

Giving at Christmas

Hello everyone, my name is Áine Duffy. Christmas is my favourite time of year as I'm sure it is for the majority of us here today. It's a magical time filled with fun, joy and celebrations! What I really love about Christmas is the fact that the whole world seems to come to a standstill on Christmas day. No matter what religion or race, people universally stop in their tracks to celebrate Christmas day. Businesses close, the working stops, and families and friends come together to spend time with each other. The amazing part for me is the fact that this all happens due to one little baby being born, Jesus Christ. Everyone knows something special is being celebrated on Christmas day whether they believe in Jesus or not. A very famous example of this was during world war one in 1914 when the fighting came to a halt between German and British soldiers on Christmas Eve and Christmas day so that they too could celebrate this special time of the year together by playing a huge game of football, regardless of the war that was being fought between them. This ceasefire wouldn't have occurred for just any event; it had to be because of something significant and equally important to both troops either side of no man's land. It was the celebration of Christ's birth that touched all their lives. Christ takes no part in war or unrest and I believe no other God does too. The world should look back at the events of 1914 and take example from those brave men, no matter what religion they are.

Today I am here to talk about a very important element of Christmas; Giving. This is a very important factor that the whole world acknowledges at Christmas time. I suppose the most obvious example of this is the present giving that people do at this time of year. The wrapping, the giving, the joy on the receivers face, all of this adds to the joyful element of presents. We would be lying if we said that we didn't like a present, whether it's big or small. Presents are a prime way to show a loved one that we care, and they will appreciate the thoughtfulness of the gift, even if it isn't exactly what they wanted. I know myself that Santa has got it really wrong a few times in the past but I always thanked him anyways as I knew that his heart was in the right place. As the saying goes, it's the thought that counts. The world today has gotten very focused on this materialistic side of the season and through social media and advertisement, we are bombarded and overcome with the pressure of present giving. It seems like the only important factor of Christmas is in fact the present but I believe we need to take a step back from the television screens, the iPhones and the tablets, and just take a moment to realise this is not what Christmas is about. The true meaning of Christmas lies in the heart, not in the shopping centres. And in my heart, I believe just as the father gave us his only son, we too should repay him by giving of our time and resources to help others. As Janice Maeditere once said, Christmas is not as much about opening presents as opening our hearts. This is a quote that I think everyone should really think deeply about at this special time of year.

I am a transition year student in Ballyhaunis Community School. We are only a small class of 24 students but we are diverse in our cultures and religions. Although we may not all believe in Christ's birth, we still take part collectively in our community, volunteering our time to help others like Jesus wanted us to. We have Community care for two hours every Wednesday morning where we go to local organisations and help them in their daily tasks. I am currently working with the meals on wheels group in Brickens where I peel potatoes and apples with some of my peers. It is the simple tasks such as these that make a big difference to charities and organisations,

especially at Christmas time. I think that young people today really acknowledge and understand the concept of really giving. We obviously don't have the same finances as our parents do due to our young age, and yet we still find a way to help others not just at Christmas, but all year round. I know that during the summer there was a programme run here called Volunteering at Knock Shrine, VAKS for short. There was huge uptake in this programme by young people all over Tuam Diocese. We were asked to volunteer for one weekend, from a Friday Evening to Sunday Evening, simply offering our services and information to the thousands of pilgrims that came to Knock. I myself took part in this initiative and thoroughly enjoyed the experience as I felt I was truly giving of my time in a productive way. Young people have a lot to offer to our church nowadays. They may not be sitting here physically at mass but that does not mean they aren't willing to help out in their parish. Many of my own friends do not go to mass every Sunday and in some cases, they haven't been to church since their communion but this does not mean they are any lesser in God's eyes than you or I are. They participate in so many other aspects in what it means to be a Christian that we wouldn't even think about at times. They follow the teaching of Christ in their own ways where some of us would forget. I realise that there is a divide between the church and its young people and we need to find a common ground. Young people like to be active and constantly moving and challenged as I saw in the VAKS programme but unfortunately our church has not yet fully found a way to link our vibrancy and energy. The problem is we are living as God wanted us to by helping others but we are not partaking in the sacraments and rituals because many of the youth find it boring and uninteresting. We are not mature enough to fully see the spiritual aspect of its importance and by the time we have reached this maturity, it is much harder to change our ways. Both the youth and the Church need to give each other a type of no man's land where they listen and learn from each other and work to bring us together to solidify our future. This is the challenge we must face as Catholics and indeed Christians. Giving is key to success.

In today's world, the challenge for adults is to give, but the question is what. I see adults donating money to charities and thinking this is their part over. Of course donations to charities are admirable and helpful and many people are extremely generous but in my eyes, as a fifteen year old, I think it is too easy for some people to reach into their pocket and pull out money when they know in their hearts that they could do a lot better. People need to fully realise the poverty that is in the third world compared to the extravagance of the first world. When you really take the time to contemplate this, is that donation you just gave to a charity enough? Is it honestly all you can afford to give or is it just what you are willing to give in order to tick a box and soothe your conscience. This is the moral question the world must ask themselves when they say they are helping the third world. Just as the youth of today do, I would encourage all of us here today to give of themselves in a different way this Christmas. The most important thing for me is how I share my time this Christmas, as it is the only thing I have to offer. Just as Mary gave up her time to go visit Elizabeth as we heard in the gospel today, I would encourage all of us here to take inspiration and do something similar. Think outside the box. Visit that lonely neighbour over the road. Make that phone call to the relative you haven't spoken to in years. Give the clothes shop that bag of clothes you no longer wear or need. It is these simple and little tasks that add up and show that we are living as Jesus wanted us to. He never asked us to donate our life's savings to Concern or Trocaire. He simply asked us to give the coat that we do not need, to someone who honestly does.

I would encourage all of us here to share our time and talents with the people around us who need our help and support. This support will come in many forms whether it's a hot dinner or a shoulder to cry on, we need to honour the Christmas spirit of giving and keep it in our hearts all year round. To conclude, I hope we can all take inspiration from the famous words of Band Aid where a group of musicians came together and shared their time and talents to make the world a better place.

It's Christmas time; there's no need to be afraid

At Christmas time, we let in light and we banish shade

And in our world of plenty we can spread a smile of joy

Throw your arms around the world at Christmas time.

Thank you.