

Six weeks ago many people were excitedly unwrapping gifts. In many families there is a bit of a tradition to this. The presents for everyone are piled at the bottom of the tree and only when the family are gathered are the presents distributed, one by one. Sometimes, everyone watches while one person unwraps the present, expresses delight and shows it to the others, thanks the giver and only then is the next present given to someone else. Children make presents for their parents or buy them with money they've been given for the purpose or saved up from their regular pocket money – but they have given some thought as to what would please the recipient.

Christmas isn't the only time when we give and receive gifts. It's worth thinking back to a gift we were given at some time that was unexpected and which gave delight. Margaret Visser, who wrote a book called *The Gift of Thanks*, [Show] remembers that, when she was about 15, she was given a T shirt by some friends. Years later she remembers how much pleasure this gave her because she felt valued and had been recognized as one of the gang.

A gift has to be freely given and not in expectation of receiving something in return. We do not have a right to something that we receive as a gift. And if we give something to someone with a view to their giving us something in return, then it is not a gift in the proper sense of the word. It would then have something in common with a bribe. But an important part of gifting is thanksgiving – gratitude.

A child pretty soon learns that if he doesn't say "Please" when he asks for something, he may not get it. But if he is given a gift, something that he hasn't asked for or expected, it doesn't come naturally to say "Thank you". Parents find that they have to train their offspring to express gratitude - to write their Thank you letters promptly.

As we remember our experiences of giving and receiving gifts we notice that delight is an important part of it. Not only delight in receiving a gift, that shows that someone else has thought about us and about what would give us pleasure, what would give us delight, but also the giver of

the gift experiences delight in seeing the expression on the face of the receiver, delight in giving delight. What we might call a Win-Win process.

So gratitude is an expression of thanks, not just for the present itself but also for the thought and the intention that lies behind it. Someone else has thought me sufficiently important to spend thought, time and money in choosing this gift, getting it and wrapping it up so that it's a surprise. It's why a gift of an object often means more than a gift of money or a gift voucher. An object remains to remind the receiver of the gift – it's why a book token has a card attached that can be used as a bookmark and a reminder of the gift. Part of the joy of gifting is the memory of it: both by the giver and the receiver. When I was a housemaster and sometimes parents would give me a bottle of something, I used to write their name and the date on the bottle and when eventually it was opened, we would drink the health of the giver, whether they were present or not. We may never forget an injury – “He may have buried the hatchet but he never forgets where he's buried it” – but we do often have to remind ourselves of gifts we have received and who from. It's why we have Remembrance Services to remember to give thanks to those who gave their lives for us.

Theirs was the ultimate gift: Jesus reminds us that greater love no one has than to lay down his life for someone else. It is what Firefighters and Lifeboatmen do and it is what doctors and nurses are consciously doing at present. And when, at the Last Supper, before his crucifixion, Jesus instituted the Eucharist – a word which means thanksgiving εὐχαριστω in modern Greek – he said “Do this in memory of me”. So, gifts are expressions of love; what St Paul describes as living as if the other person is more important than ourselves. And it's perhaps an example of the application of the Resurrection, of God's habit of bringing good out of evil, that there are so many examples of self-less giving in times of war and disaster.

In our Monastery Refectory at present we're having read to us at lunchtimes a book called Give. *[Show]* It's by Magnus MacFarlane-Barrow, who is the founder of Mary's Meals, the charity that provides food so that children in poor countries can have a meal at school and can

benefit from their schooling and, later, be in positions to help their own people. He brings out several important points about gifting. Because it is an expression of love – which is what the word charity means – it is vital that the dignity of the receiver is recognized and maintained. Which is why Mary's Meals supply only the food: local people – often mothers of the children – get up early in the morning to cook the food and distribute it. It is why Mary's Meals, like many other charities, takes trouble to establish contacts between the volunteers and fund-raisers who make it possible to buy the food at one end, and the people who prepare the food and the children who receive it at the other.

John Chrysostom wrote: 'The degree of goodness in helping others is hugely affected by the attitude with which it's done. If you show resentment or superiority, the receiver feels awkward and embarrassed. If you give with joy, he is glad to have caused you pleasure'. It's why Thomas Merton wrote: 'We must know ourselves well enough to recognize our own illusions ... enough to be able to tell when it is not the Charity of Christ that speaks in our hearts but only our own self-pity .. or ambition, or cowardice, or thirst for domination'. Often we do give with mixed motives: there is a certain amount of self-centredness involved: we hope others will notice us 'doing good', it gives us a feeling of importance, maybe even of power. Mixed motives should never stop us doing good but, as Merton says, we need to recognize them so that we may grow out of them.

But attitude is important for the receiver as well. He is not receiving something he is entitled to. If it is a real gift, he will not feel that he is being patronized: he will feel loved; he will feel that the giver regards him as more important than himself, the giver. And he will see the joy of giving on the giver's face and feel joy at being the cause of that joy. It is the smile on the face of the baby who is experiencing being loved. It's what the first Beatitude in Matthew 5 is about: Blessed are the Poor in Spirit. The trouble with the Rich Young Man, in Mark Chapter 10, was not that riches are in themselves are bad but that they made him totally independent. He had grown up knowing that he could buy anything at all that he wanted, never mind needed. And it is fundamental to our being

human beings that we recognize that whoever we are, however rich we are, other people have something to give us. And we need to be ready to gratefully accept it.

