

Christmas Eve 2020

1 John 4:9-10

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

God’s gift of love in Christ Jesus

Christmas is a time to give gifts, cards and other expressions of love. The public health orders dealing with the pandemic have restricted our ability to gather with loved ones, but we continue to find ways to express our love for family, friends and acquaintances through the giving of gifts. The type of gifts we give often reflects the depth, type and quality of our relationships with various people. Gift cards for a large coffee or hot chocolate might be appropriate for your coworkers, but you would probably want to buy something fancier and more expensive for your spouse and children.

What was the most expensive gift you gave at Christmas? What was the least expensive gift you gave at Christmas? People can get carried away with gifts. Some families discourage lavish spending and seek to promote equality, by limiting the number of gifts and setting the purchase price at a modest amount of money. The depth and importance of a relationship are not always reflected by the value of the gifts given. As they say, ‘It’s the thought that counts.’ Cold comfort when you were expecting the latest video game system and got socks instead!

By definition a gift is a freely given expression of positive affection for another person. By definition a gift is given without expecting anything in return. A free gift has no strings attached. However, we all know that some gifts are wrapped with strings. Sometimes people give gifts hoping to gain favours, or considerations in return. I read a devotion in which a person gave his coach a nice Christmas gift, hoping it would result in more playing time. Some organizations have policies restricting or forbidding gift giving. Human gift giving is affected by many motives besides the simple expression of love, but God’s gifts spring freely from the bounty His loving heart!

People sometimes think that we can motivate God’s giving or somehow influence His action in our lives, by giving him something as a sacrifice or act of devotion. That was the motivation behind the offering of sacrifices in the ancient world. It’s still part of our thinking as human beings. We imagine that despite obvious differences of power and ability that God is similar to us, in that He can be influenced by gift giving on our part. But what need could God have of any gift on our part? Humans have needs and so it is possible to give gifts that will have an affect on other people’s behaviour and influence their attitude towards us. But God is the creator of all things. St. Paul said, *“In Him we live and move and have our being.”* All things, ourselves included, depend on Him for life and the things necessary for living. God is not driven by need, influenced or motivated by our giving. He is the giver of all things and He is motivated by His love. In our lesson St. John says, *“God is love.”* Love is at the heart of His being. Love is His motivation for giving.

God expresses His love daily, richly and freely in the things He has made. He opens His hands and provides for the needs of all living creatures. He causes the rising and setting of the sun. He sends the rain in its season and blesses the earth with fruitful harvests. He blesses us with hearts that love and with hands that work together, support, strengthen and encourage each other. The ability to love and give gifts of love is a gift of God, which He has bestowed on no other part of His creation. Our ability to love, bear’s witness to the truth of St. John’s words that *“God is love.”* God expresses His love in countless ways each day, but His love is expressed most deeply and profoundly in the giving of Jesus to live as one with us and to give His life on the cross to atone for human sin.

Gifts express our love for others. The gift of Jesus expresses the depth of God’s love for us! God loved His human creation so much that despite the sin of our nature, the resistance of our will and the rebellion of our lives that He joined His divinity to our humanity and lived among us. Christmas is God joining us in our humanness in a world in bondage to sin, suffering from the effects of sin. Jesus is God with us in the realities of life, as we daily experience it. Christmas is God redeeming us from the penalty of sin and lifting its condemnation of death from our heads, through the sacrifice of Jesus’ cross. St. John writes, *“In this is love, not that we loved*

God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Jesus was born to take away the curse and condemnation of our sin. He sacrificed Himself on the cross to make things right between us and God, which is what propitiation means.

Christmas is God reaching out to the world with the free gift of His love in Christ Jesus. It is a free gift, motivated by nothing other than His love for a world in bondage to sin, in misery and under the condemnation of death. It is a free gift with no strings attached. It is a gift that frees us from the strings of sin that bind us, enslave us and bring misery and death to our lives. It is a free gift that gives the peace of a good conscience in relationship with God in time; and release from the condemnation of death in eternity, to all who receive it through faith in Jesus. The free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Holy Spirit open our hearts to the free gift of God's love and give us faith to believe in Christ Jesus as our Saviour. He was born to bear our sins and take their guilt away! God open our hearts that the free gift of His love in Christ Jesus may grow within our spirits, cleanse our hearts and minds daily. He comes to us that we may have good hope in time and life in eternity. A blessed Christmas. In Jesus' Name.