

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

The Gift of God in Christ: More Abundant Life

One of the most touching experiences at Christmas is the unexpected arrival of a friend bearing a gift that is wholly a surprise: a gift so thoughtfully and personally chosen and the magnitude of the love it symbolizes so wonderfully evident that it surprises and overwhelms us with its unexpected graciousness.



Gift of Life: "I have come," he said, "that you may have life and have it more abundantly."

It is true that in the Old Testament the people of Israel hoped for life, for fullness of days and the well-being of life; they knew that DEUTERONOMY taught them to "choose life," to choose goodness and the works of life; and their prophets proclaimed that Yahweh is the God of the Living, that it is He who gives and preserves life, and that the health and vigor of human life flow from the fidelity of human wills to the will of God.

But the gift of Life which Jesus Christ brings to human history is far greater than what was anticipated or prophesied in Israel. Like the wonderfully tender and creative Gift-Giver that He is, Yahweh kept His secret till the fullness of time. We will miss the essentially Christian joy and generosity of God's Gift to us in Christ Jesus if we do not realize this. The Birth of Jesus Christ, with His subsequent death, resurrection and glorification in new life in which we are all invited to participate - is an Event-Gift fashioned by an unfathomably merciful God, and an Event-Gift fashioned by Him in secret precisely for our sakes.

The unexpectedness of the revelation of this "hidden plan" shocked Israel and it still shocks us. The Father through Christ still has to say to us: "Be not incredulous, but believing." Whether we are Josephs, or Marys, or shepherds, or inn-keepers, or wise men, or apostles, or townsfolk, or hungry crowds, or sad-ducees, or rich young men, or high priests, or Roman soldiers, or condemned thieves, or anyone else along Jesus' Way, we still find it very hard to believe the Gift of Life which Jesus, the Gift-Bearer of the Father, holds out to us with an everlasting smile of delight. We simply cannot conceive of such a Gift or such a generous Gift-Giver - one who would, through Christ, give us HIS OWN LIFE, both now and in the world to come.

Yet, this is precisely what Christmas is and means: the gift of radical newness of life through the Gift of Jesus Christ, the Source of our Life. The historical wrappings are the human wrappings of Jesus' human life and death, but the gift itself is God's own life in the risen Christ, already given to us now through our baptism and one day to be perfected through the final unwrapping of our lives and deaths in the final coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The far smaller Christmas gifts which we give to one another are, for Christians, a loving attempt to share and symbolize this infinite Gift and the hope and joy we know in it. They are, by comparison, very humble gifts, but Christ and the Father chose to identify them with their own first Christmas Gift.

One of the happiest gifts a Christian family could offer to one another during these last nights before Christmas is to gather in a warm corner of their house and to read together the opening chapter of the New Testament, LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS, as if it were, which indeed it is, a Christmas greeting to ourselves. I, your brother Christian, offer you here the text of this ancient gift-testament as the most encouraging, ennobling, and transforming gift-message I could possibly give to you this Christmas. Let us ponder its amazing generosity together:

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless and to live through love in His presence, determining that we should become His adopted sons, through Jesus Christ for His own kind purposes, to make us praise the glory of His grace, His free gift to us in the Beloved, in whom, through His blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins.

Such is the richness of the grace which He has



showered on us in all wisdom and insight. He has let us know the mystery of His purpose, the hidden plan He so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end: that He would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth. And it is in Him that we were claimed as God's own, chosen from the beginning, under the predetermined plan of the one who guides all things as he decides by his own will; chosen to be, for His greater glory, the people who would put their hopes in Christ before He came. Now you too, in Him, have heard the message of the truth and the good news of your salvation and have believed it; and you, too, have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise, the pledge of our inheritance which brings freedom for those whom God has taken for His own, to make His glory praised. (Ephesians 1:3-14)

The preacher of this moving statement of our faith was a man like ourselves, living near the end of the first century. Whether he was the Apostle Paul, himself, or a disciple of Paul, he was a needy man like ourselves who had probably never seen the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, through him God majestically declares the mysterious Gift of our Life in Christ, in words which are perhaps the most exalting Christmas hymn in all of scripture or tradition. Like ourselves this man is obviously overwhelmed by the Gift, by "the richness of the grace which God has showered on us in all wisdom and insight." He knows that it is not through his own paltry goodness that he or his children are so blessed and given New Life, but, rather, that "God loved us with so much love that He was generous with His mercy: when we were dead through our sins, He brought us to life with Christ and raised us up with Him and gave us a place with Him in heaven in Christ Jesus."

