

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, can I wish you all a very happy Christmas?

Thank you. I hope you've got better presents than me. I must have been very badly behaved this year, my presents were distinctly sparse. Although I did get one. In fact, I only got one very good, very practical present. It's going to be especially useful at all the clergy conferences I have to go to. It's a, it's a label, a name label and I know you can't read it, so I'll read it out. It says at the top of the label, "Hello I'm" and then in the space marked where your name is meant to go, it says "Hello, I'm not a hugger."

So that's going to be very useful on many occasions. I'll keep that safe. I'd like to mention another present. It was a gift given to a teacher in a school in Africa by a child to her teacher. It was a mission school for poor children and the teacher explained how at Christmas time Christians like to exchange gifts on Christmas day to show their joy over the birth of Jesus and their love for each other. When Christmas day came, the boy came to the teacher and gave her a beautiful shell. She said, "that's lovely. Where'd you get that"? He said, "I got it from this beach", and he named the beach and she said, "well, that's miles away". He said, "well, that's the only place where you can find these shells". She said, "well, you know, you didn't need to go that far. I mean, any shell would have done". And he said in his broken English, "no, the long walk part of gift".

And I'll tell you this story, as we gather this morning to thank God for his wonderful gift to us. The gift of himself and his son Jesus, and the gift of God isn't just the baby Jesus. It's the gift of himself because he grew up and at the end of his life he faced a lonely walk to the cross where he was to die. And the Bible is quite clear that this unseemly death was part of God's plan to save us. He too could say long walk part of gift.

In this Eucharist, we are reminded that the baby Jesus grew up and we celebrate his birth this morning, in the context of a Eucharist. We'll be hearing again shortly the story of his last days. The Eucharist is a memorial of his death and resurrection because by his death and mighty resurrection, Jesus has won for us the gift of eternal life. His life is the gift of salvation, and like all gifts, it needs to be received. But we're not all good at receiving. There's an extreme example told of a few

years ago in the Appalachian mountains. It was a particularly hard winter and the Red Cross were out at Christmas time using helicopters to get supplies up into the mountains. And there was one particular crew had been working for hours. Just as they came back at the end of a long shift, it was starting to get dark. They saw a very remote cabin and they thought, well, we really need to stop there and give them something before we finish our shift.

So they're headed there. The nearest they could get was a mile away in a clearing for the helicopter. So they, they, they landed the helicopter, put some supplies on a rucksack and headed out to this cottage. And as it was dark, by the time they arrived, so they knocked on the door, covered in sweat, and they said, when the woman opened the door inside, they said, we're from the Red Cross. We've come to, we've come, we've come to see you. And the woman said, look, it's been a really, really hard year. I'm not sure we can spare anything for you this year.

They weren't ready to receive. We all need to be ready to receive, to receive and respond to the gift that God gives to us in Christ Jesus. We can so easily forget to recognize all that he did to win us that promise of new life. He spared nothing of himself to win for us our salvation. And yet we so often respond like those, that person in the cabin in the Appalachians, not with gratitude and with open hearts and arms because it's hard for us to receive. We're more likely to want to do something to earn God's favor, to do something righteous or holy, but the Christian message is always to be open and ready to receive all that what God has done for us.

And I have one more thought to leave with you. Something that came to me this year when I was preparing my Christmas sermons. That I've never noticed before how Jesus's life began and ended wrapped up. It says in our reading from Luke, "Mary gave birth to her first born. She wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger." And then moving to the end of his life at the end of that same gospel, we read this. "Joseph of Arimathaea went to Pilate and asked for Jesus's body. He took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth and placed it in a tube." I thought that was interesting. And that sadly is the way that many people today prefer Jesus, wrapped, out of harm's way. Jesus is either a helpless baby or a dead prophet. Either way,

he's not threatening or demanding, but this makes no sense.

The Bible talks of Jesus as God's greatest gift. The gift of his very self. In Jesus, God came amongst us and made himself known. Leaving the baby wrapped up is as ridiculous as leaving any other gift wrapped up. Just imagine how silly it would be if each year as well as getting out the decorations early in December, the Christmas lights and all the baubles, that we get out a gift that we didn't bother out in the previous year and we shove it under the tree. And then after Christmas we pack everything away and we pack the gift away, getting it out for next year. It would make no sense. Gifts are there to be received and opened and yet that's so easily what we do with the gift of God and himself that came in Bethlehem.

We so often get out the baby Jesus once a year and leave him for the rest of the year, all wrapped up still in swaddling clothes till next year. But look at the story as it goes on in the gospels. There were no, nothing could constrain him. No wrappings could contain him. The final reference to the wrappings of Jesus comes at the end of Luke's gospel where we read this. "Peter got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves." They couldn't bind him. Jesus didn't stay as a baby. He didn't stay dead, all wrapped up in the tomb. He refuses to be wrapped up. He broke the bonds of sin and death and rose to new life. And his life gives us hope and the promise of new life in him. That's the wonderful gift that we celebrate at Christmas. The gift available to all people if they simply receive it. So let us be people who receive that gift and not leave God's gift of himself all wrapped up. Amen.