

The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord: Christmas Gifts

“A child is born for us, a son is given to us.” *The Prophet Isaiah*

“Jesus Christ gave himself for us.” *The Apostle Paul to Titus*

“A savior has been born for you who is Christ the Lord.” *The Gospel of Luke*

“But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God.”
The Gospel of John

These quotations are taken from various readings in the four Masses of Christmas: the Vigil Mass, Midnight Mass, the Mass at Dawn and the Mass during the Day. In this season of gift giving, it is good to remind ourselves that the reason we give gifts is as a reflection of the gift of love we received from God when he gave us his son, Jesus the Christ.

I read a beautiful story about a gift given many years ago by the journalist playwright Charles MacArthur to his fiancée, the great actress Helen Hayes. At the time the gift was given, they were not famous, they were very young and they were very poor. With a flourish, Charles gave the young lady he would soon marry a bag of peanuts. He then said to her, “I wish they were emeralds.” Many years later, after years of devoted marriage, Charles lay on his deathbed at Christmastime. He had the strength to give his wife a gift he had a friend procure for him. The gift was an emerald bracelet. The story goes that when Charles MacArthur gave the bracelet to Helen Hayes, he said, “I wish they were peanuts.” The years of love were far more valuable than the emeralds. The real gift that Charles gave Helen was his love. His true gift was a reflection of the gift of Christmas, the gift of God’s love.

I want to speak about real gifts today, the gifts that matter, the gifts that reflect God’s love, true Christmas gifts. Of course, I have no choice but to speak in generalities, but perhaps you might be able to relate the needs and gifts I present today to your own lives.

I want to begin with the gifts given between husbands and wives. Let’s start with the men. Deep in the heart of every man, every husband, is his sense of success or failure as a man. Most men will tend to focus more on their failures than what others might reasonably consider their successes. A man wants to be a leader at home, at work, in the community. He wants to be a successful provider. But he knows how infrequently he enjoys genuine success. How often are his opinions sought out? How wide is the scope of his influence? A man may appear to have a handsome, smiling self assured exterior, but he is frequently a silent sufferer of emotional fatigue, frustration, and most often, discouragement. He may be earning a very good salary, but often feels totally inadequate in his own home. What gift does he need from his wife? He needs encouragement when he is weak, and approval when he is strong. To understand her husband in this way, a wife has to take a step away from her own

perception of the world and a step away from her own needs to support her husband. Taking a step away from her own agenda and taking a step into her husband's needs is a gift of love, a reflection of the Gift of Love we celebrate at Christmas.

The wife is like Jesus speaking to his large, impetuous and somewhat clumsy, disciple, Peter. When Jesus walked on the water, Peter started to walk over to him on the water, but soon became afraid and started to drown. When Peter's bravado was louder than his courage and he denied the Lord, Jesus reached out to him and convinced him that he would do better, exhorting him three times to "Feed my sheep", canceling Simon's three denials. Earlier, when Peter was strong and declared that Jesus was the Christ, Jesus showed his approval by calling him his rock. So, also, a wife's great gift to her husband is encouraging him in his weakness and approving him in his strength.

Women, wives, also have great needs, but needs that are somewhat different from their husbands' needs. A perceptive husband can give his wife the gift that she craves at Christmas and throughout the year. Like her husband, a wife lives much of her greatness away from her spouse. He does not witness her continual skills as a mother, a homemaker, a child psychologist, a neighborhood diplomat. Many wives also juggle a job with their homemaking. Most husbands do their best to compliment their wives, but many men do not realize that a woman needs much more than compliments. Again, I am speaking in general terms here, but deep within every woman is the fear of being unloved or even unlovable. She has a fear of being considered unattractive, a fear that is heightened with each year. But the deepest fear within a woman is a gnawing sense of loneliness. Surrounded by the demands of children and husband, she often feels alone in a crowd. She feels that she has to solve the problems of her family's world, while her basic need is ignored by all around her.

