

Sermon for Holy Ghost Church, Genoa, Christmas Day 2016 - Fr Peter Cavanagh

Earlier this week I was late switching on the BBC news. A woman was weeping. Children were sobbing uncontrollably. They looked well-fed and well clothed. There were no tanks, or soldiers, or bomb damaged buildings. So it obviously wasn't Berlin or Syria. There were no rising flood waters or devastated homes, so it wasn't Cumbria. What on earth could cause so much pain and grief? The camera drew back. The scene grew wider. This was not a disaster, nor was there a new civil war. We were in Hamleys, the West End Toy Shop!

'That's the end of Christmas for my kids' sobbed the distraught mother.

The shop had run out of little furry creatures. Clever, furry, electronic creatures that respond, so they say, to the loving care of children. They cost the earth. With them is life. Without them there can be no life, no Christmas – just days of misery in the run-up to December 25th.

The *central point* of Christmas comes wrapped-up, and bound-up, and packaged in traditions and symbols, atmospheres and sensation. It's snow, and trees, and decorations, and cards, and presents and Christmas food. A year ago I freely admit I stood in the check-out queue in Tesco, full of awe and wonder and great anticipation after reading their sign: 'Get your Christmas Goose here!' I stand before you as one who knows the full meaning of the word *disappointment* – and it has nothing to do with the absence of a furry toy.

So, yes, I admit to enjoying all the run-up to Christmas. The commercialization, the presents, the carols, the blottoed-Santas and any amount of Ho Ho Ho-ing.

And, I think, if we're honest, most of us enjoy the traditional packaging. And why shouldn't we?

The longer I live the more aware I become that for many people the moments of joy are few. And for some they are constantly outnumbered by times of sorrow, or periods of long, dull routine.

A year ago on Christmas Eve morning, Christmas got to me. Like many others, I had gone to Sainsbury's to get few last-minute bits and pieces .

I was standing in the cheque-out queue. I heard music. I thought it might be canned-Christmas-Musak for a moment, but no. It was a real, live, human voice - and

pushing a big trolley came this game old girl, singing, not quietly or apologetically, but not offensively loud either, While Shepherds watched their flocks. She knew all the verses too. Some looked embarrassed, some smiled and looked away. I caught the eyes of the girl at the cheque-out, she smiled, and I said: ‘And why not?’ She replied: ‘Why not indeed!’

I left the queue, for a moment, went up to her and said: ‘I hope you have a happy Christmas.’ She said: ‘I hope you have one as well son’. (Son! That made *my* Christmas). She went on pushing her trolley. I noticed it contained, 2 potatoes, 2 carrots, one apple, one satsuma and one pork chop.

It’s usually the sight of a child wearing a tea towel and half a roll of baco-foil that bring tears to my eyes – last year it came at 8.15 on Christmas Eve morning.

If a card with a robin on it, a couple of feet of tinsel, a few glasses of Harvey’s Bristol Cream and a mince pie can make somebody happy, then let them have more, and more often! Yes, I can cope with the packaging and all that surrounds Christmas.

But our job, and we are *all* called to this work, is to point people to that greater and more enduring joy. We are the ones who can/ and must/ explain what is inside all this packaging; what is at the heart of, and the reason for ~ all this gift wrapping. The birth of a baby – hidden and obscured by the wrapping paper. And we must be careful not to spend too much time denouncing the secular Christmas that *we* forget the Gift it contains, and we, too, obscure this special festival. Instead we ought to use this season of happiness to point to and explain the eternal happiness it brings.

So let’s enjoy all that surrounds this celebration ~ but not selfishly, not exclusively, not greedily.

Enjoy all you receive. *Give*, not simply in return ~ but because you enjoy *giving*.

Discover the deep joy of Christmas ~ that God loved us so much that he gave. Not our action, or our goodness, or our worthiness or our unworthiness, or our belief, or our disbelief either. But that he gave – gave his Son so that we might have eternal life. Whatever has brought you to this Eucharist today – faith, tradition, habit, hope ~ that’s all-right ~ for this holy child accepts us, all of us, and all that we are ~ and there’s nothing more magical than that. And there’s no greater gift either. I hope you have a very happy Christmas.

AMEN.