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THE BEST PART OF CHRISTMAS IS THE GIFT

Pastor Richard Mau (adapted from a script by Pastor Ed Koch)

Only a few days ago it was Christmas. There are no doubt many exhausted business people and parents say; 'Thank goodness Christmas is over'. However there are many excited children holding their gifts with bright smiles all over their faces. It is their way of saying, 'Look what I got for Christmas'.

Someone once said, "The best part of Christmas is the gift." Many parents suffering from a cash crisis, or who are perhaps unemployed, may be questioning whether this is true. They're worried about the cost of gifts given to their families and they wonder how they're going to meet the payments on their credit cards.

Whose idea was it to make Christmas, gift time? Could it be the brainchild of people who're only interested in making a profit? Anxious minds might find such a thought plausible. Still, few would deny that gift-giving brings joy to the giver and the recipient. It brings smiles even to faces where such things are in short supply these days.

The best part of Christmas is the gift. I don't know where that expression comes from. Whoever it was that said it, they couldn't have been talking about the gifts we give each other, because they mention 'The Gift'. Christmas is about a gift, and one so great and so wonderful that in many places a tradition has developed of observing 'twelve days of Christmas'.

For children the presents under the tree have an exciting air of mystery about them. Often they come from a jolly, generous and invisible person who rides an unseen sleigh drawn by unseen reindeer. He's often called Father Christmas. Some call him Santa Claus, or St Nicholas. In parts of Europe the mysterious giver is called the 'Kristkind' or Christ-Child. Whatever the name, there's mystery about both gift and giver.

Older children and adults tend to concentrate on the gifts they give and receive, as though Christmas is all about the gifts we give each other. But the best part of Christmas is 'the gift' - a gift so amazing that angels from heaven came to look, to tell, and to sing praises in a song that's sung around the world to this day: 'Glory to God in the highest ... goodwill toward all people'. An unseen hand was at work giving a wonderful gift to the whole human race. That gift has become the pivot of history; now everything is dated as happening before or after his birth.

Christmas is about a gift. That gift is an infant. Not any infant, but a son born in a stable 'because there was no room ... in the inn', as a famous historian reports. His birth was repeatedly promised over many hundreds of years before he was born. In a sense, it's still a mystery, because he was born 'of a virgin', and yet was 'the Son of God most high'. It's a real mystery. We know that he was born and where he was born, in the town of Bethlehem, we know his mother's name; but there's no record of the precise day. So we have a 'traditional' day, for his birth.

In Jesus, God is with us. The unseen hand of God has given you and me his son, so we can know **him**. This gift is for real. That's why it's a real mistake to think that Christmas is over.

Perhaps the day is past; the celebration that marks the day is over. But the gift is still with us, and the

giving goes on. This is vitally important for us as we pass from one year into the next. After all, the past year hasn't been without its drama. We've had the Global Financial Crisis, growing unemployment, devastating floods, bushfires, fear about the future everywhere, unrest and fighting in many places, famine, injustices, sickness, broken homes and broken lives. In spite of all that, there is a good reason to look forward to tomorrow with hope ... because of the gift.

I remember Pastor Ed Koch telling us about someone he visited in hospital when he was hospital chaplain in Melbourne Victoria.

He was talking to a 54-year-old man who was very ill. The man said that he was born in Europe, and brought up during the war. He survived the massive bombing raids on Berlin and the allied invasion. He was brought up as a Christian. He was confirmed and had his first communion at the age of 14, but then he drifted away, neglecting his faith. He got married, and they had two children. Times were difficult, so they came to Australia to start again. His marriage failed. For a while life seemed to be straightening out when, out of the blue, he discovered that he had cancer. It was now very advanced. He had only a few weeks to live. Yet he told Ed that although he'd ignored God and turned away from him, God hadn't turned away from him. 'He's always led and guided me, somehow', he said. 'He's just kept on faithfully showing his goodness to me, and hasn't deserted me'.

'I wasn't conscious of his leading and guiding at the time, but now, as I look back', he said, 'I can see the hand of the Lord in my life'.

His story isn't an isolated one. Graham Barrett's story about 'The Reluctant Diva' in The Melbourne Age Extra is another example of this. He talked about Dame Kiri Te Kanawa whom he called 'the world's greatest soprano'. He dubbed her 'Diva' which means goddess - goddess of the stage. It's a title this New Zealand singer, was reluctant to accept. Her reluctance was born of the fact (as she said) that, 'A lot of top singers ... have someone to make the cup of tea, another to get the newspaper, a third to open the door'. After a while these stars can't do without it.

Though at the time she was 'the world's most-sought-after soprano' Dame Kiri didn't regard herself as heaven's greatest gift to the world. Rather, she said, 'I don't think of myself as a diva, and I certainly don't think of myself as anyone special, but what I am allowed to do is special'. She added: 'I've always believed it was something given to me by a special person or people; by my parents first, I suppose, but ultimately through the grace of God'.

Asked whether it was a divine plan, she explained: 'I was a chosen sort of person, I feel. I was lucky. I don't think God pointed a finger at me or anything like that, but I was given a chance in life, and I don't think I've let anyone down'. 'Somewhere along the line, everything that came my way pointed to me becoming a singer: my parents, husband, manager, teacher, children, everything fell into the path'.

So, as she looked back over her life, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa was conscious of an unseen hand guiding her. That's the way it is for those who have the insight to see it, though few are aware of it at the time. The best part of Christmas is the gift which the mysterious unseen hand of God **gave** at Christmas. He gave us his Son so that we, who like to go our own way, might be turned round and be reconciled to him. That hand keeps on giving. It's a gift that you and I are invited to accept, from a hand we can't see. It's the hand of God, and with God the giving goes on long after Christmas is over.

Knowing this we can look forward to the New Year full of hope and confidence even in the face of sickness and uncertainty because with God the giving goes on and on and on.