

**Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year B  
(Dec. 18, 2011)**

**Christmas Gifts**

This morning I am going to ask all of you to put on your thinking caps because I'm going to ask you a question. All of you now; the little children, their parents, their big brothers and sisters, the youth of the parish, all of you. Are you ready now? I want all of you to think what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word Christmas?

Well, I once was celebrating a Mass for children just before Christmas – much as we are doing today – and I asked that same question. All of the children were eager to tell me what they thought about. I wonder how many of you thought the same things? I received many different answers. Some of them said Christmas tree; some said Santa Claus; some even said baby Jesus; some said Mary and Joseph and the stable at Bethlehem. But you know what most of them said? Most of them said presents, Christmas gifts under the Christmas tree. Did any of you think the same thing?

Well, since the first thing that came to so many of them when they heard the word Christmas was gifts or presents, I thought I would talk about gifts, presents, because that really did seem to be appropriate as we prepared to celebrate Christmas. So then I asked another question. I asked them, why do you give gifts? What does it mean when you give someone a gift? I wonder how many of you have ever thought of that? And that includes the grown-ups, too! Well, that question was followed by a great silence. No one seemed ready to tell me what it means to give someone a gift. But then one little boy, very shyly and very tentatively raised his hand and looked at me sheepishly and when I called on him he said, "It means you love them." Bingo! A+! Gold Star! Yes it means you love them – or at least that's what it should mean. I guess we are all so much in the habit of exchanging Christmas presents, we never wonder what it means.

So let me tell you some more about what I think it means. Giving a gift means that I want to let someone know that they are my friend. It equivalently is saying, "I care about you. I want to give you something that is mine. I want something that is part of me to belong to you." And

ultimately if we are really serious and thoughtful about what we are doing, giving someone a gift is the same as saying, "I love you." That young lad was so right!

And isn't that just what God did on that first Christmas night when Jesus was born. God gave us a gift. God gave us the most precious gift God could give. God gave us his own Son.

That beautiful story of the Annunciation that I just read to you is just another way of expressing God's love for us. God loved us so much that he wanted to be one of his. God wanted not just to know but to experience what it means to be a human being, to be born as a little baby, to grow and become a man, to laugh and to cry and ultimately, like all of us, to die.

The Annunciation story expresses it first in God's love for Mary. He loved her so much that he wanted her to be the mother of his son. And Mary loved God so much that she was willing to say "Yes," even though she didn't really know what it meant. That was a lot of loving and a lot of giving.

Next week on Christmas Day we will sing Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to people of good will. Peace on earth. There doesn't seem to be much peace in our world today even though we have withdrawn our troops from Iraq. But peace on earth has to begin in the hearts of each one of us and then it has to spread out from us to those around us in deeds of love.

You young people who are looking forward to Christmas day, talk to your parents about what it means to love others – especially maybe, others that you find it hard to love, or others who are just different from us: people who look different, or who don't talk the same way we do, or who dress differently. But this is what God asks us to do, because God loves them all and God wants us to love them, too. If we really tried to do this, if all of us really tried to do this, then peace on earth would not be far behind.

And as you all exchange presents on Christmas Day, remember what it means to give a gift. Happy Christmas to all of you!