

Introduction

This week I popped into the supermarket to top up on a few bits and pieces and was appalled, though probably not surprised to see that they were not only selling Valentine Cards but, also Easter Eggs.

We have not even got to Epiphany and Christmas has been swept aside. For so many people it is simply a secular festival perhaps summed up by the greeting cards that wish us 'A merry Xmas'. Where Christ has been replaced by an anonymous X

Christmas, one of the major Christian festivals has almost lost God. In the commercial frenzy that attacks us each year there is now little time for God in the round of parties, eating, drinking, shopping and acquisitiveness that fills the holiday. And every year we see the reluctance and concern of many councils and businesses to even call the festival Christmas in case it offends people of other religions. We offer people "season's greetings" and put up the "festival lights! That seems to me to be the supreme irony as Christmas Christ Massis the annual festival in memory of the birth of Christ - The point at which God supremely made himself known to mankind.

In his Gospel John tells us that, although no human being has ever seen God He has made himself known to us through his Son Jesus Christ. When Christ was born that first Christmas two thousand years ago he came - as God in human form to show us who God is and to bridge the gap that had developed between God and ourselves.

It was lovely this last year to run an Alpha Course in the Benefice. The strength of Alpha is that it provides an informal group where people can come and honestly bring their questions about Christianity and begin to decide for themselves what they believe. One of the propositions that the course presents is that Jesus Christ, whatever he may have been could not simply have been a "good man" as many people think. He could only be mad, bad or God. A good *man* would not have been able to perform the miracles that Jesus did, and if it was simply a confidence trick he could not have been "good" he was "bad".

The thing that comes through with absolute clarity as you read the Gospels is Jesus' sincerity. He spoke with certainty about who he was and his relationship with God the Father. As you read and absorb the things Jesus did and said it seems clear as C.S. Lewis says: "that he was either mad - on a level with somebody who thinks they are a poached egg, or else he was who he claimed to be: God incarnate.

God with us, living amongst us to show God to us, and to help us to understand God's love for us and his purposes for our lives. Jesus, his

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life, his teaching, his miracles and supremely his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead speak clearly to us of God and show us more than a thousand arguments ever could who God is and what he is like.

How then is God revealed to us in Jesus Christ? John tells us this; "So the word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the father's only Son, full of Grace and truth." So in Christ, the invisible God has shown himself to us in his glory, grace and truth.

Glory

It is clear that in confining himself in human flesh God had to put aside some of his power and majesty. He limited himself to human form and human abilities. Jesus grew tired and hungry as we do and allowed himself to be weak and vulnerable. Yet even so God's glory clearly shone through him, most clearly during that incident when Peter James and John were allowed a glimpse of what he was really like, on the mount of transfiguration, and were entirely overwhelmed by the experience.

But his glory came through in other ways as well. In the power he showed to control nature, stilling storms and turning water into wine, feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. In the authority he had over sickness and deformity and evil spirits. But ultimately God's glory was seen in the resurrection of Jesus Christ when he broke the power that death has over humanity and made it possible for us to look forward to life after death. And this is a gift of God's grace which is also shown to us in Jesus.

Grace:

is a term that means: a free gift of love that is entirely undeserved. When a person works an eight-hour day and receives a fair day's pay for his time that is a wage. When a person competes with an opponent and receives a trophy for his performance that is a prize. When a person receives appropriate recognition for his long service or high achievements that is an award. But when a person is not capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award--yet receives such a gift anyway--that is a good picture of God's unmerited favor. This is what we mean when we talk about the grace of God.

The Bible tells us that God needs to reveal himself to us because our relationship with him has been broken by our wilful disobedience and disregard of his will. This is more often called "sin", and it is this failure to obey God that has separated us from him and more than that has meant that we face judgement and death, which is our punishment for sin. Jesus Christ, as he lived on earth is the only man who was entirely sinless. In all he did and all he said he showed his perfection to us. Not

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that he was programmed to be perfect.....it would be much easier for us perhaps if we could be programmed.....though that would take away free will and the opportunity to choose to love God for his own sake. St Paul tells us that Christ was tempted in every way as we are, yet he chose not to sin.

Yet Christ came to earth to be a great deal more than simply an example to us because he revealed God's enormous love and compassion to us. Not simply in his attitude to the people he met and the love he showed in caring for individuals, but supremely as he allowed himself to be put to death on the cross, bearing the punishment that each one of us deserve.

God's love is shown, is shouted at us by the fact that he wasn't and isn't content to leave things as they are. He does not like being separated from us; so much so that he was willing to lay aside his power and glory, come to earth and live as a man and die a painful and horrific death for you and for me! Just think about that for a moment. Each one of us has, at different times, turned our back on God, disobeyed him, let him down and rejected him, yet he does not want to let us go. He wants us to have a second chance, an opportunity to get close to him and to share our lives with him.

Once when Billy Graham was driving through a small southern town, he was stopped by a policeman and charged with speeding. Graham admitted his guilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court.

The judge asked, "Guilty, or not guilty?" When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied, "That'll be ten dollars -- a dollar for every mile you went over the limit."

Suddenly the judge recognized the famous minister. "You have violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid--but I am going to pay it for you." He took a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner! "That," said Billy Graham, "is how God treats repentant sinners!"

God revealed his glory and his grace in Jesus Christ and he also showed us the truth:

The truth:

about our guilt and failure: The truth that no matter how hard we try we are unable to get close to God by our own efforts and are entirely dependent on his love and mercy. The truth that he is loving and merciful and is entirely dependable: The truth of his holiness and justice and the fact that he wants to be close to us, to have a personal relationship with us; Where we allow him to be involved in our lives, not just on Sundays, or at Christmas, or for weddings and funerals, but daily moment by

moment.

The truth is that God has the power to transform us, our lives and our failures. He asks us to trust him and to put him first but as we do so we discover the truth that the most important thing to God is our well-being and our happiness. God has created us, he cares for us, he sent his Son to die for us and he can be entirely trusted to provide for our needs.

Christianity is often depicted as a "prop", only for the weak and insufficient. But actually Christianity offers a personal relationship with a powerful and Holy God who loves us more than we can begin to imagine. John tells us that to those who received Christ, and believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God. I cannot think of anything that could be more challenging or satisfying.

It may be that in the midst of the business of this Christmas season. As you prepared to celebrate, and rushed from shop to supermarket, you might have felt that there was something missing. You might have asked yourself, "What is it all for?", "Why I am I doing this?" What we celebrated this Christmas was that God himself, who created us by his very word, came to earth to live amongst us as a human being. He came to show us who he is and how much he loves us and he came to give us a way back to him.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, The word epiphany means a 'a moment of great revelation or realization', and at Epiphany we celebrate the fact that Christ was made known to the Gentiles, non-Jews, as represented by the Magi. This is a good opportunity for us to consider how much Christ is made known in our own lives.