

As we move into the Christmas Season, many people will be enclosing a photo in their card, or may be writing a letter to loved ones. But while these are all traditions, rarely in a card or a photo does one look like they need help, or express that in the card. Rather, the photo shows a smiling person or group of people, and the letter may share the high points of the prior year.

The thing of it is though is though in all of our lives, while there are peaks, there are also valleys. And when we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, we are reminded of how Jesus came and how He reigned. He came as an infant born in a manger, and died on a throne of wood laying down His life for us. All of His life shows us the deep love that He has for us, and that He comes to make us whole, and asks us to do the same for one another.

Some years ago, a woman by the name of Alice Hobbs found herself trying to maintain a strong image to those around her. But when she finally acknowledged her need, she not only was filled, but was able to help others.

Alice had lost her husband Ben, and her husband let his insurance policy lapse when the medical bills got expensive. She thought about this one night as she

looked into the kitchen cupboards and was having a peanut butter sandwich and tomato soup for dinner for the third time that week.

As she looked at her situation, she thought of the many “what ifs” that were before her. What if that insurance policy hadn’t lapsed. What if she managed to sell the house before the bank foreclosed. What if it were easier for a 68 year old woman to find a job. What if she wasn’t so stubborn which prevented her from moving in with her daughter in Seattle. Her stomach growled to remind her that the “ifs” don’t buy groceries or provide peace of mind.

She reluctantly signed up for food stamps a few days before but hadn’t gotten her card yet. Until that arrived, she had to save her pennies to pay the utilities. In the meantime she ate in front of the TV and tried to concentrate on the show while not thinking about what she was eating. When she had bought a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter and a few cans of soup for her weekly fare, Alice hadn’t realized how dismal it would be trying to sustain such a meager diet.

She made a cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table to nurse it. She made each action she took last as long as possible, prolonging every moment. It was how she got through the long, lonely days without Ben. She did everything in slow motion.

She sipped her tea and thought about how upset her husband would be if he knew the dismal shape she was in since his death. He always believed he would beat the cancer and find a way for them to be solvent again. He always had more faith than Alice had she thought to herself and what little faith she had seemed to vanish when she lost him.

Mae, the elderly widow who lived a few doors down, told her about the soup kitchen she went to a few times a week. “The food is good, and it sure beats eating alone every night,” she said to her. Alice though dismissed the idea immediately. To her, that was just a step above begging, and she was far too proud to do that. The meals were served in a new, modern facility and the sign over the doorway said “The Shepherd’s Table” in reference to a shepherd feeding his sheep. But nevertheless, it was a soup kitchen and in her day only the homeless, the beggars and the winos went to them. But still, Alice couldn’t bring herself to take the bus downtown and enjoy a good meal at the Shepherd’s Table.

As the evening wore on and her hunger returned, she knew she had two choices. She could stuff another peanut butter sandwich down her throat or swallow her false pride and make her way to the soup kitchen. Alice finally put on her coat and

stuffed a cheap pair of gloves into her pocket in case It got colder and walked to the bus stop.

When Alice got to the Shepherd's Table, a line were already out the door. She shuffled around uneasily and looked around. They couldn't be placed in a neat, predictable category. She saw faces from very pale to very dark and every shade in between; all ages from babes in the arms to the very old and frail came to seek a hot, nourishing meal. The only thing they all had in common that stood out to Alice was the look in their eyes. A touching combination of desperation, fear, embarrassment and pride showed in eyes that dare about but never quite made eye contact except for the regulars who had come to now one another. Alice wondered if her eyes told the same story.

A middle-aged woman in front of Alice pulled her hands out of her coat pockets and began to rub them together. Her fingers were red and swollen and bore the knobby signs of arthritis. Their eyes met, and she gave her an apologetic half-smile saying "I'd trade my dinner for a couple of aspirin right now," looking at Alice hopefully. Alice apologized but said she had none to offer. The woman explained that the soup kitchen wasn't allowed to dispense any medicine. Only food. But for that the woman said, they should be grateful.

The words shocked Alice into reality. Alice knew she was right. Instead of being ashamed and embarrassed to be standing in line for a free meal, Alice thought she should be thankful that it was available for those who needed it. And she thought too that she should be more like her precious Ben and believe things would get better. Ben had faith until the end, and he'd want Alice to have it too.

Alice pulled the pair of gloves out of her pocket and tapped the woman on the shoulder. She spun to face her, the curiosity in her eyes melting into surprise when she saw the gloves that were held out to her and Alice saying “maybe these will help.”

Alice could tell that the woman wanted to take the gloves but hesitated.

“They look new” she protested weakly.

Alice grinned and said they were new, new from the dollar store.

The woman put them on and said “they fit.”

Alice shrugged and said “one size fits all for a buck.”

They both laughed.

Tears welled up in the woman's eyes. "You're very kind" she said. "My hands feel better already."

