

WHAT CAN I GIVE HIM, POOR AS I AM?

The title of this of this essay is actually a quote from the poem “In the Bleak Mid-Winter,” by Christina Rossetti, famously set to music as a Christmas carol by Gustav Holst. It is a question we might want to consider asking as an alternative, in this frenetic time of more typically asking for what we want to receive.

In his *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, Jesuit Francis X. Weiser writes: “Christmas Eve is the feast day of our first parents, Adam and Eve. They are commemorated as saints in the calendars of the Eastern churches....In Germany the custom began in the sixteenth century of putting up a ‘paradise tree’ in the homes to honor the first parents. This was a fir tree laden with apples, and from it developed the modern Christmas tree.”

If Adam and Eve asked the question, what would they want to bring to the Christ-child? I have an idea, coming from a wonderful religious education film *Epiphania*. This is a highly symbolic movie weaving together in simultaneous fashion a young woman and her lover in New Orleans during Mardi Gras; a group of hippies doing an interpretative dance of the Temptation and Fall in the middle of Jackson Square; and a young bayou fisherman family with a new-born baby boy. In this third storyline of the film, a shadowy figure is being rowed in a pirogue boat toward the family’s house. The figure gets out and begins to enter the house; the mother is afraid (her young husband has just left to go fishing), and she picks up her baby. The figure turns out to be an old woman, walking with great difficulty and with a half-smile of hope on her face. She is holding a “gift” to give to the baby— an “apple.” Then she falls on her knees before the woman and her baby, crying uncontrollably. She is Eve—her gift is a broken heart and a return of the forbidden fruit. The Child takes it, and Eve departs in peace.

Do we have a gift like this that we might like to bring to the manger in Bethlehem? Remember, the gift will never be completely accepted until Good Friday. But it can be offered now. The Rossetti/Holst carol ends:

*What can I give him/Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd/I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man/I would do my part;
Yet what can I give him—/Give my heart.*