

## Fr. KEVIN DILLON'S HOMILY DATED 05.01.19

Every so often after the reflections that we have after Communion, people might come and say "what is that song?", "where did it come from?", "can you download me an illegal recording of it?" A couple of weeks ago we had a little song that got quite a strong response from a lot of people. I've referred a few people to it, made a lot of copies because the CD itself is pretty unprocurable, and the original isn't even available on the internet. If you recall, it was only a couple of weeks ago, it was called 'The Gift', the original version sung by Garth Brooks. You'll be relieved to know I'm not going to sing it for you today, but I will just read the lyrics of it. A little story that is familiar and we saw it just a couple of weeks back:

A poor orphan girl named Maria  
Was walking to market one day  
She stopped for a rest by the roadside  
Where a bird with a broken wing lay  
A few moments passed till she saw it  
For its feathers were covered with sand  
But soon clean and wrapped it was travelling  
In the warmth of Maria's small hand  
She happily gave her last peso  
On a cage made of rushes and twine  
She fed it loose corn from the market  
And watched it grow stronger with time  
Now the Christmas Eve service was coming  
And the church shone with tinsel and light  
And all of the town folks brought presents  
To lay by the manger that night  
There were diamonds and incense  
And perfumes  
In packages fit for a king  
But for one ragged bird in a small cage  
Maria had nothing to bring  
She waited till just before midnight  
So no one would see her go in  
And crying she knelt by the manger  
For her gift was unworthy of Him  
Then a voice spoke to her through the darkness  
Maria, what brings you to me  
If the bird in the cage is your offering  
Open the door and let me see  
Though she trembled, she did as He asked her  
And out of the cage the bird flew  
Soaring up into the rafters  
On a wing that had healed good as new  
Just then the midnight bells rang out  
And the little bird started to sing  
A song that no words could recapture  
Whose beauty was fit for a king  
Now Maria felt blessed just to listen

To that cascade of notes sweet and long  
As her offerings was lifted to heaven  
By the very first nightingale's song.

So much of Christmas is about gifts. And I suppose when we're very small, and sometimes when we're older, gifts are really important. Hopefully, as we get older, we learn it's better to give than to receive. When we're young, it's really about what we receive rather than what we give that has prime importance. But at this conclusion of the Christmas season, each year the Gospel is the same, it's the gifts of the wise men to Jesus. And of course enormous symbolism in each of them- gold, recognizing the kingship of Jesus, the frankincense recognising his divinity, and the myrrh, his humanity and looking towards his burial, death, and ultimately, rising again through God and through man. They're the gifts of the wise men. But so many Christmas stories are about our gifts. Our gifts to one another, and what they represent. And maybe at the end of the Christmas season, we look back on these and we see what have I really given this Christmas.

One Christmas story which is very very famous and was written about 100 years ago. And it was called, like today's feast, 'The Gift of the Magi' (of the wise people). And it was written by O. Henry. And my recollection is O doesn't stand for anything, it's a name that he made up. It's a story of Jim and Dela, a young married couple who have very little money. And I'm sure you'd be familiar with the story but they each want to give to each other a very special gift for Christmas. And they're very poor indeed, living in a little rented apartment. Jim wants to give to Dela a set of brushes and combs for her long and beautiful hair. Dela wants to give to Jim a chain or a watch which was very in, no apple watches in those days. The watch he treasures and this would be just the thing for that. But they have no money. And the essence of the story is she goes off and cuts her hair, and so she only has short hair when Christmas morning comes, and she receives the brushes and combs for hair that is only about a small percentage of the length that it once was. But he of course has gone off to sell his watch to buy all the brushes and combs. So they each end up with gifts that are superficially useless, but which are a magnificent gift because they represent a total offering of themselves.

Another little story that gets a lot of attention, or hopefully should at any rate at this time of year, was 'The Littlest Angel'. The story of a little 4-year-old who is somehow taken to heaven, and think of that poor little fella that died of the farm this week, little Darcy whose photo is on the front page of the bulletin. But this angel is in heaven too, and he's got nothing to offer the Christ child. All the angels are running around with their great gifts and so on. But all he has is a little box of all his treasures, and his treasures are meaningless things, like the worn out collar that his dog used to wear, and a few pebbles that he picked up by the river and so on, and they're the only things that he's got. And he offers these to the Christ child, and he's very embarrassed because he's got nothing else. And the angel comes and blesses them and they're taken up to heaven, and they are welcomed by God as the gifts for His son as they are the fundamental, simple things of earth. And the little box begins to glow and shine, and hovers over the stable and becomes the shining star of Bethlehem.

And the third story, the third leg of the trifecta- 'The Happy Prince'. It's a story by a great storyteller, Oscar Wilde, about a statue of a prince in the town and it's full of jewels and it's got gold leaf all over it, and it stands very proudly in the town. And the prince looks down from his statue and sees all the poverty in the village, and he gets a little bird that will take some of the jewels from the statue and give them to people who have nothing. And after all the jewels are exhausted, the bird eventually takes the gold leaf and gives them to poor people around the village. And eventually of course, the little swallow dies because he hasn't been able to migrate to Egypt because he's been doing the bidding of the prince to give the gold leaf to the poor. And the mayor and the councillors as sometimes happens, take a very dim view because the happy prince doesn't look too good now, he's just looking a shadow of his former self. So they throw away the bird whose body lies at the base of the statue, and they take the statue down and crush it all up. And that's not the end of the story because there are so many people in the town who have benefited from the happy prince's gift of himself.

And ultimately, that's what Christmas giving is all about. It's what the giving of Jesus himself is about. Even as the Christmas season ends, we don't cover the crucifix and we don't take it away, because that is the ultimate Christmas gift. Jesus giving of himself for us. And that is the Christmas gift to which you and I are called. And it's not something that is done by internet banking, or writing a cheque, or getting an expensive gift card or any of those things. Ultimately we are called in our Christmas giving, to give of ourselves, of our time, of our love, of our care, of ourselves. I wonder if we look back on this Christmas season, and it's never too late, because as the old song says why can't we have Christmas all year around? Well we can in this. But if we look back at this last Christmas, is there someone, and hopefully the answer is yes, and maybe the answer is there are several, maybe even many. But is there someone to whom our gift has been of ourselves, of our very being. It might be someone we spent 2 hours or 5 hours with, and really 5 minutes was enough. But somehow or other, we knew we had to do more.

It might be someone we went to visit, even though their house is smelly, and we know that we should've said no to whatever they were offering us to eat. It might be someone who needed their lawns mowed, even though we wanted to go to the cricket and see a lawn that someone else had mown, etc etc. What is the gift that we've given over this Christmas season that has truly been an offering to Christ, in the spirit of the poor orphan girl named Maria, or the happy prince, or Jim and Dela giving their gifts which represented so much sacrifice for them? Or the littlest angel with the little things that became so precious. Let's look back on this Christmas, and see how we went. And if we haven't, it's not too late. Because Christmas is never over. There will always be someone for whom we can make it Christmas. And we even have an expression like that don't we- "you've made my day". And we don't have to think about Dirty Harry for that one. We can make each other's day by giving the gifts that are simple, precious, loving, and they are the most precious gifts of all, because they are the gifts of ourselves. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.