

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:11)

For many, Christmas is about gifts. Indeed gift is at the heart of the Christian story.

Before I ministered as a priest, I used to work as a primary school teacher. This meant I had the annual joy (mmm?) of the school Christmas party. Thirty plus children overly excited and a bit tired to entertain for two hours. My saviour was pass-the-parcel. It was a sit down, calm down (could last a while) teacher-sanity-saving activity. I always used to have at least three parcels ready; one or two for games and one that often was never used but was there for an emergency.

The pass-the-parcel type I liked best was where there were small gifts between each layer. As each layer was taken off some gift was revealed. Generally, there was joy in each unwrapping. Sometimes children removed the layers very carefully and very neatly. Sometimes they were pulled off roughly and in a mess... even tugged between two children on occasions. Sometimes a layer got accidentally removed as the paper became loose or damaged. Often the moment for unwrapping was by chance as the music randomly stopped. At other times, the moment for removing a layer was by intervention from the teacher (who wasn't really looking) perhaps for a child who hadn't won much. Sometimes the layers were plain paper or old newspaper. At other times, very beautiful wrapping paper was used, especially the final one giving me the clue that the end was near. Once the last layer was removed, the gift was finally revealed and brought a lot of pleasure. Of course the parcels that remained unwrapped never brought any pleasure at all.

The same is true for us and our lives. Upon each of us is the imprint of God's image and likeness expressed in our individuality. Christ came to show us the way to that gift of ourselves and that means life-in-all-its-fullness. Sometimes our personal layers in life will be neatly removed. Sometimes they will be detached roughly, untidy... even violently. Sometimes layers will be removed accidentally; sometimes by divine intervention. Many of our layers will be beautiful; sometimes less so. Each layer bearing a gift between. If we allow God into our lives through our relations and our loves and through kindness, fun and joy you will be able to remove the final layer to the gift of you to

yourself...then as you are revealed you will be a great gift to others too. When we come to leave this world, death will not be a life ended but a life complete... all the layers removed and a revealed gift handed back to God.

My prayer for you is that you will take the gift of Christmas realising that you and all those you encounter have the image and likeness of God. Each is holy, good, and beautiful. If you follow Christ's example your layers will be removed to reveal the wonderful gift you are. Not to heed the Christmas gift of life-in-all-its-fullness is to be like my spare pass-the-parcel. That parcel was never unwrapped and never brought joy in its unwrapping or in its final revelation.

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