

### **“God’s Christmas Gift” – Christmas Eve, 2005**

The Christian year brings us two great moments of meaning – Easter, and Christmas, each with their own special significance. Easter provides us the “Why” of the Christ story – redemption; Christmas reveals to us the “What”, a precious gift of God. And just like the presents and gifts that surround us at this time of year, this Christmas gift from God has become wrapped in many layers.

The outermost layer is a bit like the brown wrapping paper we use to mail a parcel. It is dull, and scarred and marred by contact with the world. All decorations have been removed with this wrapping, even the word ‘Christ’ has been removed from Christmas, and we are left wondering how it could have come to such a sorry state of affairs. Peeling off the brown mailing paper we find a gaudy, colourful layer of bright shiny metallic paper, full of winter scenes and houses with strings of lights, and we can hear the TV commercials that go with these scenes. And there are other, older, obscuring layers underneath as well. There is Santa Claus paper, proclaiming a tradition made famous by an old soft-drink company. Digging deeper we find underneath a wrapping paper with evergreen trees, and holly and ivy, all borrowed from old traditions in northern European lands far removed from Bethlehem. Like a child on Christmas morning, we excitedly peel away these layers, seeking to discover the precious gift in the centre.

But finding that precious gift is not that simple, because people of faith, and even the church itself, have added even more layers of obscuring wrapping papers. One example of the most subtle of these layers are the words in that beautiful and oh-so-familiar carol “Away in a manger”; specifically the phrase “no crying he makes”. Oh, a baby that doesn’t cry is a lovely thought, and makes for a perfect picture, and we know these words were meant to be an idyllic way to proclaim the perfection of the child Jesus, but those words also convey a highly-distorted theology. Claiming that the baby Jesus never cried implies that the baby Jesus was somehow not completely human. We recognize that in this magnificent and unparalleled act of grace Jesus was one with God from the very beginning, long before his conception through the Holy Spirit. But Jesus was also as human as you and as me. It is vitally important for our faith that Jesus, fully One with God, was also fully human, because otherwise the “Why” of Easter would have no significance for us as humans.

However, we declare, with great thanks to God, that Jesus was indeed not only truly Divine but also truly human. Our scriptures witness to this, for as we come to the final unwrapping of this divine gift we eventually come to a babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, literally diapers gently folded around this newborn baby.

Yes, diapers – a baby in diapers, doing all the normal things that babies do with, and in, diapers, even including crying!

That was God’s Christmas Gift to the world ... a Son, born a fragile, tender human baby. That is indeed what is at the very heart of all our Christmas celebrations –the tiny beating heart of a helpless infant, who would grow into that man who walked the dusty roads and

the city streets, bringing healing, comfort, joy, and Word of the Kingdom. The same Jesus who would bring reconciliation with God through His rising again victorious over even death – the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, born to give us liberation and joy.

But that's the "Why" from Easter – let us linger for a little while around the manger, mingling with the shepherds, enjoying this most blessed of gifts, a tender baby, as human as you and me, and yet Holy beyond description. Let us join the countless people who have lingered at that manger, and praise God from our hearts for this priceless gift He has given us.

In the spirit of, and in the name of that same infant, our Lord Jesus Christ, I wish and pray for each of you and your families a most blessed and joyful Christmas.