The anointed Messiah given to us in God's new testament relationship with humanity bears to us a gift of far more abundant life than that desired by the prophets and people of the Old Testament relationship with God. The Anointed of Yahweh is now Yahweh's own Son, and the Life He gives and preserves in us is now God's own Life, communicated by the Spirit of God who is called forth within us by Jesus. This Jesus Christ has said to us:

"I shall ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate to be with you forever, that Spirit of truth whom the world can never receive since it neither sees nor knows Him; but you now know Him because He is with you, He is in you."

This Spirit of God "has made His home in you" (Romans 8:9), and this "Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

The New Life of the Spirit, given to us by God through Christ, can be more tangibly realized if we contemplate the two great metaphors that characterize the Scriptural readings for the Vigil of Christmas: MARRIAGE and the FAMILY TREE.

On the Eve of Christmas we hear Isaiah proclaim to us: "You shall be called by a NEW NAME pronounced by the mouth of the Lord... No more shall men call you 'Forsaken,' or your land 'Desolate,' But you shall be called 'MY DELIGHT' and your land 'Espoused.' For the Lord delights in you... As a young man marries a virgin, your Builder shall marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so shall your God rejoice in you." (Isaiah 62:1-5)

The vital union of humankind with God which is the Gift of Life brought to our human thresholds by Christ is so transforming a gift that it radically changes our name and lifts us to an entirely new relationship with God, a relationship that Scripture can speak of only through the intimate, life-sharing, and life-creating image of marriage. This means that on Christmas we celebrate the great truth that through the Life-Giving reality of Jesus Christ, our Builder has in some extraordinary, divine way, "married" His people and even now rejoices in us, His "Delight." If it is mysterious to us how we delight in God, how infinitely more mysterious it is to us, at this Christmas time, that He delights in us. Yet this is what He has said in Christ:

Then, in the Gospel for the Vigil of Christmas, we hear, often with their unfamiliar pronunciations, the long list of the forty "begots": the genealogy of Jesus descending from the fatherhood of Abraham through Joseph, the spouse of the Mother of Jesus. It used to be a common custom among families, even in our own culture, to keep such a record of the "family tree," though this is made far more difficult now in our highly mobile society. The family tree was often written in the front of the family Bible.

But Christmas is, in fact, the celebration of the Gift of Life which radically transforms the Family Tree of Jesus Christ. After His Resurrection and Glorification by the Father, it is no longer of primary importance who is or is not related to Jesus according to the bonds of blood. The early Church recognized the surpassing blessing and dignity of Jesus Christ's New Family: all those brothers and sisters "who hear the word of God and keep it."

The kinsfolk of Jesus are now no longer limited to those who have been connected with Him in the narrow sense of belonging to His physical family. Paul reminds the Corinthians of their far more precious bonds of Life with the Lord Jesus:

"From now onwards, we do not judge anyone by the standards of the flesh. Even if we did once know Christ in the flesh, that is not how we know him now. For anyone who is in Christ, there is a NEW CREATION; the old creation has gone, and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation. In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself... and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled." (2 Cor. 5:16-19)

So the Tree of Life planted in the middle of the original garden of humankind now blooms in the Father's Gift to us, the New Family Tree made possible by the Spirit in Christ. The Father's unbelievably wonderful Gift to us, which He daily renews, is the gift of our New Genealogy in Christ, of our Brotherhood with Him, and of our Sonship to the Father. This is what it means to acclaim Jesus Christ as the Source of Our Life.

Christmas is a celebration of the Birth of Jesus the Christ, but it is also, therefore, a celebration of our own New Birth, the new creation of our own being "born again from above" through the gift of Christ and His Spirit. When, like Nicodemus in the dead of night, we come to realize this more fully, there can be only one worthy Christmas carol, repeated over and over in different words and signs, a deeply humble, joyous cry of thanksgiving to the Father, a profoundly glad and thoroughly grateful "Thank you."

My dear people in the Family of Christ, I wish you the fullness of your Life in Christ and all the joy that comes with receiving and realizing this great Gift. My words are but poor human wrapping, but the Gift Itself is God's.