

Saturday, January 3, 2009

# Giving and receiving

**Thinking Anew:** AT THIS time of year we recall the story of the wise men who, according to St Matthew, travelled to Bethlehem to worship Jesus bearing symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. There is surely a message in the fact that at such an early stage of the Gospel story we are introduced to these foreigners, outsiders, wanting to give. And their presence and their gifts are deemed acceptable. But worship is not only about giving; an essential part of it is learning to receive.

A recent study published by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York concluded that church attendance is good for one's health. According to its author - Dr Sylvia Wassertheil-Smoller, professor of social medicine at the college - detailed research indicates that life expectancy is significantly higher among regular worshippers. While Dr Smoller felt unable to offer any explanation for this conclusion there are a number of factors that might be relevant.

In her book *The Parish*, Alice Taylor writes about the importance of her local community where people have a sense of belonging and being known and cared for in good times and bad. She emphasises in particular the value of collective mourning. She describes in detail the interests and activities that bring people together to work for the common good.

Sadly, there are signs that this way of life is threatened increasingly by the loss of local shops, schools and other services. As a result, people have to go far afield in search of work and schooling, and local ties are weakened.

A local church has an important role in creating and maintaining community. This is especially true as we gather for worship week by week and are reminded that we are not alone. We are joined in spirit with women and men everywhere who acknowledge the existence of God and the meaning and purpose this brings to our lives. When we say "We believe in God", there is a sense in which we are also saying: "We believe in ourselves". The Gospel insists that all of us are loved and valued and this has to be affirming and reassuring.

In worship there is a unique opportunity to deal with our moments of failure and seek restoration. Harsh words spoken, actions taken without thought or love; fear of others or jealousy at their success; our rush to judge others while ignoring our own inadequacies - we all struggle with such things and it is much better to have them dealt with. And that happens when we worship God "in spirit and in truth".

In worship, when we pray for ourselves we come to terms with the fact that we have needs and anxieties and that we don't have to go on living the pretence that we are totally self-sufficient. That is too great a burden for any individual to carry, although many try. And prayer takes us beyond ourselves to the needs of others, rescuing us from an unhealthy preoccupation with self and reminding us that we have responsibilities for others.

So it is that in God-centred worship we are enriched and renewed beyond measure and given a sense of peace and security which may have something to do with the findings of that American survey.

We need that sense of security as we face this New Year with all its uncertainties. There is much fear and understandable anxiety among us, but as Christians we follow the example of Abraham,

the father of faith, who "set out not knowing where he was going", but was confident that, however long the journey, God's promise would see him through.

"Trust the past to God's mercy, the present to God's love and the future to God's providence." - St Augustine of Hippo.

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