

Advent 4C “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”
Lk. 1.46

CS Lewis wrote, “There is a stage in a child's life at which it cannot separate the religious from the merely festal character of Christmas or Easter. I have been told of a very small and very devout boy who was heard murmuring to himself on Easter morning a poem of his own composition which began 'Chocolate eggs and Jesus risen.' This seems to me, for his age, both admirable poetry and admirable piety. But of course the time will soon come when such a child can no longer effortlessly and spontaneously enjoy that unity. He will become able to distinguish the spiritual from the ritual and festal aspect of Easter; chocolate eggs will no longer seem sacramental. And once he has distinguished he must put one or the other first. If he puts the spiritual first he can still taste something of Easter in the chocolate eggs; if he puts the eggs first they will soon be no more than any other sweetmeat. They will have taken on an independent, and therefore a soon withering, life.”

By this time our Christmas festivities should be in full swing: the countless office parties and casual get-togethers; the children's school carol programs and the obligatory decoration of the house. Yes, even your scrooge of an interim conceded the battle and put up his Christmas tree this week. But above all of these, the sign of the Season is the unrepentant and extravagant gift-giving. Yes, the economy may have put a damper on some of the larger expressions of goodwill, but more to my point, the very act of giving the gift seems to be alive and well.

But why are we so committed to this generosity at this time of year? Could it not be some other time of year: perhaps the beginning of February when things are so dreary and everyone would enjoy a present to lift the spirits? No, of course that would be silly and miss the point altogether. So, what is the point? What is the reason for the season? There are two theories on this question. The first is that there is a fat man who lives at the North Pole named Santa Claus who drives a sleigh pulled by eight tiny reindeer around the globe. He pops down chimneys leaving gifts for good little boys and girls and switches and coal for naughty ones. Adults give gifts to one another because Santa Claus sets the example.

The other theory for the reason for this season of gift giving is that God the Father gave his Son to be born to a young woman in a miraculous way. This auspicious beginning led to a sorrowful end as he died upon a cross in a far away land. In giving his own Son to a sinful and wayward world, the Father gave the gift of everlasting life to those who believe in him. So people give gifts at this season, called Christmas, following the example of the Father.

As you might expect, I prefer something like this second theory. As a matter of fact I don't think it's a theory at all but is the Bible truth! Which brings me to ask what the Bible has to say about what response the Father's generosity has

received from the very beginning? Our Gospel lesson today tells us about that very thing.

Luke begins his Gospel with not one but two miraculous conceptions. The first is the conception of John the Baptist to Elizabeth and Zechariah, both well beyond the age of childbearing. To mark the miracle and give meaning to the sign, an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah as he went about his duties in the Temple. The second conception, and that without the aid of a human father, was that of Jesus to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The angel Gabriel announced to her that the Holy Ghost would overshadow her and would conceive within her womb the son of God. When Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, Mary (who was her cousin), came to visit. When Elizabeth saw Mary the unborn baby jumped in her womb, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She praised God and blessed Mary. Mary, responding to this marvelous greeting, joined Elizabeth in praising God for his marvelous works. Each of them, favored by God's gracious hand, offered back to him solemn praise and worship for the mighty things that he had done for them and for the world through the gift of his only-begotten son. One bore the forerunner, the messenger who would prepare the way. The other carried within her the hope of the whole world. One had been relieved from the shame of barrenness by the gift of this messenger. The other bore the Son of God who would take away the shame of sin from the whole world. And what is their response? They praised the Lord.

Mary's hymn, known in the liturgy as the Magnificat, is the very model of joy and worship to the one true God. She gives all of her being to bring attention to the God of Heaven and Earth that had given her this child. It should be obvious to all of us that there are pregnancies that are not met with such joy. Pregnancies that happen out of wedlock or that occur at inconvenient times are described as "unwanted" pregnancies. Mary's conception was both of these and more. She was engaged to be married to Joseph, but they had yet to finalize their matrimony. Not only was this conception embarrassing, it also jeopardized her arrangement with Joseph. Had he not been a just man he would have broken off their engagement and subjected her to public embarrassment. Yet, she did not consider these as objections to the business at hand which was to praise God that he had given her a child who would be her Savior.

When God came to save his people from their enemies they celebrated with glad rejoicing. So the psalmist wrote, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy." The children of Israel had been in exile because they had rejected the Law of the Lord. They had gone after false gods. They had oppressed the poor and had refused to bring the gentile nations in to worship the Lord their God. As a result he had sent them into foreign lands. But now he had remembered them and had remembered his covenant with Abraham and with David. He had restored them to their land, and now Mary was carrying within her womb the Son of David, the Son of God. He was the long expected Messiah who would end the days of darkness with the light of Heaven. So she rejoiced.

From Mary's example we should learn that praise and worship is not an optional addendum to an otherwise secular life. As Lewis wrote, there must come a time when we must be able to distinguish between the ritual and the spiritual aspects of our religion and our lives. Gift giving is good if given in praise of the gift of the Savior. Yet if praise is not the end then the gift is only a dwindling memento of a religious sentiment that has lost its value.

No, from Mary we learn that the Christian's life must be lived, in December and the rest of the year, praising God for the salvation that we have received at his hand. We may rightly ask, can anyone truly have the Christmas spirit unless he has known the joy of being released from sin? Will the soul and lungs and throat and mouth sing the songs of the angels, "Gloria in excelsis" if it they are still bound with the chains of indifference and enmity to the Savior? Oh, yes, we may say that someone can acknowledge that Jesus was born of Mary, lived a generous life and died an unfortunate death. But this is not the same as a man who looks upon the wonders of the glorified Christ and cries with joy and praise knowing full well that Jesus is his Savior.

Yes, the Christian like the Blessed Mary is privileged to come into the very courts of the Lord to praise him for his everlasting goodness. Yes, we must offer him thanks and praise, but it is our privilege. Peter wrote, "Without having seen Jesus Christ you love him; though you do not see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy." Mary had known the gloom of her own people waiting for their salvation to be revealed. When the Lord had shown himself faithful there could be nothing left to but to break forth in song. We who have received an even greater salvation, the salvation of our souls, should sing out all the more. My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.