



Gifts and strangers

In the week before Christmas I was busy buying presents. I find it a difficult time because I do not have the imagination needed to buy truly personal and endearing presents. Then there is always someone for whom it is difficult to buy anything because they seem to have everything. The experience reminded me of a book I read, *Gifts and Strangers*, by an English missionary anthropologist, *Anthony Gittins*, recently rewritten as *Ministry at the Margins*.

He analyses missionary life from the point of view of “gift giving and receiving.” He sees these as a necessary part of building relationships. Gittins builds on the theories of Marcel Mauss’ seminal book, *The Gift*. Mauss points out that gifts are rarely free, they nearly always indebted us. But that is not so terrible because these debts establish relationships. The alternative is the rich, independent person who needs and owes no one but is ultimately isolated and lonely.

Gittins points out that all of us have the obligation to give, to receive and to repay. I have no problem with giving. As a missionary I am a professional giver although I am not so sure I allow people the freedom to accept or refuse my gifts; now I wonder how that makes them feel?

However, it is the obligation to receive that concerns me most. I went to Korea when it was a much poorer country than it is now. I was young and generous and while I loved being with the people I did not feel that I needed anything from them. However, I slowly learnt that a missionary who needs nothing and lives a life apart, is irrelevant to the real lives of people even if he/she is always giving and never receiving.

‘Not to receive’ is an unwillingness to be in relationship. When we seem not to need others’ gifts and services we can make them feel helpless and insignificant. It is like having rich friends for whom we cannot buy a present - it is an alienating feeling.

Not only can people oppress others with large presents but they can also insult them by the way they receive other’s gifts. ‘To receive graciously’ is to give power to others. It is to hand over the initiative to them, to allow ourselves to be indebted, to empower and liberate ‘the giver’ in others and to open ourselves to mutual relationships.

This is not only important for missionaries but for everyone and it is also critically important in our relationship with God. We can either give and accept gifts graciously or we condemn ourselves to being strangers.

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