

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

A BLESSED HOPE GIVEN Titus 2:11-14 & 3:4-7

No matter how much we say we would like it to be otherwise, the major activity of Christmas is gift giving and getting. We look forward to it. Our merchants depend upon it. There would be no community-wide Christmas *Season* if it were not for the preparation and purchasing of gifts. Many of us have become uncomfortable with such an emphasis, but yet we are even more upset when Wal-Mart decides not to use the term *Christmas* in their promotions and decorations. We want to keep Christ in Christmas, but we also want to keep Christmas in Wal-Mart. We only wring our hands and whine when a municipality bans crèches, but we vow to boycott any commercial establishment that does not acknowledge Christmas as the reason for the buying season. We Christians are certainly a conflicted group when it comes to the celebration Christmas and especially the emphasis on gifts.

On the surface we argue that there is far too much focus on gifts at Christmas and not enough on Jesus. Certainly this has been the refrain in the Church for at least the last 20 years. Yet, the emphasis on gift giving and getting is the reality with which we live. With all the years of beating up one another and the culture for our gift-focus, there has not been a decrease in our obsession with gift giving and getting at Christmas. Nor has the campaign to keep Christ in Christmas resulted in an increase in the world's interest in Jesus. There is something behind our gift giving and getting that is strangely resistant to our efforts at its suppression. Perhaps a deeper consideration of our gift-focus might help us understand a little better why we do what we do at Christmas.

If Jesus is the reason for the season, might he also be the reason for our gifting? After all, the extravagance of our gift giving and getting seems insignificant when compared to the gift to the world that is the Incarnation. Jesus is the gift of transcendent value that is given and gotten eternally. It is eternal both because of its effect on us and due to the fact that it is also a gift to the eternal Father. One might say that the original Christmas gift could be summed up as the arithmetic of hope. That is, Christ's gift to us plus the Son's gift to the Father. Jesus gave himself to redeem us and reconcile us to the Father. He also gave himself so that he could purify and present a people to God as God's people.

As there is a St. Nicholas behind the Santa Claus tradition, there is the Divine Gift-Giver behind our gift giving and getting celebration of the Nativity. With each gift you receive and each gift you give this year, recognize that those gifts are symbols of the greatest gift of all – the gift of eternal hope through Jesus Christ. By giving gifts we are imitating in our finite way our God and Father who “*gave his only begotten Son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).

But, what is this eternal hope: this blessed hope given?

N. T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham answers by saying that:

“Hope, for the Christian, is not wishful thinking or mere blind optimism. It is a mode of knowing, a mode within which new things are possible, options are not shut down, new creation can happen” (Surprised by Hope, p. 72).

Through the Incarnation we learn that a virgin can conceive and bear a child; that the infinite God can become a finite man; that God and heavenly beings can intervene in this world; that the poor in spirit, the helpless and the humble can be exalted; that people who have turned their backs on God can become his people; and that the place of new creation is in this place and in this life at this time. As St. Paul wrote: *“if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). He did not say that after a believer dies he will become a new creation, but rather when he believes he becomes a new creation, here and now.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis put it this way:

“Hope...means...a continual looking forward to the eternal world...It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought the most of the next...It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth “thrown in”: aim at earth and you will get neither” (bk. III, ch. 10, p. 118).

Heaven as the eternal world is present in the life of the believer in this world and continues through death into the next. That means that we can live lives of eternal significance today if we allow ourselves to be recreated by God through faith. This is the meaning of the words St. Paul wrote to Titus:

⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

¹¹ For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

Again, the arithmetic of hope is Christ’s gift to us plus the Son’s gift to the Father. In giving himself to redeem us and reconciling us to the Father, Jesus brought us into God’s peace. In giving himself so that he could purify and present a people to God as God’s people, Jesus recreated us as members of God’s kingdom. The sum is the extravagant gift of new life – not just a fading gift, but a gift that makes us new every day and brings us ultimate joy. It is the gift of heaven come down to earth rather than one of earth being taken up into heaven.

We celebrate Christmas by giving gifts, not because we are materialistic but because we are material beings. We express ourselves, our love, our gratitude, our esteem and our concern for others through the giving and getting of gifts. We also live into our redeemed nature as the image of God when our gift giving and getting is motivated by the extravagant example he gave us in the Incarnation. This Christmas, our challenge is to be intentional about both our gift giving and getting by contemplating why we are giving each gift to each person, and why others would give gifts to us. And each time you handle a gift do it in memory of Jesus, the One who loves you so much that he gave himself so that you might be recreated a new and eternal being – that you might know the blessed hope given.

Let us pray:

Let your goodness, Lord, appear to us, that we, made in your image, conform ourselves to it. In our own strength we cannot imitate your majesty, power and wonder; nor is it fitting for us to try. But your mercy reaches from the heavens, through the clouds, to the earth below. You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries. Amen. (Bernard of Clairvaux, 1090-1153)

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on December 14, 2009, Christmas Eve.