Husbands, to give your wife a true Christmas gift that lasts all year, be present for her. Be considerate, be attentive and be affectionate when she least expects attention. To do this you husbands have to step away from your own wants and dive into your wives' needs. You have to reflect the sacrificial gift of the God. You can assume the role that Jesus took in his relationship with Mary of Bethany. This was the Mary who treasured the presence of the Lord while her sister Martha was busy with chores. Jesus told her that she had chosen well. He wanted her to experience his presence. Mary of Bethany, under the name Mary Magdalene was also the first one to whom Jesus appeared that first Easter morning when after the crucifixion all seemed lost. He told her to fear not, he was there. Husband, say with your lives to your wives, "Fear not, I am with you," and give them the gift of knowing that they will never be alone. This is a reflection of the gift of Christmas.

Children have watched TV for the last month. Some of them want everything they see. But they have only one real need that so many parents often miss. It is a need that takes time, a commodity that some parents are not willing to sacrifice. The basic need of a child is the need for security. This demands time, continual time, time

to do that which in the eyes of the world might seem insignificant but in the eyes of the child is critical. This is the commodity that so many parents refuse their children. A child must know that Mommy and Daddy are there, loving, caring, protecting. Parents who shower gifts upon their children but who delegate their presence to nannies and continual baby sitters are depriving their little ones from their greatest need, their parents' presence. The sacrifice of being present, the sacrifice of presence, is a reflection of the gift of Christmas, the abiding presence of God.

As children grow their needs tend to model their parents. Growing boys need continual encouragement. Growing girls need continual assurances that they are not alone. Parents would be shocked to learn how many of their teenage children go through periods of disparaging or even hating themselves. Parental presence, encouragement, support, and trust go a long way in helping a child achieve a sense of personal affirmation and self-worth. When children grow into adults recognizing the presence of their parents' love, they grow recognizing the presence of God's love in their lives. At Christmas we proclaim that Jesus is the Emmanuel, God with us. Children experience the Emmanuel in the presence of their parents.

And what is it that children can give to their parents? What is it that their parents really want? Simply this: respect. Children, whether you are little, teenagers, or even adults, respect your parents. Respect them even during those rare times, I'm sure, when you disagree with them. They are your parents. They have earned the right to be honored, the fourth commandment tells us. You may give many gifts to your Mom and Dad at Christmas, but this is the one they need: respect. Remember, the accounts of Jesus's birth all end with the how he related to his parents. He was subject to them, which is the biblical way of saying, he honored them. Because he honored them he grew, the gospels tell us, in wisdom and grace.

Well, that takes care of those in the family setting, but how about the rest of us: the single, the widowed, the divorced? What are the gifts that we need and that we need to give each other? The answer to this flows from the basic needs of women and men, the need to heal the wounds of loneliness and discouragement. The Gospel for the Christmas Mass During the Day proclaims the "Word was made flesh." This is not just a theological doctrine. When we say this we are affirming that Christ became one of us, a person who can and does relate to us. The gift of Christmas that God has given to us, especially to those of us who have to go it alone, is the gift that we are never really alone. We have instead, within us, divine life, light and love.

In a few simple words, the *Gospel of John* describes the life of the Christian and the continual gift of Christmas. Those words are *grace flowing upon grace*. There is no limit to the depth of God's gift to us. The closer we come to him, the more room we have for him to fill us even more with his presence. The more we delve into the mystery of the Emmanuel, God with us, the more we enjoy his presence.

Christmas is a day of joy. It is a day when we open our eyes to the beauty of the Christmas scene and our hearts to the profundity of the Christmas mystery.

And yes, we clothe our Christmas in a great deal of sentimentality, with songs and scenes of the Newborn Babe. We do our best to summon up feelings of peace and good will. But sentimentality is not religion and feelings are not faith. Sentimentality and feelings really do not matter. What does matter is the realization that God is with us, will always remain faithful to us and will never stop offering us the gift of salvation. And He calls us to give the Gift of His Presence to all in the world.

This is the ultimate message of Christmas.