

## The Greatest Gift

Ah, Christmas! Once again, it is nearly upon us! Once again, shops are buzzing with people Doing Their Christmas Shopping, while, behind closed doors, multiple online orders are placed and delivery dates anxiously selected.

There are only x number of days to go until the Big Day and the whole process absolutely must be completed by then. It is a fraught time for most people - apart from the ultra-organised, who have all their gifts purchased (and wrapped!) months in advance. (Such people do exist, apparently.) Perhaps older people should take a leaf out of children's books and think in terms of the number of "sleeps" until Christmas Day instead of the number of shopping days ...

Part of the stress of gift-buying is choosing suitable gifts for the recipients: items that meet a need or address their interests or hobbies. Things that they will be glad to receive and be able to use and/or enjoy.

We don't always get it right when it comes to gift-giving. I remember, very many years ago, receiving from an aunt a yellow jumper with a dog on it which she'd made on her knitting machine. I love my aunt, I love dogs and I love yellow – but oh dear!

And, in case you think I am being unkind, I freely confess to making mistakes when choosing gifts. I once gave my sister a homemade skirt and a re-purposed birthday card taped into a painted bamboo frame. I could argue that I was just being creative, albeit in areas far removed from my talent base. However, I cannot for the life of me think why I gave her a diabetic chocolate clog (yes, clog; not log) for her birthday. She isn't even diabetic.

For all the thought that we put into the process, it is unlikely that many of us consider ourselves and our own interests when we choose a gift: nobody wants to get something that reflects the giver's interests, surely.

Surprisingly, research into the psychological effects of gift-giving and receiving suggests that this may actually be the case. Studies have indicated that, in a nutshell, when someone gives something that reflects something of themselves, it may strengthen the bond between both them and the recipient; it can have a deeper emotional impact than something which addresses only the recipient's interests.

This might seem surprising and yet, when we look at it from a spiritual point of view, it makes a lot of sense.

The concept of gift-giving originated in God. Ever since He created humankind, He has been giving to people. Read through the Old Testament

and note instances of God's giving: you will have a very long list. And a list as wide as it is long, because God's gifts addressed every facet of human existence.

All these gifts reflected aspects of God Himself – His unlimited creative power, love, wisdom, righteousness and goodness. In giving them, He was giving something of Himself. They should have made people feel closer to Him, but they didn't – because the bond that had once existed between God and humanity had been broken by sin. Rather than deepening any bond, they only underlined the estrangement between God and Man and that human hearts were inherently opposed to Him.

So, what did God do to re-establish that bond? He gave the greatest Gift of all – His own Son! Jesus is the pinnacle of God's gifts to humanity. He couldn't give any more. Jesus' life on earth was characterized by giving - and most of all when He went to Calvary and offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin, in our place. Through His suffering and death, we are able to enter into a relationship with God again and enjoy the numerous blessings that flow from being His children.

What is our response to this most wonderful of gifts - do we accept Him and all He accomplished for us on the cross? If so, do we take time to reflect on Him and allow the Holy Spirit to draw our hearts ever closer to Him in love and gratitude? Lastly – and this is the challenge - how much are we prepared to give of ourselves to Him in return?