

Merry Christmas! (an Easter Sermon) April Fools'!

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' Jn 3:16

Merry Christmas, everybody! I know, I know...it's been a tough week, but not that tough...I just wanted your attention. Well actually, I wished you Merry Christmas for another reason. I just wanted to pick up where we left off the last time you heard my sermon; Merry Christmas! Just joking. It's April fool's day too, so I know we know each other well enough to joke about your poor church attendance. But it's not just for laughs that I bring up Christmas today on Easter. There is actually a misunderstood relationship between these two holidays-that if explored today-might prove very relevant to our spiritual growth. So let's get started with a question.

If you stopped someone on the street and asked what the biggest Christian holiday is, what do you think they would say? Most would say Christmas and not Easter. And from the outside, this sure looks to be the case; Christmas is an entire season of the year, its where most businesses make half their yearly profit, it's where everyone gives gifts to each other. But traditionally, Christmas has always been much smaller than Easter. In the Armenian language this is literally true. Does anyone know that old name for Christmas in Armenian? *Pokr Zatik, Little Easter*. According to our tradition, anything Christmas does, Easter does much better, including even the thing we now most associate with Christmas, gift-giving.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life," we know famously from the Gospel of John. And today's chosen reading reminds us that the Christmas gift of baby Jesus is just a little gift compared to the great Easter gift of Jesus' very self, our master and friend who offered himself, as Badarak; despite our unworthiness, loving us to the end.

So really today, Easter, is the season of gift giving, because the greatest gift you can give to another is yourself, and on Easter, God literally gave us his self. Easter is also the true season of gift giving, because it reminds us of how challenging it is to receive certain kinds of gifts. Some gifts by their very nature make you swallow your pride. Imagine getting a gift from a friend...and it's a book on dieting. Or imagine you're a pastor and a parishioner gifts you, *How to Become a Better Pastor*. Ouch. Or maybe you've had financial difficulties and a friend or relative offers you money to help. Some gifts make us swallow our pride, because in receiving them we admit that we have flaws and weaknesses and we need help.

There has never been a gift offered that leads us to swallow our pride to the depths that the gift of Jesus Christ requires that we do so. Blaise Pascal said that "Kindness is welcome only to the extent that it seems it can be paid back." I wonder if this is why Christmas became the season of gift-giving instead of Easter. Perhaps the gifts of Easter are so big that to accept them means we are dependent on Jesus, with seemingly no way to pay him back?

Our journey through Holy Week reminded us of the power of human pride, that so resists God's free gift of grace. Rather than repent and accept the gift of God's Son, mankind betrays, denies and disposes of this gift. Rather than admit to ourselves that we need help and ask "What shall God do with me," we often ask 'What shall I do for God?' as if God needed our gifts, as if we could do anything to pay God back for his gift to us.

I think it is clear why Christmas has become bigger than Easter, and why it is the season of gift giving. It just takes a little humility to accept the little Christmas gift of baby Jesus. But it takes abundant humility to accept the abundant Easter gifts of our Lord; his body and his blood, his forgiveness and mercy, his love of us till the bitter end.

Easter has been very hard to commercialize because the gift giving of Easter is not of this world, its impossible to pay back and it can't be found in stores. But even though we cannot pay back the Easter gift of God's only begotten Son, the good news we have this Easter morning, is that we can pay it forward. We can learn to give each other the greatest of all gifts, to love each other as deeply as Jesus loves us. In comparison to this greatest gift, all other things will remain small, now and always, amen.