

Linus, resident theologian and biblical scholar of the Peanut's Comic Strip, is explaining to Sally, Charlie Brown's sister, the meaning of the Gospel I just read. It's about the birth of Jesus from the Gospel according to Luke: "The census is said to have been 'of all the world.' This probably meant only the Roman Empire. When we read that there was no room at the inn, the word 'inn' is better translated as 'guestroom.' The intention, of course, is to contrast a place of human lodging with a place for feeding animals. 'Peace among men with whom he is pleased' is an interesting translation. It indicates that divine peace is not dependent on human attitudes. The name 'Bethlehem' is interesting too. It means 'House of Bread.' I think things like this are fascinating. What do you think, Sally? 'I think I don't get everything I want for Christmas this year, I'm gonna gross out.'"

We would all probably agree that Sally has missed the real meaning of Christmas. It's easy enough to do in our modern affluent society. The secular celebration of Christmas is determined largely by commercial interests. The department stores determine when the season begins: sometimes just after the Halloween decoration blow away in the November gales. The stores determine when Christmas is over: when the stores close on Christmas Eve. Commercial interests decide what the goal of the season is: to find just that right gift for that special person. Businesses determine if the season is successful: did this year's profit exceed last year's. But this is nothing new. In 1644 the British Parliament passed a law making the celebration of Christmas illegal because of the holiday excesses of merchants and buyers alike.

Now gifts are important, aren't they? How many of you here expect to receive gifts tonight or tomorrow? How many of you here have bought gifts

for someone? How many think Santa is bringing them something tonight? Does that mean that all of you have been good? In the third or fourth century, Christians took over the Roman feast of the unconquered sun for their feast of the birth of the Son of God. To those ancient peoples, it seemed that darkness, since the summer solstice in June, was threatening to overwhelm the light. But by December 25<sup>th</sup>, when it was apparent that daylight was increasing, the Romans knew that the sun had conquered the powers of darkness after all. You know, we can do the same thing again those Christian once did. We can take over once again what has become a pagan and secular celebration. How others may celebrate does not need to determine how we will observe this day as a religious celebration, how we will celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

Christmas gifts have become an important part of our celebration. And we don't need to outlaw them as did the British Parliament. We can incorporate this one dimension of Christmas into a three dimensional vision, a complete picture and a far more satisfying celebration.

The real meaning of Christmas is, of course, the incarnation. Let the Christmas crib and the creche be the first dimension of our real picture of Christmas. In Bethlehem's manger lies child that binds a lost world to a loving God. In the last Mass for Christmas day, these words from John's Gospel are read: "THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND MADE HIS DWELLING AMONG US." The Son of God has become a human being. Because of this act of divine love, we do not just occupy a small planet whirling around a medium-sized sun in a distant corner of our galaxy, one among billions of suns in our galaxy alone, which in turn is one among billions of galaxies in the cosmos. God is not far off and distant from the people made in the divine image and likeness. Christmas means that God so loved the world that he gave the Son. Christmas means that the Son so

loved us that he gave himself for our salvation.

The second dimension of a full portrait of Christmas is given by the cross. This symbol really illuminates the meaning of this season. One day a young child was shopping with her mother. She noticed all the different manger scenes and asked, "Mom, why is Jesus always a baby? Doesn't he ever grow up?" Born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem about 2009 years ago, he did grow up, grew to manhood in Galilee, preached the advent of the Kingdom of God beginning in the wilderness of Judea, perished in Jerusalem near the feast of Passover during the government of Pontius Pilot. He rose miraculously from the dead and was appointed by God as Lord of all. He is the agent of creation, the architect of the kingdom, the light of human existence, the substance of human hope. When he comes again in glory, it will not be as a cute, infant boy, but as judge of the living and dead. When we come face to face with the Lord at the end of our lives, we will face him as the giver of eternal life. Christianity could get along without the celebration of Christmas. In fact, it did for the first three or four centuries. It could not get along without the death and resurrection of Jesus. That ending makes possible the spirit of goodwill, peace, generosity, and joy we experience at this season. It is the afterglow of calvary. This is not Santa's big scene, not at all.

Let the third dimension of the Christmas portrait be provided by the Christmas gift. This element of the Christmas season is near and dear to the hearts of so many. Nearly everyone exchanges brightly wrapped gifts in this season. But how would you feel if you received a gorgeously wrapped present that proved to be empty? But the gifts we exchange might just as well be empty, if they are not symbols of the love, the care, the concern of the giver for the receiver. They might just as well be empty, if they do not symbolize the gift of ourselves that we offer to God and one another. In the

third Eucharistic prayer, we say: **“May he (Jesus) make us an everlasting gift to you (God) and enable us to share in the inheritance of the saints.”** Those packages we exchange might just as well be empty if they do not symbolize the gift we present to God of ourselves as the rebirth place of the Christ.

What does it mean to give the gift of ourselves? I have these practical suggestions: (1) The gift of listening: Psychologists tell us that one of the greatest things we can do for one another is to listen. (2) The gift of signs of affection: take time to show those people you live with how important they are to you, how much you love them: say it, show it. (3) The gift of laughter: Some studies suggest that laughter is a very good medicine. No warning labels needed and no possibility of recall by the FDA. Everyone loves to laugh. Just cut out a cartoon, clip a joke, copy a riddle. Best of all, don't take yourself so seriously. (4) The gift of doing a favor. Try to anticipate what another person needs, rather than wait for the request. (5) The gift of a compliment. This is good medicine too. We don't tell one another often enough about a job well done. (6) The gift of prayer. Prayer is another way of saying “You are so special to me that I often talk to God about you.” (7) Last, a gift to the poor. It is our task as Christians to make the lives of those burdened by cares of all kinds a little less arduous during this season. The possibilities are endless. All we need do is ask.

And so this Christmas, may we give our hearts as a gift for the rebirthplace of the Son of God. May we give our lives as his home. May his work be truly our own. From your parish staff, from Fr. Gjengdahl and from me, may you and your family have a blessed Christmas filled with all the spiritual gifts of Immanuel, of the God who is always with us.