

Homily – Christmas Day 2011 – St. John Gaulbert Cathedral

What's in that package? Whose present is that?

Who is that present from? If it's from Grandma you know its going to be socks or maybe pajamas!

Stay away from that Christmas tree! Don't touch anything until all of your brothers and sisters are here. Remember, the youngest one gets to open presents first, so just be patient.

Does any of that sound familiar? I can certainly remember those things being said on Christmas morning when I was a young boy.

Having those kind of rules had to do with the fact that I grew up in a large family. Even with those directions, exchanging Christmas presents at our house could be pretty chaotic.

I recently read a reflection by a man who was recalling what he wanted for Christmas when he was 9 years old.

Charles had wanted only one gift; a genuine Civil War Army set and nothing else. Everyone of the boys in his class at school wanted the same thing.

When Christmas morning arrived, there was a large package with his name on it. This has to be it he thought. He was so excited he could hardly wait to open it.

When it was his turn, Charles tore off the wrapping paper in an instant. As soon as he saw the gift that had been hidden inside, all he could do was say in a loud voice, "What! This can't be right. I only wanted one thing; a genuine Civil War Army set. Didn't anyone listen?!"

Charles explained that his heart sank when he realized it wasn't a genuine Civil War Army set. In that moment of disappointment, he started to think what a terrible Christmas day it was for a 9 year old boy.

Almost as quickly as Charles expressed his disappointment, his older brother asked if he could look at the gift that Charles had received.

Charles recalls that he had not even noticed what the gift was; he couldn't see past his disappointment.

His older brother Bud began to tell him, "Charles, look! This is really cool. You got the premium edition Erector Set. It has everything. It's not just the beginner set that I received when I was 9 years old. You can build all kinds of things with this."

It took awhile, but Charles started to hear what his older brother was saying, and what his older brother said meant a lot to him because Charles really looked up to him. Bud was 13; a teenager!

Then Charles finally started to open the box and began asking his older brother to show him how to use an Erector Set. They spent hours doing trying out the various components.

Charles admits that by the end of the day he had forgotten about the genuine Civil War army set.

Did I mention that his older brother had also told him that by receiving this super Erector Set, Charles was now a big boy and that everything was cool?

Today we celebrate the birth of a son and a brother. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ

- Son of God and son of Mary
- Brother to every one of us

Today we celebrate especially that this only begotten Son and this brother is our Eternal Father's gift to us. In the person of Jesus Christ the Father has really given us the gift of himself.

Pope Benedict XVI in a reflection on the celebration of Christmas a few years ago observed that because of that very personal gift, these feast of Christmas has become the feast of gifts and of gift-giving.

It is important for us to reflect on what is the gift; how is it given; and what is its meaning for us. The readings from Sacred Scripture help us to formulate that reflection.

What is this gift that comes to us in the person of Christ?

In the Gospel reading, St. John explains that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God; a Word that the Father was waiting patiently and lovingly to speak.

The letter to the Hebrews says that in times past God did speak in partial and various ways, especially through the prophets. But with the birth of Christ, God has spoken in a complete way.

The completeness of God's eternal Word as manifested in Christ is found in his fulfillment of God's plan for our salvation; Christ suffered and died and rose from the dead so that we may have eternal life; a real sharing in God's life.

In the Gospel reading, St. John also explains that Jesus Christ is

- the light of the human race
- a light that shines through darkness
- a light that no darkness can overcome

How is that gift of God's life and love and the gift of God's light of glory given?

In the Gospel reading, St. John explains that this gift is given

- by the Word becoming flesh; by Jesus Christ taking on our human nature, in all ways but sin
- by the Word making his dwelling among us, so that we could hear, and see, and touch, and personally experience God who otherwise can seem so far away
- by our accepting that gift; by our inviting and allowing Jesus to dwell not just among us in the sense that he is somewhere around here, but in the sense that he can take up residence in our hearts

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that this true gift of Christmas is given

- not only in how each one of us receives Christ into our hearts
- but in how we share the true gift of Christmas with others in so many simple ways
 - a smile
 - a kind gesture
 - any of the works of mercy
 - and especially through words and actions of forgiveness

What is the meaning of all this for us; that the eternal Word of God came to dwell among us and truly wants to remain within us through the Holy Spirit?

The Responsorial Psalm today reminds us that in the person of Jesus Christ “all the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.”

Or as Pope Benedict XVI has often said in his Christmas messages, the truth about Christmas is that

- God has appeared to us as a Savior
- our world and each one of us needs a Savior
 - one who brings peace, and salvation from our sins, and truly good news as Isaiah the prophet says to us today
 - a light that overcomes the darkness of sin; our sin and the presence of sin and evil from other sources that overshadow our lives
 - one who we can accept because he understands from his own experience our lives in all of the good and all of the bad that is part of it
 - one who brings us truth and hope and peace and grace and encouragement, which are all mentioned in the Scriptures today

One of my favorite reflections about this meaning of Christmas for us comes from Pope Benedict in one of his shortest messages about this feast. He says

- It is the task of Christians, with the witness of our life, to spread the truth of Christmas which Christ brings to every man and woman of good (i.e., every man and woman who is willing to accept that gift and not reject it).

- Born in the poverty of the manger, Jesus Christ comes to offer all the joy and peace which alone can fulfill the expectations of the soul.

If you want to

- find the truth about Christmas
- experience the fulfillment of the expectations of your soul

I ask you to reflect on a couple of things this morning before you leave this church. The best time to do it may be while you are preparing to come forward to receive Holy Communion or immediately after you have received.

First, think about what is the deepest longing or the strongest need that you have in your life?

- Is it recovery from an illness; yourself or someone in your family
- Is it finding a job just to pay the bills
- Is it doing well in school
- Is it trying to restore a friendship
- Is it just finding a way to be accepted by others

Second, think about at least one other person that you are aware of that is looking for a response to his or her deepest longing or strongest need; then

- ask yourself what you can do to assist that person in his or her longing and need
- ask the Eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ our Savior, whose birthday we celebrate today to give you the grace and whatever it takes to reach out to that other person in his or her need

Do you remember the story I told you about Charles who wanted nothing else for Christmas but a genuine Civil War Army set, but did not get what he wanted?

Charles finishes his story by explaining that the Christmas when the genuine Civil War Army set didn't come, was the best Christmas of his childhood.

Even though Charles didn't recognize it at the time and his older brother Bud never mentioned it, Charles had the best Christmas of his childhood because his brother did what Pope Benedict says that everyone of us should do and we should do it because it makes it a great Christmas for us.

By telling Charles that

- not receiving the genuine Civil War army set was not the end of the world for a 9 year old boy
- the Erector Set was awesome

By not telling Charles that

- he was stupid or pathetic for feeling so disappointed

By telling Charles that

- he was cool

By showing Charles

- how to use this awesome Erector Set

By saying and doing all these things, Charles experienced from his brother the truth about Christmas through simple words and actions.

Christmas will never depend on the giving or acceptance of a material gift, no matter how important the giver or the receiver thinks that gift may be.

Christmas will always depend on the unconditional love that God has for each and every person on this earth. And in some small way, Christmas depends on our receiving that love and sharing it with others in so many simple ways.

If Charles could experience all that from his brother Bud, how much more can each of us experience it from our brother, our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ?

The truth about Christmas is that God really wants

- all the ends of the earth to experience his saving power
- to give us the gift of his life; eternal life

- to dwell not just near us, but in us, in our hearts, every single moment of our lives
- us to experience, enjoy, and share his love, his mercy, his peace, and his grace

May all of that be your Christmas present today and everyday.