

Advent 1 A
St. Matthew 24:36-44
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St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

The Giving Season

"The night is far gone, the day is near."

Black Friday, which is now extended through tonight and "cyber Monday" tomorrow, is the biggest bargain hunting time of the year. Legend has it that the day got its name from retailers who noted that because shopping was so heavy, it was the first day of the year that their books were in the black. Many, like myself, resist the pushing and the crowds, the traffic and the long lines, figuring it is better to pay a little more and avoid them. But then, much of the Season of Advent will be marked with crowds of shoppers, long lines and traffic in the evenings after work and on weekends. It is what you have to do this time of the year, to keep the season, I guess.

Black Friday is the beginning of the season of giving, a time when we move beyond what we want, and think about what would make others around us happy. It draws us out of our self-absorbed shells. Black Friday reminds me of another Friday on which Jesus gave his life for us on the cross.

While we say that Advent is about preparing for Christ to come, it is in reality a season that is all about giving. And the way we seem to get ready for the baby Jesus in our lives is to think about giving and *do something* about it, even if we are only giving to our loved ones and friends. But the opportunity also exists for us to get into giving so much more. Both Fridays,

Black and Good, are about giving. One involves us, the other is about God.

Giving is what Jesus is about. Giving is what God is about. Look at all God has given us. God is a giver. God gave us a beautiful world in which to live. God gave each of us a life to live. God gave us his only son that we might have eternal life and return to Him. God never stops giving to us. Every new day is full of His blessings. God is the founder of our feast: food shelter clothing, health, good friends and so much more.

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, we hear: *"beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...neither shall they learn war anymore."* This defines the standard of the Christian season, where we are called to live lives of peace and not war and waste. Destructive behavior towards the wonderful resources and gifts we have been given is poor stewardship and displays human ingratitude and selfishness with these gifts. Taking something which is bad and making it into something good for everyone is practicing a generosity of spirit. Darkness becomes light.

But for us, the night is far-gone. The darkness has been put to flight. We are people of light, and we are to be flashlights, millions of points of light in this world to dispel the darkness. That light is brightened by our *generosity with others*. That is the light that transforms violence and destruction into peace and creativity. That is the light that transforms selfishness into generosity. To me, the lights of the Advent Season are showing us the way of giving, and that giving prevents the darkness from overcoming us. It means we are blessed when we think of others instead of our own needs, especially when we are so drawn through need and want and worry and stress to be focused on our own issues and problems.

Call me a Pollyanna, but the twinkling lights of this Advent season lifts my spirits and are an inspiration to reveal the hope this season brings. I am hopeful that the goodness of humankind prevails, instead of the darkness. I am hopeful that the generosity of this season inspires love and good things and reminds all of us of what is important in life. I love the holiday lights. They are a special gift to me. I hope they brighten your life also as the days grow shorter and the night comes sooner.

What violence we do to unseen others when we are wasteful with the gifts God has given us, when we ignore the sweat and labor and the working conditions of people who make things for our consumption half way around the world. Black Friday conjures up images of a greedy, consumeristic society that hunts like Ebenezer Scrooge for the cheapest deal on everything, not so that we can save or give more, but so that we can consume even more. *"What's in it for me"* does war on the entire world. *Live simply that others may simply live.* Selfishness is the antithesis of the message Jesus.

I would prefer not to see this image of the season. I would prefer to see how black Friday marks the opening of a season of generosity. I would prefer it if generosity was not just for a season, but went year round. Just as we are blessed with many undeserved gifts from God every day, so we are moved to bless others in some small ways, to bring a smile instead of a frown. Consider the simple gifts of courtesy when driving, letting someone into traffic, or the same in a line at the store. There are so many small occasions for us to express generosity and pay it forward.

I have found that it *is* truly better to give than to receive. First, I enjoy it and take great pleasure from it. Next, I relish the surprise on the face of the recipient of the gift. And it is better still if the gift appears anonymously, as I am not out to

get credit for it. My getting credit humbles the recipient and makes them feel indebted to me, which they are not. I am indebted to God, which is why I give.

Generosity is one of the main tools that can beat the sword of darkness into the tools which can implement the peace of Christ.

In the New Testament, we are told by St. Paul *“to owe no one anything except to love one another...Night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”*

To owe no one anything, except to love one another... this is the spirit of the season. Generosity draws us to truly love our families, our friends, our neighbors, our co-workers and even the occasional stranger. Because I am so loved, because you are so loved, we are empowered to share that love and spread it around. It is even more fun when that love comes unexpected, as undeserved as we did not deserve it when we received it. There is nothing better than the surprise and joy and excitement of someone who has nothing, expects nothing, needs much, and when they receive the blessing of a gift, even the smallest one imaginable, it were as though they won the lottery. I know, I have seen it many times. I wish I had been the one inspiring it more often than I have observed it from a distance.

You do not need to pile up debt to give a wonderful gift. It isn't the price of the gift that matters, as they say, it's the thought that counts. Put yourself into your giving. Make something, a sweater, a poem, a scrap-book of memories, a meal, cookies, a cake, a piece of furniture, even a handmade card, or give a coupon to do something for someone. Best of

all give yourself, your time, your presence, and a visit, show you care. Give up something you want, to enable someone else to receive something they want or need. The film, "*The Gifts of the Magi*," illustrates this teaching about giving. This is the heart of giving. It is about caring. When you care, you don't give the very best, you give *your very best*, and that is enough to change lives and light up the world.

Giving is not about feeling guilty. Don't show me pictures of starving children or charts about the budgets of non-profits. Giving money is no absolution for any guilt, only God can do that. We are not about a *gospel of works* that will save you. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom, God does not have a special seat reserved in heaven for you, no matter how much you give. You can't buy a seat there with money.

No, we need to give because it is our way of life. We are called to be givers and not takers.

Give because that is what God does for us. Give because of the example of Jesus. God gave his only son for us. What's our giving compared to that?

Give because you can't take it with you. Give because that is why you have resources to share. Give because it brings you alive and out of your shell of self concern and self absorption.

Do you think of yourself first when you look at your money and wealth, or do you think of others and how you can share your bounty with them? Do you look for opportunities everyday to give?

How does giving benefit me? It brings me alive. It lifts me out of myself. It creates in me a heart of flesh to replace the heart of stone which I have made. I want to be a giver and not a taker.

The Gospel warns us, *"Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."* The Gospel of Matthew presents us with the need to be stewards of the time which God has given to us. This is also what Advent is about: - stewardship of the short time which God has given to each of us. Advent asks, *what time is it?*

You know what time it is! It is time to give. This season measures the time we have left before Christmass, so get busy and find new ways, better ways, fulfilling ways to give.

So as the sale circulars remind you of the days remaining before Christmas, be thankful for that. They urge you to use the time you have been given carefully and remind you that time *is* running out.

Advent marks for most, as I said before, the beginning of a season of giving. Let this be a season when you resolve to be a giver. AMEN