

Homily
December 25, 2023
Christmas Morning Mass
20:24-30:02

How many have already enjoyed a frenzy of unwrapping gifts? Raise your hand. How many are so disciplined you're waiting until after this Mass? Wow! Really. Praise God before you get the gifts. All right!

This is a very strange Christmas Day. Forty years ago today it was 25 below zero. It's now in the 50's. The heat came on because the sacristy window was left open accidentally. And guess where the thermostat is. (smiling) In the sacristy So if you're warm. Blame someone. So we've got a few windows open. If you're too hot and need to open a window, I have no trouble with that. I don't want you to melt. The deacon and I will take care of melting.

Christmas is a time of gift-giving. Gifts as small as a cookie or as extravagant as a Rolls-Royce in the driveway. Whatever brought about the custom of gift giving at this time of year?

Well, it has its roots in the pagan rituals held during the Winter Solstice in the Roman Empire. They would exchange gifts to celebrate the days are growing longer. Christianity eventually folded these rituals into Christianity, into Christmas itself, recalling the bearing of gifts by the three wise men for the infant Jesus.

Such gift giving eventually fell on a variety of days over the centuries. December the 6th, the Feast of St. Nicholas, Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Epiphany, January the 6th, in the old calendar.

In the Middle ages, wassailing in England gave rise to a reciprocal exchange between the feudal lords and their peasants. The peasants would come and stand outside the feudal lord's castle or house and offer a small token. And the lord of the manor would bless them and they would thank him in one of the great wassailing songs. You can see that toward the end of the second to last verse that is the exchange taking place.

In early modern Europe, wassailing shifted to Christmas begging. During the holiday season, bands of young men, often rowdy, would wassail, that is stand outside the house and sing – going from home to home of the gentry, demanding handouts. Yeah. Kind of reminds you of Halloween. I don't know if they did tricks. I just know if you didn't give them anything, they said bad words to you.

In mid-19th century England, there was a poem that came out, "The Night Before Christmas." And then very soon Charles Dickens wrote the novella, "A Christmas Carol." These two prompted gift-giving to move into the home.

Christmas customs of all the immigrants, found their way to the United States, where we domesticated it. The recipients of gift giving shifted from the lower classes, as penned by Charles

Dickens, to children. And the gifts were now given by or purportedly given by some version of Santa Claus.

Of course, the adults were not left out because every adult contains a child within, longing for a gift or two. Right Monica? Good. She agreed with me.

What is the gift that you are wishing for this Christmas? Have you received it? Or are you still waiting, all of you who are practicing what my mother used to do. Mother would refuse to let us open any gifts until the dishes were done. We hated that. Well, guess what. When mother got older, she grew very impatient. "Why aren't we opening gifts?" "Well, mother we have to finish doing the dishes." "Well, that's silly!"

What is the Christmas gift in the span of your life that is most precious, most meaningful, most longingly remembered and. And among all the gifts that you have received why is this the one so significant. You have it in mind. Possibly not. We introverts have to take a few days to answer a question. But it's something that you might think about.

And this most significant gift – how often do you take it down from the mantle, the shelf, the wall, the cabinet, or a closet to hold it thankfully, joyously, longingly.

The Three Kings brought gifts. In the song, "The Little Drummer Boy," he played his best for him. But today the gift giving on Christmas, or in the Christmas Season, is not about gifts to the Lord. It's about gifts being exchanged between us. We are, yes, the receivers and the givers. Which leads me to ask the question, "Did you know that we all share the most precious gift each Christmas?"

It's the same gift – indeed it is "more precious than a heap of gold," as the Psalmist says. At each Christmas this gift begins to unfold into our lives, emerging during the liturgical year in the Lord's ministry of teaching, healing, triumphal entry, suffering death, resurrection and ascension and eventually, another gift to us, the culmination – Pentecost - the Church. This gift is so precious, it is not confined to mantle, shelf, cabinet or closet. For it is the gift of the Lord himself, a baby who grew to be Savior, Redeemer and Sanctifier. This precious gift is placed upon the altar, then handed to us in consecrated Host and cup, kept before us in the Tabernacle with a shining lamp always burning. But not only on Christmas Eve, or Christmas Day. This gift is for us at all times, all days of the year.

We come here every Sunday to recall this gift to hear its origin, to cradle it in hand and heart, this Word made flesh; and to carry it forth in our persons as disciples.

Like the peasants and the lord of the manor, what gift can we give to our Lord? Perhaps a deeper relationship with this Savior going forward. Perhaps more frequent prayer or spiritual study. And of course, perhaps our presence each week among our fellow gift receivers and gift givers in our gathering for Mass. It is the time of gift giving. But it is also the time of receiving. We receive the Lord. Shall we bless him with our presence?