

AREA LEADERSHIP MESSAGE

Our Gift to Christ

By Elder Allistair B. Odgers

Area Seventy



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“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea . . . , there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem. . . .

“ . . . They departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. . . .

“ . . . They saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.”¹

What gift will we give Christ?

For many a season in our family, the best wrapped gift, the best gift

under the Christmas tree, has been for Christ. Each member of our family would make a promise or commitment to the Saviour and place it in the gift-wrapped box. Then we would open it each Christmas to see how well we did in truly giving a gift to Christ.

On Christmas Eve, we would often do treat drops. We would bake and



Because I Have Been Given Much

By Argentina Fatialofa

My life has been so blessed. My family and I found the gospel in the early seventies, and it has enriched our lives in every possible way.

In my line of work, I see so much sadness. Broken families, broken hearts. When I think about the richness and blessings the gospel has brought into my life, I know I must give something back, particularly to those who have not found the gospel as I have.

Back in the early eighties, my children and I were looking for service opportunities as a way of showing more appreciation for what we had at Christmastime. It all began one year when we served dinner for the homeless and families in need. It was a sweet, spiritual experience that meant so much to us as a family.

Since that first involvement, I have tried not to miss a year. We serve at the Auckland City Mission now, and the Christmas meal has been going for nearly 30 years. Over the years many different family members have come to join us: siblings, nieces and nephews, depending on who's around or their circumstances at the time.

make all day, and then at night we would choose families to take them to. Often placing them on a doorstep, knocking on the door, then running away, peeking behind to see the response.

We took it to another level on our mission (Philippines Laoag Mission). Our zone leaders baked and packaged hundreds of biscuits. Then on the eve of Christmas conference, we would go out to sing Christmas carols to their investigators and members. I wept when, according to Philippine custom, they would come out and give us all that they had: some rice in a bag or a few pesos. Then they wept when we gave it back, adding to it biscuits and lollies. But theirs was the greater gift, for they were willing to give all that they had.² When we returned, we would gather and take time to ponder upon our gift we would give to Christ. Each wrote on a card the gift they would give, then placed it in the gift box.

President Howard W. Hunter gave us some great ideas:

“This Christmas, mend a quarrel. Seek out a forgotten friend. Dismiss suspicion and replace it with trust. Write a letter. Give a soft answer. Encourage youth. Manifest your loyalty in word and deed. Keep a promise. Forgo a grudge. Forgive an enemy. Apologize. Try to understand. Examine your demands on others.

Think first of someone else. Be kind. Be gentle. Laugh a little more. Express your gratitude. Welcome a stranger. Gladden the heart of a child. Take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of the earth. Speak your love and then speak it again.”³

Oh, how I remember one Christmas Eve in our home. The year had been hard financially—this year we told our children that there would be no gifts under the tree and that dinner would be simple. But we still made treats and did our treat drop Christmas Eve. As we gathered after to do our gift for Christ and to read the scripture story of Christ's birth, someone knocked on our door. Then we heard the running of feet and saw car lights leaving the driveway. As we opened the door, there on our doorstep were gifts for the children and the makings of a feast. Oh, how grateful we are for that Christmas and the anonymous gifts.⁴

As we busy ourselves in this festive season, may we take time to ponder what gift we can give Christ.

And let us remember that real gifts help us centre on Christ. For Christ is the reason. *Christ is the gift.* ■

NOTES

1. Matthew 2:1, 9, 11.
2. See Mark 12:41–44; see also Mosiah 18:27–28.
3. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Howard W. Hunter* (2015), 32; adapted from “What We Think Christmas Is,” *McCall's*, Dec. 1959, 82–83.
4. See Matthew 6:1; see also 3 Nephi 13:1.

For my children and I, this Christmas tradition has taught us humility. It has taught us to appreciate what the Atonement has given us. Everything we have, we owe to the Saviour's Atonement. When I see so much on our table and so much under the tree at Christmastime, I know it is because of the blessings of the gospel that have enriched our lives.

Jesus Christ loves all mankind. I've felt that same compassion for those who come to the City Mission Christmas luncheon. Regardless of their situation or background, we welcome all who walk through those doors, just as the Saviour would. I love seeing them and treating them like family, especially those who are disabled or homeless.

The Saviour carried the cross without complaint. He suffered pain for my sins and never once did He say He can't do it anymore, nor did He give up. Knowing what He suffered for me, I must give something back to Him by serving and ministering to others in need.

I will keep this tradition as long as I am able to. I don't know how long that will be, but Christ never gave up on what He came to this earth to do for me. Until the Lord needs me elsewhere, you will find me serving the Lord and His children at the Auckland City Mission this Christmas and many Christmases after. ■



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Light the World

By Waireka Collings

The Christmas traditions we have started with our family have come out of the 'Light the World' initiative.

In the first year, we participated because it sounded fun. We thought, "Well, let's give it a go and see how we get on."

I began planning little things that we could do to (1) Serve our neighbours and those around us

and (2) Make Christmas more meaningful to the children, focusing less on what they can get out of Christmas and more about what they can give.

