



## **CELEBRATION: THE GIFTS OF JESUS**

### *A Message from the Quorum of Twelve Apostles*

December is a happy month dominated by the Christmas season and the New Year holiday. As children, we looked forward to this season for many months each year. As adults, our thoughts and activities drift toward preparation for the holidays well in advance of the fun. While the birth of Jesus is the nominal reason for the season, many people have allowed focus on Christmas gifting, along with feasting, decorating, and otherwise celebrating to eclipse the significance of the birth of our Savior.

Occasions for giving and receiving gifts stand tall among all of our favorite things. In the very early history of man, gift giving was often associated with formation of relationships whereby mutual support and protection were expected. History also records the giving of gifts as an act of respect or obeisance by persons given audience before royalty. Per the scriptural account (Matt 2:1-12), wise men followed a star to find the young child-born-King, Jesus, and after worshipping him, presented precious gifts.

Whenever we give gifts, the pleasure for the giver comes from the appreciation of the one who receives. Think of the times you have thought and thought to come up with the perfect gift for someone you love and how you waited with bated breath to see that loved one's joy upon receiving it. When gifting is at its best it is impossible to determine whether it is better to give or to receive. In fact, the Apostle Paul, speaking to the Ephesians (Acts 20:35), reminded them of Christ's teaching, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Looking closely at this in context, we find that Paul was expressing his joy in bringing them the Gospel. He had sought no remuneration or material reward but only looked for their appreciation of his giving shown by their continuation of his example, modeled after Christ's.

Earlier, we referred to the scriptural account of gifts associated with the birth of Christ. Pagan customs also embraced gift giving to celebrate birthdays of pagan deities. One of the most relevant of such customs, the feast of Saturnalia, was a

Roman feast celebrating the birth of Saturn on December 25 (later changed to a December 17–23 festival). The scriptures do not specify the birth date of Jesus (many studies have suggested various dates based upon prophecy), but it was not an accident that by the fourth century, the Roman celebration of His birth came to officially replace the pagan holiday on the same date. Historians suggest that this “merger” of cultural religion with Christianity was a convenience for the comfort of Roman converts allowing them to cling to traditions that honored a pagan deity while nominally celebrating in the name of Christ.

Over the centuries, many have argued whether or not this was significant. Today, it seems safe to assume that no one is thinking about Saturn as Christmas gifts are being exchanged. So, let us not be obsessed over the questionable validity of a date chosen many, many centuries ago. Meanwhile however, it may be good to be wary of the potential for modern commercial, secular celebrations of Christmas to be overlaid in ways equivalent to the Roman decisions. As Saints who know Jesus, keep the season in perspective; enjoy the time appropriately while we exalt our Lord every day of our lives, not only at this time of year. When we think about gifts, let us remember what God gave.

Jesus understood gifting. He taught and demonstrated giving continually. To Nicodemus he said, *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* To His disciples He said, *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* He was so continually prepared to give that, at the mere touch of his garment by a believing woman in need, virtue went forth from Him and healed her (Mark 5:25-30).

Faith in Christ affords us all of God’s gifts, Salvation being the greatest. Jesus Christ, during His short residence on Earth, showed us – for our sakes – that the Spirit of God can overcome the flesh and supersede the laws of nature. He related His Gospel in teachings backed up by demonstrations in action and power. While teaching Faith, Hope, and Charity, He was continually giving: healing the lame and blind, raising the dead, feeding the multitudes, and more. Jesus wants us to sustain His brand of giving. He made some profound promises to believers, including: *...He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do;...and whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* (John 14:12-13) What are the circumstances that enable mere men and women to emulate the giving of Christ?

When Peter and John encountered the lame man begging alms at the Gate Beautiful, they were able to share the healing gift of God with him, commanding Him in the name of Jesus to rise and walk. Certainly, this was among the works Jesus had foretold, but how did they manage it? Read the passage (Acts 3:1-8):

The miracle occurred; the man was able to get up and walk. Presumably his entire life changed from that point on.

The account suggests that Peter and John were totally prepared for an encounter like this, as there was only the briefest pause to assess the situation prior to action. Confronting them: a man had severe need. He was lame and poor without the means to earn wages or otherwise provide for himself; he was reaching out to them for help as he had reached out to many other passers-by among whom some helped, many did not. Peter and John were disciples of Jesus Christ, endowed not with great wealth but with the Spirit of God AND the promise of doing works like those they had seen Jesus do or even greater. The account tells us that Peter and John believed Jesus, felt access to the Power of God, and gave that which they had.

This is an impressive story of the Gospel in action during the earliest days of the Church after the Day of Pentecost. Most of us have heard it preached and taught many, many times. How do we regard the account? Is it perceived as a part of days gone by, a beautiful history, or is it an example no less possible today than 2000 years ago?

Let us go back to John 14, Jesus speaking to His disciples, continuing with verse 15: *If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever. Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you... Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and I will manifest myself to him.* In these words, Jesus elaborated on the concept of belief in Him. The elements of loving Him and continuing in accord with His commandments are tied to the mutual co-dwelling of Christ-in-Father, Believer-in-Christ, and Christ-in-Believer. While Jesus prepared His disciples for the pending departure from this life, He also offered them an understanding of how that apparent void would not actually come to pass because that Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Ghost, is promised to in-dwell the loving faithful even so wonderfully as to be accompanied by manifestations of Jesus.

How much of this was really being absorbed by the disciples at the time the words were spoken? Their behavior immediately after Jesus was crucified proved that they were still made of flesh and blood and governed by carnal minds. But Jesus knew that they loved Him, and He worked with them to prove His resurrection and remind them of all else that He had said; for example:

- He left two angels in the sepulcher, and appeared to Mary
- He appeared to the disciples in the upper room and showed them his hands and side.
  
- He breathed on them and pronounced the Holy Ghost upon them.
- He patiently made a special repeat visit for Thomas who doubted the account of his colleagues.
- He came to them as they fished, frustrated, in the sea of Tiberius, instructing them to cast their nets on the right side and astounding them with the miraculous catch which prepared them, specifically Peter, for the question: *...lovest thou me more than these?*
- He appeared alive over a period of forty days following His passion and spoke of things pertaining to the kingdom of God and promised them that they would...*receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

Consider how glorious that 40-day period must have been. Can you imagine how many rearrangements of life, cancelled appointments, and changed plans developed during those days which indelibly confirmed the Resurrection and prepared the disciples to operate as the Church in one accord? This unification culminated in the famous Day of Pentecost when the gifts of the Holy Ghost rushed in as a mighty wind, appeared as cloven tongues of fire, filled them all, and gave them utterance in many languages with understanding by all.

It was from this preparation and unity and in this Spirit that we find Peter and John traversing the Gate Beautiful and giving of the gifts they had been given. Here and now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the point of this message is not to attack the date we designate as Christmas nor any reasonable celebrations. The important thing – and the point of this message – is that we Saints have the advantage of the Restored Gospel – a gift from God for us to appreciate. God’s plan included the Restoration to replace the lost understandings, to restore the Word, and to correct any misapplications of the Gospel that Christ originally demonstrated and taught. He provided a refreshed, solid foundation for His Church, His Saints, upon which we can base and build our lives serving Him in Spirit and in Truth and sharing all of His gifts as He would have them enjoyed – every day.

In the Love of God,

The Quorum of Twelve Apostles

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