

**Christmas Eve**  
Homily of December 24, 2004  
by Father Brian Joyce

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I have to tell you the truth. At Christmas time I worry. I really worry. Earlier today, at 3:30 and at 5:00 and at 6:30, we had well over four thousand people at Mass, probably another thousand at eight o'clock, and lots of kids. And I worry because it's got to be confusing for them because kids know about Christmas and they know who the key figure is and they know, who, when it comes to Christmas, is most important and most central and most decisive. It's obvious and more than obvious, at least to most young children, that the key figure is Santa Claus. And then they come here and we talk to them about Jesus and about God.

Now, I don't want to get critical about Santa Claus. I'm a fan of his. Santa Claus is one of the good guys. And, in fact, he is rooted in a third century bishop, St. Nicholas, who was legendary for his holiness and for his generosity. He represents a sound approach to healthy giving, a spirit of giving, and of caring for children. In fact, we invited him to the first three Masses today. And he came and he bowed and he blessed himself and he genuflected and he knelt before the crib. It was great, although it reminded me (This is the truth.) a year ago, after our 3:30 Mass with eleven or twelve hundred people, two visitors came up to me furious because we had Santa Claus here and how could I allow such a pagan, secular, fantastical figure in a religious service! Well, my response was I invited him back this year.

But, there is a problem. There is a big confusing problem and it's not just for youngsters. It's also for adults. Our image of Santa Claus, who is bearded, fatherly, gift-giving, visitor from the North, somehow gets mixed-up, for some people, with our notion of God, when they could not possibly be more different. So, what I want to do this evening is share with you my list of six major differences between Santa Claus and God, not even counting or mentioning the basic number seven difference, to be or not to be.

Number one, Santa Claus lives at the North Pole. Well, while the true North for us could be our God and God can be the firm compass point that gives direction for our lives, at the same time, the God of the Universe is as close as our own hearts. God is always near and not distant. And that's a problem because in our own lives we stick God in heaven. Pardon me, but heaven is even farther away than the North Pole! That's a bigger insult to God than sending Him to the North Pole, further away! Putting God on the margin of our lives, we just have room for God on weekends or on holy days. And our God lives close as our own hearts.

The second difference between Santa Claus and God is very similar. Santa Claus visits us just once a

year, but our God is always available, always at hand, always present, always near. We need only to visit our God because our God is here. We visit our God in prayer. We stop and reflect. We visit our God in acts of kindness, even when we don't reflect and pray about it. We visit our God when we reach out to the needy, and we visit our God when we insist on justice. And those are not once-a-year trips. Those are not once-a-year kind of visits. What we might want to do on Christmas and in Christmas season is ask the question of ourselves, "When do I pray or reflect or visit God that way?" Or, if I don't do that, "When do I visit God with acts of kindness to people around me?" Or, "When do I visit God by doing something for the needy?" Or, "When do I visit God by being insistent on justice, in my conversation, in my opinions, and in my politics?"

The third difference between Santa Claus and God is that Santa Claus brings things. Santa Claus brings toys and gifts and presents and material possessions. The gift our God brings is God's own self. God gives us a relationship, a friendship, a bonding that we call grace. Now, you can measure this. We talk about holiness. Someone is holy if they're close to God, if God is close to them. All right. Let's look at Bill Gates and let's look at Mary and Joseph. Who do you think was holier? I don't want to criticize Bill, you know, but, if God is about giving us things, then obviously poor people like Mary and Joseph are unholy and ungodly, and wealthy people like Bill Gates are godly and holy. I would hope they all are, but God is not about giving us gifts, even when we ask for them. What God is about is giving us a power and strength greater than ourselves, giving us peace and support, not giving us more things, but giving us enough strength to live by.

