

Opening the Word: The problem of a pure gift



One of the major questions that has occupied the attention of philosophers in the 20th century is whether it's possible to offer a pure gift.

What's meant by a pure gift? A pure gift is something that is given by a person without any strings attached. A parent would feed and love a child without any self-interest. The parent wouldn't care about the affections involved in the act of parenting. The parent would never think about any future responsibilities that the child would have to the parent – showing up at holidays, calling on Sundays or taking care of the parent in old age.

Many philosophers have argued that this pure gift is impossible precisely because we are always self-interested. We always give a gift in order to get something in return – even if it's the good feeling of offering the gift to another.

Of course, the problem with this argument is that it presumes that the individual should not be attached to others. It presumes that what would make a gift “pure” is total and absolute altruism, no attachment to those whom we love.

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Hab 1:2-3; 2:2-4

Ps 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

2 Tm 1:6-8, 13-14

Lk 17: 5-10

Scripture has another sense of gift. In Habakkuk, we hear the

prophet cry out for divine assistance. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has made a covenant with Israel. And the prophet wonders when God will act on his end of the bargain.

The Lord offers a vision to the prophet. God doesn't say, "Don't ask for anything from me. I'm God and you're not." Instead, God asks for faith from the prophet. God will act. God still has a gift to give.

Jesus addresses the disciples relative to this faith. We're used to hearing about the mustard seed, the bush that begins as a tiny seed. It is the seed that grows large enough that a bird may nest in its branches.

But Luke's account of the mustard seed is different. The faith of the mustard seed is a miraculous faith, capable of transplanting a mulberry bush into the middle of the sea. It makes the impossible become possible.

The disciple has this faith. And the reward for this faith, this obedience to God, is not immediately evident. The disciple should not expect rewards aplenty for possessing this faith in the present.

Disciples are servants. They have been given the gift of being in relationship to God. Their response of obedience is dependent on the wondrous decision of God to enter into a relationship with them. As servants, they have acted in a way that is the bare minimum, a return-gift of love to the God who first loved them.

But this doesn't mean that eventually there will not be a reward. Even the servant should expect to sit down and eat.

God provides this for the servant, who is simply doing his duty. God provides because God is pure gift, pure love, purity itself.

As Christians, we thus have something to say about the

supposed goodness of “pure” love. For us, the only pure love is the divine love made incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is a gift beyond gift.

We can't offer a return gift of love that is this pure because we're not God. We're just doing our duty, responding to a love first received.

And rather than see this as a problem, it's good news.

Being a servant to a God this loving, this capable of fulfilling the promise of redemption, is more than enough.

It is what brings us week after week to the Eucharistic altar.

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