

Well, here we are at the fourth Sunday of Advent – one of those occasional Advent Sundays when, later this very same day, we'll gather for Christmas Eve. All the wonderful preparation – the buying and wrapping, the cooking and baking, the decorating, the partying – it all comes to its conclusion before our heads hit the pillow tonight. But where are these things leading us? If just to a day of celebration, it's all a bit hollow.

In amongst all of the traditional stories that we know and love so well, hiding somewhere amongst the tinsel or the straw in the manger, we find this morning's Epistle, the closing verses of Paul's letter to the Church at Rome. These verses form a closing benediction, and they hardly seem at first glance like an Advent or Christmas text. However, they have much to teach us about how we might start to act on December 26 and beyond. Because if by a week from now Christmas has become a memory, safely packed away for another year, then we are not really celebrating Christmas at all, but simply paying it lip service.

Sandwiched in between the words "Now to God who is able to strengthen you..." and the closing words, "be the glory forever," Paul gives a very brief explanation of the reason for Christ's birth. Jesus has come to reveal the mystery of God in an exciting new way. This way is for all nations and will, we can pray, bring about the "obedience of faith" of which he speaks. Put it another way, Jesus has come so that everyone can know God, and respond accordingly.

There is a point to Christmas that goes far beyond a day or even a season, and which does nothing less than transform the world completely and forever. It is what Mary proclaims in the bold and prophetic verses of the *Magnificat*: God has done great things, and God's mercy is on all, from generation to generation. Why? Because justice and mercy are God's very nature. And because God promised.

As we think about Christmas, our minds undoubtedly go to the subject of gifts and gift-giving. By now you may be at that point of having bought and wrapped everything, and you may be thinking "I've overdone it again." Or maybe you're wondering if you have gotten just the right gift for someone. Maybe you have yet to finish your shopping, and you're in a bit of a panic knowing that the stores close at 5:00 or 6:00 today.

Without putting additional pressure on this whole gift-giving thing, there's one more present that we need to think about. What gift will you give to God *after* Christmas?

If we are going to celebrate God's gift of new life that came in the amazing package of Jesus the Christ, we ought to give God something in return. As we celebrate the grace of God that comes to each and every one of us as a free gift, no strings attached, how might we show our gratitude?

Paul reminds us that Jesus came to challenge us to live out our faith in response to what God has done.

We seem to understand that well throughout the Advent season, throughout the time of preparation. Amidst the biggest spending frenzy of the year, people still find it in their hearts and their wallets to give to charities. Food banks can stock their shelves, Salvation Army kettles fill with coins, and churches collect socks and mittens and coats for those who are homeless.

Something else happens at this time of year that is pretty unique as well. This is perhaps the only time of year when Christians unabashedly sing hymns in public. Think about it – we hear familiar carols on the radio, in shopping malls, and in concerts, and we *sing along*. (Or at least I do.) Even if we do not consider ourselves singers the rest of the year, at Christmas we dare to raise our voices in all sorts of places.

But what is the nature of our giving for the *next* 11 months? How eager are we to proclaim our faith, in song or spoken word, until the cycle starts again?

One homeless shelter held a Christmas campaign in the month of January. It got a lot of press, and some curious questions: "Why now? Did you miss the boat? Are you starting next year early?" To which came the reply, "We are inviting you to *respond* to Christmas. We are providing you with an opportunity to keep the spirit of Christmas alive and not hidden." Sadly, the response was pretty dismal – it seems that people had finished celebrating the birth of Christ.

Many people speak of the January "blahs" and of a sense of let-down after Christmas. The term "blue Monday" was first coined as a label for the last Monday in January because, for those in the northern hemisphere, that was traditionally the time of year when people hit the deepest depression due to dark and cold winter weather.

Yet this comes barely a month after Christians have so boldly proclaimed the arrival of the light of the world. Something's wrong with this picture.

As a child I thought it strange that we, in church, didn't start to say "Merry Christmas" until December 25 had arrived. Why didn't we "get with the program" and start singing Christmas carols all the way back at the beginning of December?

Now, I've come to appreciate this custom, and to encourage it. We *need* Advent. We *need* a season of preparation of the heart so we can fully celebrate God's gift, and respond to it, in a more meaningful way.

So, too, we need to keep Christmas a festival that *starts* tonight and *continues* the full twelve days. The secular world might start putting it all away starting Tuesday – but not us!

- *Dare* to keep that tree up as long as you can!
- *Keep* playing your Christmas CDs , and sing along with them!
- Most of all, keep thinking of ways that you can give of yourself to others, as a way of giving back to God.

One of my favorite Christmas carols is by English poet Christina Rossetti. You'll instantly recognize the words:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb.

If I were a wise man, I would do my part.

Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

May we do the same as we transition beyond the Advent we have shared to this Christmas and beyond, and thus enact what Paul called the obedience of faith, and thus glorify God for ever.