**20th December 2015**

**Luke 2. 1-15**

Through advent we have been looking at the big advent themes: Hope, Peace, Joy and today Love.

Giving gifts, as we will all be doing in a few days’ time, is of course taken as a gesture of love. A middle aged woman posted her Christmas list on the refrigerator for her husband to ‘accidentally’ read. Another cunning plan by the female species! Rather than list certain items of desire, she simply requested that Santa get her ‘something that will make me look sexy and beautiful’. When Christmas Day rolled around she expected to open a package with some fancy lingerie or perfume inside. To her surprise, he gave her an exercise bike instead! I understand the divorce was acrimonious.

How do you show your love? It is an agonising question, preyed on by the commercial world to inflict guilt and angst on us in an attempt to extract ever more lavish spending to secure that perfect gift - the token of our love.

Well I’m really sorry because I am going to add to your guilt levels because the Christmas story is all about lavish love and a dramatic gesture of affection and sacrifice. The only person in history who was able to choose where to be born chose a stable.

Instead of expensive jewellery, gold, silver, diamonds whatever else may bling, God chose the gift of his Son, born in humiliation and poverty, to be a token of His love. Christmas is the ultimate love story. God let his one and only Son leave the comfort and glory of heaven to come to earth to be crucified for our sins. God gave away what was most precious to himself, his own dear Son. As for the Son, he was prepared to humble himself and be born as a baby. At the end of his life he allowed himself to experience the most excruciating execution that human beings can devise. Why?

That question has caused many to contemplate and ponder throughout the centuries.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism for those philosophers amongst us, used the story of the coal miner’s daughter to offer a meditation on the love of God for us in coming as a baby born in a manger.

Imagine, Kierkegaard says, a young and beautiful coal miner’s daughter living in a remote pit village in a central European kingdom. Imagine further that the King had once seen this girl when he was out hunting and fell totally in love with her. He thought about her constantly and loved her passionately. He wished to woo her and to bring her to love him – yet how should he proceed?

If he were to ride to the village with all his retainers, the girl would be terrified. If he stepped down and spoke to her in his magnificent clothes, she would quake with terror. If he said that he loved her, it simply would not make sense. She would be so full of fear, so awe-struck, so intimidated that she could not respond. Her fear might cause her to go along with whatever the King wished, but then she would not love him. The problem was that the King did not want to seduce her, to intimidate her or to make her his servant – he loved her and wanted her to love him. Nothing else would do if it was a free love response.

If the King persists in his love, he really has only one alternative. Of course, his courtiers are likely to say that he is mad – why, after all, should the King bother with a poor, insignificant peasant girl? If he wanted her, he has but to command and she has no choice but to obey. If the King insists on giving her a choice, she is still certain to do as he wishes because she could not refuse him anything. The King sees however that the courtiers have misunderstood. They do not understand love. Do you understand love?

If the King truly loves the young girl, then he would never intimidate her or frighten her. He would not be interested in a relationship with her that is built on fear. Only one thing is good enough – and that is a relationship of love.

The King therefore has no alternative. He must go to the young girl in disguise. Not dressed in his fine robes, but rather in old clothes – the clothes of a wandering tradesman perhaps. He must hope that when she sees him and gets to know him, she will fall in love with him. If she does, then the love will be free. She will love him for himself and not for any ulterior motive. She will not think about his money, or his power, or the comforts she could enjoy nor will she be full of fear of the consequences of not loving – she will love him for himself alone.

There are of course risks. The young girl may not like the King. She may reject him and prefer another. This, however, is the risks that love runs. It can never be forced and it must risk rejection and disappointment.

I hope you can see Kierkegaard’s intended parallels with God and the Christmas story. If our freedom is to be preserved, out of love for us, and if we are to respond in genuine love and without being forced, then God can only give this message of his love for us, indirectly. He comes in the form of an ordinary person – and He must risk the danger of people ignoring him or rejecting his message or doubting it was ever true and real. There simply is no other way forward if it is all about love. Which I believe Christmas is.

Love is higher than reason. It goes beyond reason. We are complete human beings. We have minds that we can use to calculate and to work things out for ourselves, but we are far more than computers. We can respond with our emotions, we can appreciate beauty, we have a moral sense, and we can be unselfish and be willing to put our interests in second place to those around us. None of these essential parts of our humanity are ‘intellectual’. We respond to people and to decisions about our lives as whole individuals. Philosophers and clever thinkers seldom recognise this. They demand that the intellect prove the truth of Christianity which is impossible.

Anyone who thinks however that we are just intellectual machines has a poor view of humanity. We were created to love and be loved. Reason may take offence at the paradox that Jesus is both man and God. Reason takes offence at seemingly irrational concepts such as paradoxes. Jesus himself said ‘blessed are those who are not offended by me’. The intellectual Greeks said the claims that a man was also God was stupid and irrational and a stumbling block. The Jews of Jesus day saw it as blasphemy.

The alternative response is faith – the acceptance that Jesus was God come to us in love, maybe undergirded with reasoning close to Kierkegaard’s but still needing to be accepted by a leap of faith. It is not a rejection of reason but an admittance that reason can only take you so far. A leap is then needed. The person, who is content to respond in love even when this faith calls him or her beyond reason, will have nothing to hold onto but God alone. Reason has been left behind and cannot help. A leap has been made.

It is all about love. Love is not always rational. Love needs a commitment – a leap of faith. God’s grace, his unmerited love, his willingness to enter into a love relationship, is available to everyone: this is the message of Christmas – God is with us if we are willing to respond. Whenever he is sought, He will be found. Seek and you will find, knock and it shall be opened unto you. Leap and you will be caught.

May you know you are loved this Christmas time. May that love transform your life. May you leap into the arms of love.