

All being well, in just over one week's time our first granddaughter will be born, sister to her soon to be three year old brother, Adam. The one thing we know for certain is that her name is not going to be Eve. When we first go to visit her, like all doting grandparents, we will place our finger inside that tiny hand and feel her quite extraordinary strong grip.

In many ways the Christmas story is like that; it is the powerful grip of a tiny hand reaching out from a bed of straw to grasp your attention and be struck with awe and wonder at the birth of a child two thousand years ago.

Christmas day is a Holy Day because of that birth, when God's son came to live amongst us. One of the names given to Jesus was Emmanuel, which means God with us. Christmas day is also the only Holy Day that is also a major secular holiday, celebrated by over half the world's population in two different, yet similar ways.

The secular Christmas holiday is a festival of lights, a time of family gathering and a season to generously give to the needy and a special time to give gifts to one another. These resonate deeply within the origins of Christian traditions too except the giving of gifts for Christians is in response to Jesus' stupendous act of self-giving when he laid aside his divinity and was born into the human race; born not into an aristocratic household but in a stable to poor people.

It is the giving of gifts which is so important in both the secular and Christian world, but that statement is not a simple or straightforward as it sounds.

There is mystery surrounding gift giving; you've all heard the saying – he has the gift of the gab. But who or what is gab? There is potential danger surrounding gift giving – beware Greeks bearing gifts. There is potential political incorrectness about gift giving – the Prime Minister asked her private secretary why there wasn't a nativity play in number 10 this year to be told they couldn't find 3 wise men.

But there's also the thrill of discovery surrounding the giving of gifts and I think there are two basic ways of selecting gifts. I call it the secular E method and the biblical P method.

The E method is easy to recognize, particularly if you are a man buying for his wife – the present must be elegant, exclusive and expensive. One trip to a major store in Knightsbridge late on Christmas Eve, all sorted.

The biblical method is a little more complex. The first P means the gift must be personal. In Luke's gospel it says "For God so loved the world he gave his only Son, that whoever believed in him, shall not perish but have eternal life". I can't think of any gift in any other circumstance being more personal than that.

The second P means the gift must be practical. Thankfully that excludes chocolate tea pots. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which literally means 'the house of bread'. Later in life Jesus spoke about himself in picture language saying "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty"

Bread satisfies and strengthens and Jesus came into the world to satisfy and strengthen us all. Equally important is that he left us the gift of the Holy Spirit which is the practical means by which we are helped to live a new kind of life with love, joy, peace, gentleness, patience, self control and humility. The fruit of the Spirit is the way we practically live out the life Jesus taught.

The third P means the gift must be permanent. As a youngster I can recall countless times playing with my new toy on Christmas day only for it to be broken or discarded a few days later.

Jesus said "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die". Life without Christ is a hopeless end, but life with Christ is an endless hope....or if you prefer, a permanent hope.

I have here four gifts. Let's see how my theory works in practice. Don't say it out loud but put your hand up if you can remember what the first P stands for?

[choose Left or Right Male or Female Young or Old]

The first P stood for personal. Every Christmas one of my sisters sends me a Christmas card and inside are the words "Buy your own present" and some years she actually puts a cheque in.

Open up – chosen out of all people here + it has my name on it – from me to you.

OK you know the routine by now

Don't say it out loud, but hands up if you know what the second P stood for:

Right – practical

How many words found in the English Oxford Dictionary can be made out of the word practical [188] Jane only bought me a how to manual once....it's still unopened on the top shelf. But hopefully this gift will be far more practical.

I'll tell you the answer to the third P – it's permanent but to qualify for this gift you have to pass certain criteria: Hand up if:

1. Your name begins with a consonant
2. Your surname also begins with a consonant
3. You can play the organ

Sorry, but that was fixed, because I wanted this gift to go to Caspar. Today is Caspar's last day with us because he has heard the twang of cupid's bow releasing his arrow and the arrow has struck home and Sunday is the only day he can spend with his girlfriend.

It was personally chosen by me [beer and glass], knowing you like beer. It's practical because it's something you can re-use – the glass that is. Hopefully it will also be a permanent reminder to you of our appreciation of the time you have spent with us.

But there's also one additional gift which we would like to give you which reflects all 3 P's in one gift.

Please accept this bible with our love and best wishes. Inside it contains the personal testimony of biblical kings, prophets, apostles and so many more; the practical instruction to living out Christ's life and the permanency of God's word.

Take Christ out of Christmas and all your left with is M & S. But believers and followers can leave Christ in Christmas and know the joy of having God with us plus as a bonus of all the treats available in M and S too.