

What can I give him?

Birthdays or Christmas, it's a perennial question when it comes to presents for many men. 'What can I give him?' To give what he needs seems inadequate; to buy what he wants... too extravagant!

As a student, I found relief milking to be a lucrative holiday job, even if unsocial. Christmas morning was just another day: same long walk up the farm drive, same wind cutting through my sleepiness. I'd got the routine by now. But this morning something *was* different. In the far corner of the loose yard was a new-born calf, the only one born in the days I was there. Once milking and feeding were done, breakfast beckoned. Yet for a moment I paused to stare at the wonder of a new life. Hardly a 'Christmas present', for me: just a routine birth in the annual cycle of a dairy herd. Yet a 'gift' I've remembered for 45 years.



That morning the Christmas calf pointed me to another birth, long ago and far away: a routine birth in the cycle of human generations.

Or was it? Unusual circumstances meant he was 'laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn.' With no further facts, our cards, carols and nativity plays have embroidered the scene around the baby in the manger: a cattle shed; a lambing shelter; the quarters of a home for ox and ass... We only know that, in the hour of need, some sort of feeding equipment was pressed into service. Nothing like the salt-glazed half-pipe that the herd had earlier licked clean of concentrates, and were tossing hay out of, even now. Definitely not the normal place for a new-born. So unusual it could be used as a signpost for visiting shepherds. 'Find a baby in a manger and you'll know you've found The One!' What were the chances? Those shepherds took the chance – and it paid off! There really was a baby in the manger. 'This is our saviour, Christ the Lord,' they blurted to Mary and Joseph and everyone else in the town's thronging nightlife. 'Amazing!' they all said. Did they rush to see this wonderful child for themselves? Or wonder how down-to-earth shepherds had gone off with the fairies?

The other recorded visitors were a good deal more presentable – but no more believable. Their signpost, they said, was a new star pointing them to a new king. Really? Astronomers having been searching ever since for independent verification. At least these guys had enough wisdom to ask, 'What shall we give him?' They came up with some lavish answers. To them, the gifts were treasure: valuable and full of meaning, a sharing of themselves and their cultures in order to esteem the one before them.

Maybe the shepherds *did* ask 'What shall we give him?' *In the Bleak Midwinter* certainly thinks so, and generations of children have acted it out:

*What can I give him, poor though I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man, I would play my part...*

It's heading towards a conclusion that is both inadequate and extravagant: something which is hardly a thing at all; the part of us that we guard most fiercely from public gaze, which contains all that we most value of ourselves, and all that causes us most shame...

Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.

Sounds like taking a big chance, doesn't it? Yet the baby in the manger receives such a gift, considering it neither inadequate nor too extravagant. He holds it as the priceless treasure it is – and multiplies its value.

A chance worth taking? Or one not to be missed?

