

“Christmas Presence”

Are you stressed right now? Are you struggling to find the perfect gift for someone you know and love? It's difficult at times to find a present that can express to someone that you really do know them, that you really do love them. Yet sometimes there's no struggle at all. Instead, finding just the right gift, that perfect present seems almost effortless. You're amazed and ask yourself, "How did I not see that before?" But you're also thankful now that you've found it.

Let's now turn from Christmas presents, those colorful gift-wrapped boxes underneath a beautifully decorated tree, to what's written in the Bible about "Christmas Presence": "*Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel*" (which, means, *God with us*). (Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:14).

One way to understand and appreciate the Bible is to view it as promises made and promises kept. One of the great promises made over and over again is God's promise to be present with his people, to be with them and for them. The fulfillment of that promise begins with the first advent, the incarnation of Jesus Christ when the eternal Son of God took on full and genuine humanity, when the infinite God stepped into our finite world.

In view of the gift of God ("*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*" John 3:16) and the promise of God to be present ("*I am with you always, to the end of the age*" Matthew 28:20b), I want to draw our attention to John 1:1-14, verses 9-13 in particular: "*The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*".

Let's make a few brief observations. We see that Jesus, "*the true light*", is not recognized by the world. Not only does he go unrecognized by the world, he is rejected by those closest to him. However, that is not the end of the story, because while Jesus is ignored by the "irreligious" (people who want to govern themselves by breaking all the rules) and while he is resisted by the "religious" (people who want to save themselves by keeping all the rules), he is nonetheless received by others, those some of the early Church Fathers began to call "the third race", a new humanity, an international fellowship of rescued and restored people.

Jesus is received and welcomed by those who trust him to do in their place and on their behalf what they could not do for themselves. As he is received, people become that they previously were not: they become the children of God, children born not through the effort of man but rather born again as a result of the good and gracious work of God.

To believe in his name means to receive Jesus and to receive Jesus means to become a child of God, and when you are a child of God you have God as your Father and you have the church as your family. When it comes to understanding what it means to believe in Jesus this answer to the important question "What is faith in Jesus Christ?" is helpful: "*Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel*" (Westminster Shorter Catechism).

The truth of the gospel, or the good news, is that a right and restored relationship with God is established not when you achieve through your own effort (works) but rather when you receive what God has offered and provided in Jesus Christ (grace). Put simply, the gospel is charity and only those who know they are poor and helpless want the gift and receive the gift.

To be sure, many of us want to give as well as to receive special Christmas presents, gifts that may be practical or extravagant or both. Yet each and every one of those gifts will fail or fade over time and be discarded. Yet all of us need the "Christmas Presence" that will neither fail nor fade but will last forever. That gift is found in Jesus Christ, "*for the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14). Indeed, as the apostle Paul writes, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 6:23). The gift has been offered and is being offered. Has it been received?