

I want us to start on a very spiritual note and think of Christmas shopping.

- Occasionally seen something that you instinctively know would be just PERFECT for somebody you want to buy a present for. And then you see the price and it's about 3 x what you had in mind to spend.

After a slight tussle with your inner bank manager, you decide. I'm getting it. It seems an extravagance, but love IS sometimes extravagant. That is part of the nature of love.

Love must be practical, certainly, but love that is 'measured' to 'sensible proportions' is a most impoverished love.

- **I gather that the Hanging Gardens of Babylon** were built by a king for his wife. Created a tiered garden to recreate the landscape of her homeland. **A very expensive extravagant act of love**

And Christmas is the eternal spirit (God) longing to communicate his goodness to us (and incidentally, every major world religion has at its heart that God is good).

And coming amongst his creation in the flesh, is about as extravagant as it gets.

I wanted to find a true story in more recent times. A man who was to all intents and purposes penniless.

- Young Indian man from the untouchable cast. Clearly destined to stay in poverty.
- Happened to be a very skilled portrait painter, eked out a living doing portraits on street
- One day, when he was aged 26, a 19 year old Swedish tourist called Charlotte asked for her portrait. He was immediately rather shy. Botched it. A whirlwind romance ensued, during which they got married in a tribal ceremony in his remote home village.

A few days later, Charlotte had to return to Sweden with the people she'd come with:

promising she would return in the summer / he promised to get to Sweden to be with her.

They wrote letters, this was in the 1970s, but for some reason she didn't manage to come back in the summer and this poor street portrait painter realised he had no way of paying to get to Sweden. So he sold what little he had and bought a 2nd hand bicycle.

He didn't actually like cycling.

But he embarked on a journey that involved a number of accidents, and after 4 months and 3 weeks arrived at the Swedish border with the name and address of the girl. No guarantee she'd still want him. No guarantee her parents would even invite him into their house. But extravagant love takes risks.

To cut a very long story short, they now live in Sweden, have since had two children and he was until recently serving as the cultural ambassador of India to Sweden.

Let's not complicate the message of Christmas. God's journey if you like was even further – from majesty to a vulnerable child, living, loving and in the end suffering alongside us. It was an act of the most extravagant love.