

PRESENTS AND PRESENCE: FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY C

At Christmas time we give presents to different people. Different people give presents to us. What's it all about? It all goes back to the story of the wise men going to Bethlehem, falling down on their knees, and offering the best gifts they could afford to the Baby King.

But Christmas is not just about giving presents. It's more about *being present*, i.e. sharing ourselves with warmth, affection and sincerity. The quality of our personal presence is everything. In practice, gift-giving may sometimes be aimed more at keeping on side and keeping the peace than being really present. In fact, gift-giving may at times be part of the commercialisation of Christmas instead of an expression of unconditional love.

In contrast, the wise men are completely single-minded and sincere in their gift-giving. Their gifts are expressions of their respect, reverence, gratitude and love for the child. Their gifts are given with no strings attached, no conditions, and no mixed motives.

The flaws in our gift-giving may make us feel that the whole business of exchanging Christmas presents should be abolished, and that the commercialisation of Christmas should be restrained and restricted, if not eliminated altogether.

If and when we think such thoughts, it may help to remember that the commercialisation and consumerism of Christmas is somewhat necessary. Were it a completely spiritual celebration, hundreds of small businesses would go to the wall. Thousands of factory workers making bonbons, trees, chocolates, decorations, cards and toys, would find themselves unemployed.

It may also be helpful to remember that if people did not spend money on gifts to family and friends at Christmas, their consciences would not be roused to make donations to the poor and needy at this special time of giving and sharing. (Many charities, in fact, experience a big boost at Christmas time).

Despite the limits and flaws in our gift-giving, it's important to both keep the practice alive and to purify it of its worst excesses. It's particularly important to the lives of children. The good news is that while they are attracted to receiving e.g., a gift of an I-Pad or of shiny new roller-blades, they are also attracted to the Crib and to the story of the baby lying there clothed in rags. Their hearts are touched by the plight of his parents who are so poor that they can offer him nothing but their protection and affection.

In fact, children very easily get the message that this is a story of love. They appreciate the humanity of the Holy Family, their struggles and their sacrifices, to bring to the human race the Light of the Nations.

The story of the visit to the Crib by the Wise Men is a story of giving and receiving. It speaks of how gifts express love between persons, and of how gifts given with love bind people together. But it is not simply about the giving of things - in this case gold, frankincense, and myrrh - but the giving of persons, the sharing of selves.

In celebrating Epiphany we are celebrating the greatest manifestation of goodness there has

ever been, that of God's love for us. For it was out of love, that God the Father gave us the Son, and gave him to be our Light, our Saviour, our King and our Joy. The poet John Betjeman has written of this precious gift from God:

*A present that cannot be priced
Given two thousand years ago.
Yet if God had not given so
He still would be a distant stranger
And not the Baby in the manger.*

Jesus, then, is the celebrity we are celebrating. He's the reason for the season, the Twelve Days of Christmas. So, as a beautiful carol puts it: '*JOY, JOY, FOR CHRIST IS BORN, THE BABE, THE SON OF MARY!*'

As our Eucharist continues then, I suggest that we make a special point of giving thanks for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives. May we acknowledge with sincerity that he is the most valuable present we have ever received! May we also in return renew the gift of our whole selves, our whole lives, to both God himself and to the people who need us most!

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