We had been looking for ways to get into the spirit of Christmas for a while. The 'Light the World' initiative has been the answer for us. Even after only two years of doing it, there are already many traditions that the children talk about as though they have always been with our family. I am amazed at the power and effect it has had on us.

Over the time that we have followed the 'Light the World' initiative, we have been able to donate food to the food bank and share goodness on our social media accounts. We have done things like take a cake to a neighbour who had just moved in or take a basket of treats to the local health centre to support those who are sick or otherwise afflicted.

The tradition we love the most is on Christmas Eve. This is where we re-create the story of Jesus and spend a night in "Bethlehem." We dress as they would have dressed, we try to eat food that they would have eaten, and we talk about Jesus and what kind of life He had.

It is easy to talk about the great things that Jesus did. On Christmas Eve, we try to talk about the difficulties He experienced. With no fixed

abode, He was always relying on the help of strangers. We talk about how we can be the strangers that reach out and lift those who need our support.

On Christmas Day, instead of a gingerbread house, the kids put together a gingerbread stable with Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. I think it is good for children to know and understand that the greatest person that ever lived on this earth started

out as a baby and had to learn everything He knew just like them. Not only did He start as a baby, but He came to earth in the humblest of circumstances.

Children are so open to the feelings of the Spirit. They just seem to get the concepts wholeheartedly. These teaching moments make it all worth it.

Christmas is such a wonderful occasion in our household. There is

a certain reverence and now expectation from the children to carry out these traditions each year. I look forward to the day when we can participate in these same traditions in the homes of our grown children. I hope that they will be able to reflect fondly on memories such as these that seal their testimonies and knowledge of the truthfulness of the birth and life of our Saviour and His sacred ministry on the earth. ■



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A Gift for Jesus on Christmas Day

By Sophia Grey

When I was about five or six, I came up with the idea of giving a present to Jesus at Christmas. I remember being very conscious as a child that Jesus is our Elder Brother. As only a child can, I wanted to include Him in what we did as a family.

Gift giving is such a big part of Christmas. I had concluded that since Jesus Christ was gift enough Himself, what we should do is decide what we were going to do as a gift to Him.

I found a box with a lid, wrapped it in Christmas paper with a bow, and wrote on a little tag the message: "To Jesus, from the Greys."

I asked my family to write what they were going to do as a gift to Jesus in the coming year. Things like, “I’m going to try and forgive others more for You,” or “I’m going to try to be a peacemaker for You,” or even “I’m going to do things for Mum and Dad without being told.”

I don’t remember any exact gifts that were written, as it was about 20 years ago when we started, but the spirit of those gifts has remained.

On Christmas morning, before opening any presents, we would read from Luke, open the gift for Jesus and read to each other what we were going to give Him that year.

This simple tradition brought Christ into our Christmas because it made us feel like He was there. As a child, I was happy because He was getting a present just like us, just like one of our family. It reminded us of what the important things were, and that He is our Elder Brother! We love Him just as much as our flesh and blood family, so why wouldn’t we include Him in our happiest family time?

As I have grown older, I have come to understand that opening gifts on Christmas does not have to be superficial. The Saviour has given all of us the gift of His Atonement, the greatest of all gifts. I should receive this gift with the eagerness of a child unwrapping a present on Christmas morning. ■



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Treats, Decorations and Daily Reminders

By Paula Matenga



Putting up the Nativity scene bit by bit meant that the story of Christ's birth was shared throughout the entire month of December.

When my children were very young, we started a Christmas tradition that has lasted through the years. It was a countdown calendar with a Christ-centred twist. The feature was a simple twenty-four-piece Nativity set that I made from wood.

The manger on the mantle would start December empty. Each day, the children would take turns picking out and placing the next Nativity piece and eating the treat that went with it.

Stretching a Nativity scene to 24 pieces meant that there were a few extra sheep and camels, but every significant piece would have a scripture written on the back. The scripture would be read and there would be a discussion around the significance of the figure chosen. The angels, the wise men, the shepherds, the star and, of course, Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

Putting up the Nativity scene bit by bit meant that the story of Christ's birth was shared throughout the entire month of December. Every day, in amongst the hustle and bustle of Christmas festivities, we were reminded of the true meaning of Christmas.

When Christmas morning did arrive, the full Nativity, and its full meaning, was there at the centre of our celebrations.

Our children do not grow out of these traditions. They stay with them even into adulthood. They don't reminisce on the presents they received growing up, but the time spent together as family and the traditions they could count on every year. Because they looked forward to this particular tradition, I ended up sending a smaller set to my boys on their missions so that they and their companions could have a little bit of home at Christmastime.

My children have their own families now, so I have made an advent

calendar for each of them so they can carry on this tradition with their children.

For children, Christmas should be fun. The gospel should be fun, full of joy and excitement. The Christmas traditions enjoyed by the world can be Christ-centred if we are creative. Giving and receiving gifts doesn't have to be materialistic. It represents the gift given to all of us by Heavenly Father: the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, and everything that means. ■

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