

St Matthew's Newcastle

God's Gift of Himself

Sermon for Christmas Day 2011

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Wearying of meercats selling car insurance, another advertisement caught my promiscuous attentions in the run-up to Christmas. A young boy is pictured wishing away the time in the days before the festival, finally bolting down his supper on Christmas Eve before rushing upstairs and forcing himself to sleep. In the morning, he ignores the presents piled at the foot of his bed, goes to his cupboard and fetches out a rather rustically wrapped gift, which, with great pride, he goes to present to his parents.

Setting aside the question of what a child of about six is doing with sufficient funds to purchase a gift from John Lewis, which requires a cubic foot of box, the cleverness of the advertisement lies in its counter-intuitive plot. At the same time, its counter-intuition reflects a sad image of our contemporary society.

There has been a subtle shift in the character of receiving a gift. Once it betokened affection or esteem, nowadays, a present seems more a means of satisfying that great bully of humanity, greedy expectation: gifts so often are shallow and esteemed for their monetary value rather than be valuable for the pledge of true regard, love or appreciation. The observation that it is the thought that counts is so often uttered with disapprovingly ironic intent.

Even as I speak, so my newspaper informs me, the auction rooms of Ebay are reallocating the flotsam and jetsam of yuletide disappointment - such is the immediacy of the technological world.

Probably most of those who gave the gifts will care little, since it was all a mechanical exercise in the first place. However, some will be crushed that their attempts to express fond or admiring feelings are unappreciated.

The cynic might well suggest that this is the game you play when you seek to derive pleasure from the pleasure of someone else, since the giver derives satisfaction when a gift itself causes happiness. However, it is surely a sign of grace if one finds contentment in the joy of others.

Thus, so we learn in the Gospels, does Heaven rejoice when God's greatest gift to us, which we celebrate today, brings happiness to people on earth: when someone finds hope, comfort, peace, Truth in Jesus Christ.

The Birth of Christ was an expected token of divine love for us - so unexpected that it took us several hundred years fully to understand the full significance of Saint John's insight that in Jesus of Nazareth the Word was made flesh.

As such, in fact, the gift of Christ is the God's gift of Himself - the greatest gift that one can offer to another. It is given in the hope, but not the expectation, let alone on the condition that the love it betokens is reciprocated.

However, just as it gives God pleasure to see this gift of Himself treasured, so equally, we will find pleasure in offering ourselves as a gift to Him, for we know that he will readily and joyously accept the offer and it is in freely giving ourselves to God that we will find the deepest, truest happiness.

