

Merry Christmas! If you're like me and try to squeeze every last drop of joy that you can out of Christmas, then you'll be glad to know that there are still two and half more days left to officially celebrate this wonderful season!

Well, whether you're wishing Christmas Eve and Day hadn't come and gone so quickly or if you're just relieved that they're over, I'd like to ask you this question: What do think has happened to those presents you so carefully picked out and gave to your loved ones and friends this Christmas? Are they being used? Are they still working? Often times you can tell whether or not it was a good present if it is something that gets used over and over again. Without a doubt, a good gift has to be a thing that doesn't break within a day or two: Say you buy a toy for a little one, by New Year's Day, has that toy you spent so much time looking for, -because it had to be exactly the **right** one, - has that plaything been forgotten already, or does that young boy or girl still play with that long sought-after toy every day? Does it still do what it's supposed to do, or did it break already? By looking at what the receiver of the gift does with the present, we see whether the gift was worth the trouble to give in the first place.

The church season of Christmas is also the time for us to take stock of what we've done with the gifts that God has given to us. Our Lord has given us some unique and very wonderful presents, and just like the presents we receive at Christmastime the question for us to ask ourselves is this: "Have we broken them or failed to use these gifts?" As we look to the year that lies ahead, "What can we do to make **better** use of the gifts God has lovingly given to us?" To answer these questions, let's go back to our Epistle readings and see just what **kind** of gifts God has given to us.

Our reading from Ephesians starts off with the apostle Paul telling us how God "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." He hasn't held **anything** back. **Every** spiritual blessing is yours. Every good thing in the heavenly places is given freely, and the gifts God gives have the best and most lasting value. They are gifts from heaven, and they will last forever!

The first gift that St. Paul describes for us is that God makes us "holy and blameless before Him." We are truly holy and perfect in God's sight because He has forgiven us for all our sins, all our transgressions against His holy Name, all of our breaking of His commandments. That is the first present as Paul lists them for us. Later in this book of Ephesians, Paul is quite clear as to **how** God gives us this gift of forgiveness. "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up

for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (5: 25-27). In Christ, there is the **forgiveness** we need for all of our guilt so that God can look at us as holy and blameless.

Another present is that He **adopts** us as His children. We are no longer excluded from His family, left out because of our disobedience to His Fatherly commands. In Christ, we are welcomed into His family. God makes us to be brothers and sisters to one another in the church. We truly are children of the heavenly Father. **Adoption**- that’s the gift God the Father gives us through Jesus Christ.

The next gift that He gives to us is **faith**; faith to accept these blessings from heaven. Our faith in the Lord Jesus is created by God, it’s not by our own doing. It’s not a gift we can buy or give to ourselves. Later on in this letter Paul is clear about the **gift** of faith. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works so that no one can boast”, Ephesians 2: 8-9. The very faith that we need to accept the forgiveness and adoption offered in Christ is created in us by God’s kindness, that is, His grace.

In our reading today from Ephesians 1, Paul also talks about our **love**, a love which is yet another gift from God. The apostle says that we live a life of love because we are dearly loved children. We love because “Christ loves us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”. That’s Ephesians 5: 1-2. Even our love, something we usually think of as coming from inside of ourselves, has been given to us by God so that we can love Him and others selflessly and sacrificially, the same way in which God loves us and all people.

That’s not all. There are still more gifts to unpack. The next one is “the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him” (17). In other words, God gives us His Holy **Spirit** to enlighten our minds. We get to know Jesus better because the Holy Spirit is present through God’s Word to teach us about Him and all of His gifts.

And then comes the very best present of all: Our **inheritance**. Eternal life in heaven is ours! Not because we’ve earned it, but because Jesus has given it to us as a gift when He made our adoption as God’s children possible. Because of Christ, our sins no longer keep us locked out of God’s household. God has adopted us in Christ and given us an eternal inheritance with Him!

These are just some of the gifts we have been given. There are many more that God lovingly and generously gives to us in Jesus. We can read about them all throughout the Bible, but hearing again, from Ephesians- about forgiveness, adoption, faith, love, the Holy Spirit, and heaven is enough to show us the kind of presents we have received.

Now comes the question: “What have we *done* with these gifts?” Do we use them, or do we forget about them as soon as we leave church and go back to our everyday lives? Do we keep them as precious gifts, close to our hearts, or do we break them in disobedience and rebellion against God?

If we are honest, we know we have failed to use them like we should. Our lives don't always demonstrate to others that we have received such wonderful gifts. Many times, we hide who we are (Christians!) and what we have received from God (Such wonderful gifts!) so that we don't look any differently than the people we live by, work with, or go to school with. Many times, we do, say, and think things that are wrong and begin to wreck those precious gifts that God has given us.

But Christmas is the season to remember that Jesus is the One Gift Who keeps on giving. All those other gifts, forgiveness, adoption, faith, love, the Holy Spirit, eternal life- the one thing they all have in common is Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this season. Every heavenly gift comes from Him and through Him and in Him- in this infant Who grew up to die for us.

Yes, I do need to mention His death in this season of His birth because that baby in Bethlehem is also the Savior at Calvary. It is only because of His blood shed on the cross on that hill, that God pours out upon us again and again the forgiveness of all our sins. On the cross Jesus' body is broken for all the gifts of God *we've* broken in our lives. In His death, Jesus is forgotten by His friends so that we could always be remembered and received in love by our heavenly Father.

Yes, Jesus *is* the gift Who keeps on Giving. He gave Himself to be born as one of us. He gave of Himself as He lived among us sinners yet was without sin. And Jesus gave Himself on the cross. He gave His all for us, to give us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. That is what God decided to do for us before the foundation of the world. That is what has happened in us because of Jesus. He keeps coming to us Sunday after Sunday to give us His gifts of love, life and salvation through His Holy Word and Sacraments. Here He continually renews us and keeps us strong in our faith in Him. All these gifts we keep enjoying and using on and on as Jesus remains forever the Gift Who keeps on giving! Merry Christmas! Amen.