As human beings we are interdependent. The biologists sometimes think of humans as 'the social animal', an idea that goes back to Aristotle. We can decide not to give to others from what we have but that's not natural. It is extraordinary – but it shouldn't be – how much sharing, giving, free support has gone on over the last nine months of the pandemic. In Matthew 25, Jesus says it's the people who are feeding the hungry and thirsty, welcoming strangers and visiting the sick and imprisoned, who will take as their heritage the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. It's the people who naturally do this, without thinking about it, who are fully human, fully alive. And if we're worried that we're only doing it to get to heaven and not really out of love, then we can concentrate on what joy we are receiving out of doing it and seeing the expression of joy and gratitude on other's faces. And visiting prisoners, where we probably won't be allowed to take any object, reminds us that one thing we can give to God is our time, so time that seems to be wasted, in prayer that is full of distractions, is actually a very worthwhile gift that we can give to God.

Because, of course, we can only give from what we ourselves have been given. I remember going to shop for a Christmas present for my Mother with what my Father had given me for the purpose.

Which is where, perhaps, we start thinking about God and the gifts that he has given us as well as time.

Why on earth – or in heaven for that matter – would an all-powerful, eternal, omniscient, creator God want to give? To create a universe, a world, and human beings and to give us so many things: a world full of resources, individual gifts and talents that each of us have. We know that God is Love; we know that the Trinity is three persons, each loving the other two, each living as if the other two are more important and, if we are parents, we know that love for each other has a way of overflowing into children and that one might just as well ask why on

earth would any sane parents have children, with the sleepless nights, the nights of worry when our teenagers stay out late, to say nothing of the sheer expense. So, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, is it too presumptuous to imagine that God experiences the same delight that we have experienced in giving gifts to others?

And if we have had the experience of seeing gifts that we have carefully chosen being misused: having to watch the book we carefully chose being scribbled over with crayons or the skateboard that we bought being used as a hammer by an angry teenager to smash something else then, perhaps, we have experienced something of what God experiences when he sees us make such a mess of the world he's given us or misuse the talents that we have been graced with.

But, if a gift is a true gift, then it is without conditions. We can't take it back. We can't dictate how the receiver uses it. And neither does God.

One Christmas gift was an electric train set. It was a large and magnificent set and the Father told his 8 year old son that he could make all sorts of layouts and all sorts of trains: passenger trains, express trains, freight trains but the one thing he mustn't do was to overload it. All went well for several days until he thought it would be fun to see how powerful the locomotive was and so he loaded the trucks with lead shot and put blocks under the rails to make a gradient and watched the locomotive struggle slowly up the slope. And then, it started giving out a sweet smell followed by what had never happened before: the engine started giving off real smoke. And then, suddenly, it went dead, the humming stopped, the train didn't move, pressing the restart button made no difference – and he decided that he was rather bored with train sets and packed it all away. It was several days before his dad asked how it was getting on and then asked the embarrassing question “You didn't overload it did you?” Well, it wasn't that the Father had made a condition to the gift. He just knew that explaining how electric motors work and the concept of back E.M.F. was difficult enough with 16 year olds, never mind 8 year olds. So, was the instruction not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil a condition attached to the gift of Paradise – or just that God really didn't want us to have the experience of finding out about evil.

If gifts are expressions of love, then one of the most powerful expressions of love is forgiveness: saying “Yes, you hurt me and it still hurts but it’s you that matters, not me, and I’m not going to let this get in the way of our relationship. What’s important is that you get up and start again.” That’s the Good News that is God’s main gift to us. “I haven’t come to call the virtuous (there aren’t any, he might have added, only me and my Mum) I’ve come to call sinners.”

And this is where, unlike the rich young man, we have to know how to accept gracefully. It’s what St Peter had to learn when Jesus wanted to wash his feet at the end of the Last Supper in John Chapter 13. Jesus said ‘Unless you allow me to serve you, you can have no share with me.’ Another time he told us that the one sin that cannot be forgiven is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Not swearing but looking God in the face and saying “I don’t need or want your forgiveness”. That can’t be forgiven, not because it’s so serious a sin, but because we’re back to love being a gift and a gift being an expression of a two-way relationship. so that if it is not accepted, it doesn’t happen. So the giving and receiving of gifts and giving thanks for them is a very special process of expressing the connectedness of love between us human beings who make up the body of Christ. And it is the process by which God expresses his love for each one of us who are members of the body of His Son, and the process by which we give thanks and show our gratitude to him is what we call praising God: the psalms are continually recalling what God has given us and giving thanks.

We can only give from what we have received. And one of the gifts we have received is the ability to experience God’s delight in giving. And, paradoxically, Mother Teresa says, for best results, give until it hurts. You might like to spend some time today thinking over your life, about times you have given gifts to others and what it felt like. You may like to think about gifts that others have given to you and what they have meant to you. And perhaps to reflect on the gifts that God has given to you and to nobody else: the things that you’re good at, that you do better than most other people, opportunities you’ve had in your life, really good friends you’ve had, your family perhaps, times when you’ve felt so happy that

you've laughed out loud, times you can imagine God saying "Oh, she'll like this – and gone and given it to you". And then perhaps spend a few minutes of gratitude.