

God's Gifts

Rona and I have prepared some gifts to share with each other and to share with you. These gifts are merely symbols of gifts that God has already generously given to us and they are for all of God's people.

Rev John:

The context to the gifts that I'm sharing with Rona, is that the prophet Isaiah is telling his people that there is a sad day coming when they will be exiled to Babylon. This will be a tragic event, but they are not to give up hope, for God will rescue them and transform the situation. He said to them

*"God will provide to those who grieve on Zion,
a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." Isaiah 61:3*

1. **Bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes – My first gift to you Rona, is this.**

A paper crown from a cracker

Yesterday, I had the amazing privilege of being invited to the opening of the Ukrainian Cultural Centre in Glasgow. It is located at Greenbank Parish Church in Clarkston.

Greenbank Church has donated a former care takers house to displaced Ukrainians who have escaped the war and come to Glasgow.

This will give them cultural identity and a sense of keeping their roots deep in their own culture and heritage.

Just like in Isaiah's day, they are exiled and hoping for a brighter future and this centre is like a crown of beauty to them.

What kind of Christmas will they have this year?

At times, our life may feel as if it is full of ashes. I'm sure it does for these 1200 Ukrainians exiled on a ship on the River Clyde in Glasgow. In Isaiah's

day, when someone lost a loved one or had sad news, they put on sackcloth and rubbed ashes onto their forehead.

But Isaiah comes with good news, to his people, who had suffered much and said, that a time is coming when God will transform their situation and rather than ashes he will crown them with beauty.

So, Rona, and for everyone here today, this is God's gift to us, a crown of beauty, a crown of happiness, that he will transform despair into beauty.

2. The oil of joy instead of mourning. A Christmas Cracker

The outside of the cracker says, "it's the season to sparkle and shine".

Isaiah says that God's gift is the oil of joy instead of mourning. Literally their faces will shine again, as though God has put oil on their faces.

We all have times of mourning and sadness where we feel depressed and cast down. But the prophet is telling his people that God will provide the oil of joy so their faces will shine again.

During the week, me and Susan watched a very moving film called Gifted Hands.

It is a story of a man called Ben Carson, who was a young lad brought up in American inner city, but who against all the odds and a deep faith in God he became a brilliant neurosurgeon.

This fascinating true story reveals the tremendous challenges and obstacles that God helped him overcome. His ultimate achievement was separating two conjoined twins.

What was so fascinating for me, was the joy that he brought into other people's lives because he gave himself unreservedly over to doing God's will. One of the scenes was of him praying before the 27-hour operation on the twins, he said to God, "Your will be done" and when he successfully finished the operation, you could see the joy on the faces of the parents of the twins.

It spoke to me that when we do the will of God, then his joy will be in our lives, and then we can be the oil of joy for other people, especially at Christmas time.

3. A garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair – Garland

The garland speaks of joy and praise to God.

There is so much despair all around us. God's Word is telling us He will give us a garment of praise. Truly amazing. The garland reminds us that God wants us to be people of praise.

Praise can change our lives. Praise can lift us out of despair and into a place of peace and joy. Psalm 147 v4, "He counts the number of the stars and he calls them all by name." and then he says "Great is our God, he is mighty in power and his understanding is infinite."

Praise is having an awareness of the size of the Universe and Universes and the beauty of the world and the intricate designs that we see in all nature, which can help us to praise God with greater awe and wonder and to be able to say as with the psalmist, "How great is your name in all the earth".

When we praise God, we lift our hearts to God and something happens, God enters our own universe, God enters our lives and he affirms his personal care for each one of us. He heals the broken hearted, he lifts up the humble, he takes pleasure in all who fear him and in those who hope in his mercy.

So, Rona, he gives us the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair and its our responsibility to take this gift and to use it and to lift up our praises to God each and every day and when we do, He will take our lives and use them to be a blessing to others.

Conclusion

We only really appreciate a gift when we begin to use it. There is no point in receiving a gift, if we keep it all wrapped up in a box. God wants us to open his gifts and to literally put them on or use them. May we all continue to treasure and use God's gifts.

Rona:

Ephesians - 3 gifts relating to Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

The Apostle Paul was in prison and he was looking at Roman soldiers. Actually he may have been chained to one. The soldiers were equipped with all their armour. There was Paul, I imagine with very little. But Paul had God and God was all the armour that Paul needed. Inspired by this comparison of the gifts of God to the armour of the soldiers, Paul wrote to the Ephesians to encourage them to think of the gifts of God like the Roman soldiers' armour.

I got you gifts based on what some of those gifts of God might be represented by today.

1. Shield of faith (Umbrella)

Like the shield of faith that Paul refers to in his letter to the Ephesians, this umbrella has a number of different functions. Like a shield it protects you - you can hide under it and you can use it to move forward. I think Paul was saying that faith protects but also a shield helps a soldier to move forward, into battle and protects them from what is coming while they move forward.

Also the Roman soldiers' shield that Paul refers to were huge, often nearly the full size of the soldier. They were made of two giant bits of wood which protected them at the front and also covered a bit at the side to protect the person next to them. Our faith in God protects us and enables us to protect others. The gift of faith protects us and with this we can protect others. This umbrella can protect you, and has space under it for someone to shield with you.

Like our faith is a gift from God, it protects us and also it allows us to move forward into difficult situations and face them with the protection of Jesus before us and with us.

So this umbrella is your shield of faith, you can hide under it and protect a friend and use it to move forward and face the elements.

2. Belt of Truth (Badge)

This gift is a badge that you can wear that lets everyone know the truth about who you are (badge says 'brilliant' in Gaelic). God gives us the gift of truth in Jesus.

Paul says to wear the belt of Truth and he is talking about the belt of a Roman soldier, which was worn like a badge of identity and honour. It said who they were. It identified them not just as a soldier but as a Roman soldier. Only Roman soldiers wore decorated belts, it was how they were identified. Roman soldiers were not seen without their belt and it was a serious punishment to take a belt away from a soldier. The belt was the most important symbol of a Roman soldier, it identified the truth about who they were.

God gives us Truth and we can wear that truth like a badge to identify us, as Christians. The truth of Jesus is the badge of our identity.

3. Readiness to go share good news of peace (Tea bags, one is peace tea bag – herbal one)

It's tea! A 'peace' teabag.

Paul talks about strapping on sandals with a readiness to go. Go and spread the good news of Jesus.

Roman soldiers wore a special kind of sandal that meant that they were ready to go, to move at all times. With their sandals on they were ready for long marches in hot weather without getting blisters, they were protected from rocks on uneven ground and they were able to use the bottom of their sandals as weapons. They were ready for everything.

I thought what gift helps us to be ready? A good cup of tea in the morning, or anytime during the day. Ready to get on with things.

This tea bag has things in it that help keep us calm and bring peace to our minds and body.

God's gift to us through Jesus is a gift of readiness, for all things are possible through Him, that we can go out and share the news of the peace. Just like the Roman soldiers were ready for setting out with their sandals on.