

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.

Because as today's chosen reading reminds us, 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. According to our reading, "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."

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. Our journey through Holy Week reminded us that our pride is so resistant to receive God's free gift of love, that we had to throw away this gift before we realized what we had done, before we realized the only One that could save us from ourselves. Our journey through Holy Week and into Easter reminds us that before we can give any gift to God, church or one another, we must first learn how to accept the gift of Christ's mercy. Rather than ask, 'What shall I do for God?' (for God needs nothing), we should first ask, 'What shall God do with me?'

It just takes a little bit of humility to accept the little gift of baby Jesus. It takes a substantial humility to accept the substantial Holy Week gifts of our Lord; the Washing of Feet, the Last Supper, and the cross. Blaise Pascal said that "Kindness is welcome only to the extent that it seems it can be paid back." Is this why Christmas became the season of gift-giving and not Easter, because 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?

Well thankfully, our Lord Jesus Christ has never Lorded this over us. Though we cannot pay back the Easter gift of God's only begotten Son, we can pay it forward, as we learn to exchange this greatest of all gifts, to love each other as deeply as Jesus has loved us. In comparison to this greatest gift, all other things will remain small, now and always, amen.