and they were the guys on the scene, they spoke first hand to the players involved, and they tell it straight: cut out the mush, forget the wrappings, peel back the sticky-tape, get to the truth, this happened. Christ was born in Bethlehem.

But they go further than simply recounting the historical fact of His birth. They tell us why He came. Listen again to what Luke records the angels as saying to the shepherds. Luke 2:11: 'For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.' So Jesus came as a Saviour. All well and good, but what's a saviour? A saviour is someone who saves you from something. Imagine some slushy film, and the heroine has been thrown into a fast flowing river and she's just about to go under for the last time, but our hero dives in and rescues her in the nick of time, and as he pulls her out she gazes into his eyes and says 'o, you've saved me'. Well, as you pass the vomit bowl, that man is her saviour, he saved her from certain death.

So what peril is mankind in, what danger do you and I face that God sees fit to send us a saviour? Well, Matthew in our first reading spells that out for us as he records the angel's words to Joseph in Matthew 1:21: 'You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

So the reason, the purpose for which Jesus was born was to rescue us from the fast flowing river of our sin and its consequences, the stuff that we shouldn't do, but we do anyway, and all the stuff that we should do, but don't do. And that's the story, that's the truth in danger of being smothered under the wrapping paper. So in the film 'How the Grinch stole Christmas', when Cindy-Lou Who asks the Grinch 'what's Christmas about?' And he answers 'vengeance... er presents I guess', he was wrong both times. And when Isabella in our drama thought it was about her, she was wrong. The Bible tells us it's about a Saviour. About God stooping down to save us from our sins.

But that begs a question: how do you and I get hold of that? How do we gain this salvation, what's our part in this? The answer is it's God's free gift to us, what the Bible calls grace. You don't have to earn it, you couldn't anyway, and you don't have to get so many marks in your homework diary or notes in your agenda, it's not like Father Christmas and you only get the gift if you've been a good boy or girl all year. And its not like Isabella our character thought it was that you get chosen because you're especially beautiful, because then we'd all be stuffed. Well, I'd be alright, but you lot would be in deep trouble. It's by grace. This is how the apostle Paul puts it (Ephesians 2:8) 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.'

So our part is simply to place our trust in what Jesus has done for us, giving his life for our life, paying the price we should pay for our sins. And as we do that, we can take hold of this free gift of salvation. That's the truth under the wrapping. That's the story greater than any of our stories. That God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.