Suddenly, Alice realized she felt better too. Her spirits were lifted, and she was no longer feeling sorry for herself. She realized there were many people much worse off than she was. She had made someone happy by giving her a one-dollar pair of gloves. She knew what she had to do to take her mind off her own problems. She had to reach out to others and do what she could do for them. It felt good to know that she was needed by other people, as since the loss of her husband she had felt so useless.

After she finished her meal, she timidly approached the woman who appeared to be in charge, and offered to volunteer as the least she could do for her meal. The woman was taken aback, but when she realized that Alice was serious, they went to a back room to work out a schedule. The woman looked at her and said they had never had anyone volunteer from the soul line before, and why she wanted to do so.

The answer spilled from Alice's lips without hesitation. "I just discovered a few minutes ago that you can't feel sorry for yourself while your doing a kind deed for someone else."

Alice left the soup kitchen with a much lighter heart. She knew why Ben held fast to his faith until the end. Faith brings hope, and without hope one lives in misery and despair. Like Ben, from that day forward, Alice was resolved that no matter what life would bring, she would cling to her faith.

All of us are like Alice in that sometimes our cupboards are empty, and sometimes we also forget what a difference we can make in this world whether it's a dollar pair of gloves we donate or our time or talent.

For some, there is the struggle with physical hunger and poverty. But on top of this, I think it can be easy for our spiritual cupboard to be empty. This is due to the decisions we make due to original sin. As we hear in the second reading, "death came through man." And inside all of us is that tendency to forget about God, to push God away. Some people get overtaken by sin. Others just let life happen so stop going to Church. And others like Alice just get run down due to grief, and can

feel hopeless. But that is where Christ enters the picture. Paul says “in Christ shall all be brought to life.” And we have to remember that the same Lord who comes to judge that we hear of in the Gospel is the same Lord who died in the cross. He comes to us as the one who loves us so deeply that he mounted the wood of the cross for you and me. He comes to us as one whose majesty is founded on the total self-giving love of God. True majesty and kingship is founded on the supremacy of love. It took the prodding of her neighbor and an overcoming of her pride for Alice to admit she needed help. And we need to do the same. Maybe we don’t need to go to eat at the soup kitchen, but we do need God. That’s why it’s so important to celebrate Mass, to go to confession, to pray, to let God into your life. As I’ve said many times before, Jesus does not mind a messy house, he just wants us to open the door.

But we also must remember, each of us has a job to do. To wash the feet of one another. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the final judgement, and reminds us that He is in everyone - I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me. Those who do these things to others are welcomed into heaven, but to those who do not, they are in for a surprise: “depart from me you accursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

This means that as the Body of Christ, we are called to bring about the reign of the Good Shepherd. For Alice, that was giving a pair of gloves to a woman in need and then volunteering. When we live out the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, we have the exact opposite of the “me-first” attitude that has gained away for so many. People need to experience Christ through us. And that’s why it’s so important to open up our eyes, and to be a person of charity. Whether it’s volunteering like Alice did, or just recognizing when people in our families need us, or seeing a hurting person at work or school, opportunities for service are all around us. It took a bit of digging and thinking for Alice to see that the woman in line to her just needed a conversation and something simple to lift her spirits, and when we open up our eyes we can make a big difference too.

If you ever saw the musical *Les Miserables*, you may be familiar with the character Jean Valjean. He is a man imprisoned for four years merely for stealing bread; but because of other circumstances he ends up in prison for much longer. Released at last, he cannot get a room because his papers indicate that he has been a prisoner. But the saintly Bishop of Digne gives him food and a bed for the night. Instead of treating him with suspicion, the bishop gets his sister to take out the special silver cutlery because they have a guest. After the evening meal they all go to bed. Jean Valjean gets up early, steals the cutlery, and departs.

The next day Jean Valjean is picked up by the police, who find the silverware in his bag and rightly presume that he has stolen it. So they bring him back to the bishop. Instead of confirming the suspicions of the police, the bishop, to Jean Valjean's great surprise, responds with: "So here you are! I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave the candlesticks as well? They are also silver." And he hands over the candlesticks to Jean Valjean, who is then released.

But before Jean Valjean goes on his way, the bishop manages to say to him: "You no longer belong to what is evil but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from harsh thoughts and the spirit of damnation, and I give it to God." The bishop is no fool. He sees someone who is damaged, hardened, even dangerous. But the bishop does whatever he can to bring this man back to God. A man who was used to being treated with brutality, was now treated with love. And this changed him. Like Alice, like the woman in line, like Jean Valjean, life can beat us and one another up. But deep down inside all of us is the potential for such good. That's what God sees in us, and that's why He became one of us. This is the King we worship. Jean Valjean in the musical went from a disillusioned man to a hero, but it took love for that to happen. As we prepare to welcome our King on the altar,

may that love transform us, and may we daily take what we've been given and realize that inside us all is the power to go out and transform the world.