



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*  
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, December 30, 2012**  
*The First Sunday after Christmas Day*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11am*

+

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.  
on  
John 1:1-18  
+

*PRESENTS AND PRESENCE*

Right after Christmas Day some radio program was interviewing people about presents they wish they'd gotten but didn't get and about presents they got but were going to exchange or return or pass on to someone else. One young woman on the program (it may have been one of you) was describing a present she received from her relatives in the midwest. It was a very nice present, and she would have been glad to have it except for one thing: it would not fit in her typically small New York City apartment.

One aspect of a gift is that it can burden the recipient. The receiver should care for the gift, should recognize it as a symbolic stand-in for the giver, and yet it can be hard to do so; we might not have the space for the gift, or the time to care for it; we might not be up to the responsibility. If you were foolish enough to give me a Rembrandt painting, I would be so terrified of keeping it that the first thing I'd do would be to ring up the Frick. Please take this away! I would say; I am not worthy of it!—despite the deep affection that your gift would symbolize, and no matter how much you protested that you wanted me to have the privilege of looking at the Rembrandt while I masticated my shredded wheat.

Gifts can be a burden. And so a loving giver seeks ways to make them less so. I think this is behind the popularity of giving food and flowers—things which pass away and take up no permanent space (except perhaps at the waistline). A loving giver will try to discern what is just the right gift for you, something that you will love, something that will be helpful or beautiful in your life and something that won't bring with it a sense of weight and obligation. And whether successful or not, any gift given in love does succeed in standing in for the person behind the gift. Even the bulky present from the midwest, which cannot be kept, performs this symbolic function: the gift means the giver.

+++

The greatest gift ever given, as you know, was first seen as a baby boy, although his presence had already been felt for nine months by those most intimate to him. And although we can be gushingly romantic about babies, and although we have this lovely, pious, romantic stable here in the midst of our chancel, we should not forget the burden that this gift lay upon us. Quite literally, it did not fit in the rooms that were available, and thus had to be placed outside with the animals, as we see. This gift laid on his parents the burdens of nursing, cleansing, teaching, and formation—tasks which would consume them for the next decade and more. And precisely because this gift is the greatest ever given, it has laid upon every person in the world, from shepherd to philosopher to fisherman to housecleaner to scribe to governor to queen and king—it has laid upon every one of us an awful choice, a choice often enforced in human flesh:

are we on the side of this gift, or not? It was not the giver's intention to lay such a burden upon us. He gave us this gift because of his overflowing love. But in the actual earthly city in which we live, to receive a gift of such love requires that we renounce all evil and wickedness, and that means conflict with evil and wickedness is laid upon us.

Nonetheless, is it not good that he gave us this gift? Would any of us really prefer a life of ease and self-sufficiency, a life of comfortable pleasures, a life without burdens, if in such a life this child were never born? Would we not rather take anything at all that might happen for the sake of receiving this child, this gift from God Almighty of his very self?

+++

Every gift, I said earlier, is a symbol of the giver, and that is true here also. The Son of God, the Word made flesh, is the Father's gift to us and as such is a stand-in for God the Father Almighty. He is, if you will, a sacrament. He is a Real Presence. Isn't it interesting that in English we have that [near] homonym, between *presents* that we give and *presence* which is just there? Jesus is a present to us and he is a presence with us. No one has ever seen God the Father, but the Son of God become flesh and dwelling among us, he has made him known. When God gives us Jesus God is giving us his very self. Our creator is like an author of a story in which we are characters. But the peculiar thing about this author is that he hasn't just created his characters, he loves them. And he loves them so much that he wants to be one of them. Thus the author has entered into the story: God has come down in human flesh, Jesus has been conceived and he has made the author known.

+++

This, deep down, is why we give to one another. The divine gift is the model and the source of all our giving. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta said that, when we give to the poor, if we fail to give Jesus, we have not given enough. This is true for all giving. Every real gift of ours wants to be a gift of God. For then the present becomes a real presence.

But how in the world do we give God to one another? The answer is paradoxical. We give God to one another when we give ourselves. Here too is the greatest gift ever given. All the boxes and wrapping paper, all the bags and ribbons and bows, what they really wrap is ourselves. We give ourselves to each other. That, to say it again, is the real present, the real presence.

+++

As many of you know, about two weeks ago my wife, Susan, died. Since then I have received a veritable flood of communications of all sorts. These words and gestures are signs of your presence with me, signs of your gift of yourself. And they are also signs of that real presence who supports us and carries us along, from the mysterious inception of our life to its mysterious consummation in God's Triune Being. My testimony is this: that your support has been real, and that God's has been real, and that yours and God's are intimately related. I give you my thanks. And now let us together give thanks to God, as it is meet and right to do, in all times, in all places, because at one time and in one place he entered human history and became man, the greatest gift ever given.