The fourth difference between Santa Claus and God (Read this as the biggest one! This is the biggest common mistake and misunderstanding about our God.)... Because we are told about Santa Claus, "He is making a list; he is checking it twice; he's going to find out who is naughty and nice," we think of God that way. We think of God as making a list, as keeping track of us, of getting ready to say, "I gottcha!" Or, when things go bad in our life we say, "Oh, it's payback time. What was it that I did wrong, because God is catching up with me?" Jesus comes along and says, "God is like a father who lost his only son and was never the same again, and who spent the rest of his time watching for the son, waiting for the son, and welcoming the son back. That's what God is like." I talk at least once a year here on forgiveness. In fact, on our website, I have the Ten Commandments of Forgiveness because people have a lot of trouble forgiving. We all do. And one of the ones I really hammer on is, people say you have got to forgive and forget. Baloney! We don't forget. What are you talking about, amnesia? Is that a virtue? Alzheimer's? Is that a good thing? What's this forgetting business? We don't forget. We remember and let go. We have to let go, move on, but don't be stupid. We remember and let go. I say this again and again. Then, this Fall we had a visiting parish missionary who gave a mission to us. At one of the morning masses, he made the same point. He said, "We don't forget. We are just pretending if we say we forget when we've been hurt." But, then he said, "There is only one person who forgets. The only one who forgets, and it's in the Bible, is God, deliberately and lovingly forgets.....our weaknesses, our sins, our failures, and invites us to walk with him." So, forget this Santa Claus keeping-a-list kind of God. God is just the opposite of that. Our God deliberately forgets.

Number five, Santa Claus is like a one-man Federal Express or a one-man UPS, personal delivery

down each and every chimney. Right? Well, our God's delivery system is very different. There is a great story about after Jesus lived His life, taught His teachings, died and rose from the dead, He goes back to heaven and He is telling them all in heaven about it. He says, "I have changed the course of history. I've saved the world. I've redirected the human race. And they now know the gospel of God's love and they will be living that." And the angel said, "Well, how is that going to work?" God said, "I have gathered these people who believe in Me and I give them my spirit and they celebrate that and they are going to change the world." And the angel said, "Well, what if that doesn't work?" And Jesus says, "There is no other plan.... There is no other plan." We're it! The delivery system is not God by Himself, but all of us together.

That's why I like the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. You know, St. Francis of Assisi was the one who popularized having a crib scene and a manger. In fact, in Assisi in the chapel of the church there he brought in a donkey and animals. .... We didn't do that this year. I'm just as glad because it's cleanup after the 12:15 Mass, and so we didn't bring in the donkey, but St. Francis popularized the crib scene for the first time, and gave us the most basic of Christian prayers. Listen to the prayer: "Lord, make ME an instrument of your peace." Watch what you pray for, because if it is Christian prayer it means we are part of the solution. It means anything we ask for, we are going to be the ones who make it work, with the spirit and power and strength of God, but we are the delivery system. And that is very different from Santa Claus and his reindeer.

The sixth and last difference is that Santa Claus is bearded and obviously an older gentleman, and whether we get the notion from Santa Claus or from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, the notion that God is old is wrong, flatly, simply and incredibly wrong. Our God is forever young. With every day, our God is new, exciting, creative, amazing, surprising, youthful. Every moment, as the story of creation charges forward, and, as far as we know, the story of the human race, we are just in our beginning. We are just in our infancy. But our God is always ahead of us. We may age. God does not. You know, our best window to see what God is like is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is the one person in the human race and its history who points adequately to what God is like and makes the God of the Universe present, and lets us know what God is like. And Jesus comes to us as young as a newborn babe. Jesus continues as a young man, risen from death, never to die again. Jesus speaks to us saying, "Behold. I am going to make everything new." I love that, when we listen to the first reading about there is going to be peace and the weapons of war are going to be done away with and I sit there and I say, "I don't think this year. I don't think they are going to disappear this year." And Jesus says, "Our God will make everything new. Don't give up hope. It's all going to be different. And you may be getting old, but I'm not. I'm going to change it all." Before the God we meet in Jesus who is ever-young and ever-near we do well to forget about Santa Claus and to sing God's praise.

Hail to the newborn Prince of Peace!  
Hail to the Son of Righteousness!  
Light and Life to all He brings,  
Risen with healing in His wings.  
Mild, he lays his glory by,

Born that we no more may die.  
Born to raise us from the earth,  
Born to give us brand new birth.  
Hark the herald angels sing.  
Glory to our newborn King, and God.  
Amen.