

There once was a man with three lovely daughters, but he found no husbands for them because he had no money, and in those days he had to provide a sizeable dowry before each daughter could be married. One night he made a bad decision; he decided to send them into prostitution the next day in order to increase his own wealth. But during the night, he woke up when he heard a loud thud, followed by two more. Some anonymous person had thrown three bags of gold through the window onto the floor of his home. Because of the kindness of a stranger, the man abandoned his immoral and harmful plan. They all lived happily ever after, but not until it became known that the person who had showed him such generosity was the local bishop, a man so holy that today we call him a saint: Saint Nicholas. Pawn brokers in the business of rescuing people from taking desperate measures still hang 3 gold balls on their door in memory of what Saint Nicholas did, and we remember his spirit of giving on his feast day, December 6, and under his other name, Santa Claus, the inspiration of so much gift-giving each Christmas.

The story of the dowries is a legend, but this is true: There is something about Christmas that inspires people to perform extraordinary acts of kindness toward others. People do this at other times in our lives, especially when a child is born, an injury happens, or someone in the family dies. Every year Christmas gives us a vision of what a generous world this can be. For one glorious day people who don't always see one another, talk to one another, or exchange gifts with one another do.

Today's first reading offers a glimpse of that kind of remarkable day. The Book of Baruch was addressed to Jews who were separated from one another. Some had been captured and hauled off into exile; others remained at home in Jerusalem. Those in exile did all they could to keep their faith alive without the Temple or a synagogue. Some of them probably got used to things that way. Those in Jerusalem longed to see everyone come back. Jerusalem was broken-hearted.

This passage addresses Jerusalem as if the city were a person wearing the black clothes of mourners. "Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever." Then it invites this mourner to run to a place in the upper reaches of the city and look out at the roads leading in from afar: "Up, Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One." Imagine the joy in the heart of Jerusalem seeing all the city's children finally coming home.

That is what Christmas aims to do with no small thanks to Saint Nicholas. It's not always easy going home; sometimes even when you're in exile, you feel comfortable there. But the reunion of those who were separated is one of the symbols of the kingdom of heaven. We can experience it now as we prepare our hearts to do something generous for others this Christmas Day.