

Christmas Eve

When I was a kid, I could never figure out what to get my parents for Christmas. My brothers and sisters and I would ask them, "What do you want?" and I'm sure it was a hard question for them to answer. None of us had much money, but we wanted to show our love in some way. One year after I badgered my mother for an idea, she considered the possibilities, and finally said, "Well, I would like a new apron." I was probably 10 years old. As simple as this project should have been, I remember going to a store and sorting through a shelf of aprons again and again, spending too much time, unable to decide which one to get. After all, what does a 10-year old boy know about choosing a garment for his mother? In spite of my good intentions, I'm sure I bought the ugliest apron in Kansas City. But when my mother opened that package on Christmas Eve, she looked at it with disbelief, she smiled, she thanked me for it, and gave me a hug. Then in an act of complete selflessness, she wore that apron in the kitchen. She made me feel that I'd picked the right one. Her love for me was more important than my gift for her.

Many of us approach Christmas as the day when we get gifts, as though we've done something to deserve them. Some years on Christmas Day we only become happy if our gifts make us smile. If they don't, then Christmas becomes a day of disappointment. Or we become jealous because what we really wanted is what somebody else got. Because of selfishness we sometimes overlook the reasons why we should be happy.

Isaiah the prophet gave the people of Israel three reasons to be happy in today's first reading. First, he says, the harvest is in. All the hard work people did in the fields have produced enough food to survive the winter. Not only was there food, but there was time to relax as well. Second, he says, the war is over. Israel had been fighting enemies for some time, and now they were at peace. Third, a child has been born. This child would become a great leader preserving eternal joy. Isaiah says, "A child is born to us, a son is given us.... His dominion is vast and forever peaceful."

At Christmas, we still have these three reasons to be happy. First, the office is closed. It's a holiday. Food is on the table. Christmas is a day to set work aside and relax. Second, there's a truce. Perhaps during the year you fight with some people in your family, but at Christmas you make peace. For one day people who may not otherwise get along have a common purpose. Families celebrate who they are and the faith they share. Third, the child born for us is none other than Jesus Christ. He is God's gift to us. His coming is more important than any other gift we could receive. The birth of Jesus is the reason we celebrate Christmas.

Maybe this Christmas something will disappoint you: You don't get the gift you wanted. You don't like the gift you get. You don't like the person next to you at the table. Someone you love to see isn't here. But something else is happening. People are resting from their work. They are showing love instead of hate. And the Son of God is born for our salvation. God chose just the right gift for us. God's love is greater than other other gift you could possibly want, and it's here without fail: Christ is born for us.