

Wonderful Gift

Two weeks today will be Christmas Eve, and we are now in the season of mistletoe and wine, Christmas carols and TV movies.

Me and Susan love the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, and no matter how many times we have watched this film over the years it always moves us to tears.

There are so many elements within the film that speak into real life issues.

Frank Capra the director of the film was born in Italy and arrived in America as a 5-year-old. His family were poor. Capra remembers the ship's arrival in New York Harbour, where he saw "a statue of a great lady, taller than a church steeple, holding a torch above the land they were about to enter. This statue marked the national abolition of slavery following the civil war. He recalls his father's exclamation at the sight: Franco, look! Look at that! That's the greatest light since the star of Bethlehem! That's the light of freedom! Remember that.

Franco did, and he eventually directed and produced the film *It's a Wonderful Life* – a film of good triumphing over evil; redemption, sacrifice; a man facing despair, but his life turns around with help from heaven.

The film was first released in 1946, one year after the end of the war. Capra was fed up with war, and wanted to direct a film that gave people hope. The original script for the film was called *The Greatest Gift*, looking at life as a great gift and Capra took this draft and with his previous film experience, he was able to develop this script and turn *The Greatest Gift* into *It's a Wonderful Life*.

That's my thought for this morning – God's greatest gift to us gives us a wonderful life.

Christmas first and foremost is about God's gift to us.

Morrisons did an advertising campaign some years ago. *Morrisons - the Reason for the Season*, and their reason was quite different from God's. Their reason was about mistletoe and wine, but that might be the wonderful life, what about the wonderful gift, that provides the wonderful life.

The wonderful gift at Christmas, is found in a stable, in a feeding trough for animals. The wonderful gift is wrapped in straw, and comes to us as a gift that is free and lying there for us all to receive. A gift in a baby who would

grow to be a man, who went about imparting his gift of love, compassion and grace into the lives and minds of all he met. But this greatest gift would become a wonderful life to all who would receive it.

This wonderful life ends up on a cross, where the gift is unwrapped and revealed to the world. The cross is where the gift becomes real, and when we see the reason for the season, summarised in these words “God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall never die but have eternal life.” The gift is crushed on the cross and tossed away like the wrapping of a Christmas present, but the gift remains, it comes back from death, even brighter, and shining God's love into this dark world.

The greatest gift that we can receive at Christmas, is the knowledge that we are loved by God. This is the most precious gift that we can have at this time of year. This is what brings a wonderful life, for when we have that gift, then there is no power or force in the world, or the world to be, that can take it from us. We have that gift in our hearts.

Love is without doubt the most powerful force that we can have. Hatred destroys but love remains.

Last night I was at a concert at Woodhill Evangelical Church, led by my friend and colleague Gabriel, who is an angel from Uganda. He was born into a family of 25 children, one dad and five mums. He said that life was pretty tough as a child; for much of his youth, he was brought up in an orphanage, but his life was to change when he met Jesus; when he received God's greatest gift into his life. This young uneducated boy was to find himself here in Scotland at a Bible college, nurtured by Christians here in Bishopbriggs; he was a young man who had a passion to share God's gift with his world.

With no financial backing, he went back to Uganda and returned with a vision – a vision to return to his country – a country in need of God's healing and love – a country rebuilding after the years of dictatorship by Idi Amin. Gabriel went back with God's wonderful gift to share with his people to give them a wonderful life.

He managed to raise enough money through busking and people's support here in Scotland, to buy some land, and that was the beginning of God building his kingdom in the heart of a rural community in Uganda called Luwero.

I've been out four times, seeing the progress of his vision, and it was good last night to be updated about what has been achieved and the way forward.

He has a primary school of 400 children and a secondary of 200 children, he has a church that can, and does, hold up to 1000, he has a farm that sustains 600 children each day of the year with three meals a day, he has a clinic, the only one in this part of Uganda, he has a Bible college, and last year the first 30 students graduated.

He has been used to touch so many lives because he received God's greatest gift that gave him a wonderful life, and he has imparted God's gift to others, to take up the fight and to shine light into darkness.

So, again let us remind ourselves, what this gift is. It is Jesus. He is God's greatest gift. We heard read for us by Margaret, that this gift is God's love for the world, and so when we exchange the word 'love' for Jesus, in 1 Cor 13, we can see who and what this gift really is.

⁴Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy, Jesus does not boast, Jesus is not proud. ⁵Jesus does not dishonour others, Jesus is not self-seeking, Jesus is not easily angered, Jesus keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Jesus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸Jesus never fails.”

You see Jesus is the greatest gift, because Jesus is God's love for this world and when we receive this gift into our hearts, then it becomes for us a wonderful life.

Let us sing together about this wonderful gift coming down from heaven for us, *Love Came Down at Christmas* - 316