



Happy Christmas Earth!

How can we be more environmentally conscious in this season of giving? **Ciara Murphy**, environmental justice advocate at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, draws on the message of Pope Francis and offers advice on how to protect the gift of the earth.

The giving of gifts can be fraught with complications. What difficulties must the wise men have faced when choosing gifts for the new-born baby Jesus? Gold, frankincense and myrrh were then a fitting homage for a king. We might wonder what they would have brought to Bethlehem in today's world?

The contentious topic of human over-consumption – plastic pollution, sustainability, climate change – and the unjust working conditions of workers all over the world means that getting a thoughtful gift at Christmas requires time and consideration. In today's world the Magi's gifts would need to be a tribute to a king as well as a tribute to the world we all share.

Pope Francis regularly highlights the importance of protecting our common home, stating that it 'now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her' (*Laudato Si'*, 2). We are causing the sixth mass extinction, with vast amounts of our freshwater, soil and marine environment being polluted. We are generating more waste than

we know what to do with and producing enough carbon dioxide to change the climate. All of this degradation is linked with inequalities in our societies with those doing the least harm suffering the worst consequences.

Pope Francis argues that we need to become 'painfully aware' of the environmental problems in our society to discover that, as with any gift we receive, we need to protect and cherish the gift of nature and everything that it gives us.

How to actually go about protecting and cherishing this gift is trickier. Life has gotten so complicated that simple rules of thumb are not so simple: we know that fundamental changes in what we do will be required instead of simply tweaking what we already do – 'we cannot presume to heal our relationships with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships' (LS, 119). Pope Francis teaches us that 'when human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative'. This has led to a culture of consumerism, this 'use and throw away' generates more waste. If



we learn to look at consumerism and see that 'less is more' then we are on our way to becoming more planet-friendly.

One way to protect the environment is to buy pre-used or unneeded items. Charity and second-hand stores are a treasure trove of clothes, books and toys that are waiting for second homes. Second-hand bicycles not only promote more active travel but help keep bicycles out of the rubbish heap. Antique furniture and pottery are a testament that in the not so distant past items were made to stand the test of time. If old stuff doesn't float your boat there is still plenty of options. Supporting independent, environmentally friendly industries, local food produce, even hosting a dinner are all gifts that are bound to impress.

A planet-friendly gift may involve

not physically buying anything at all, reigniting the joy people can get by being in nature would be a gift worth giving. Membership of the Irish Peatland Conservation Council, annual tickets to parks and gardens or donating a tree in the name of a loved one can all foster relationships with nature through gifts that last long beyond the festive season. Deciding as a family not to exchange gifts at all but instead donate to charities that support people over the festive season could be a wonderful way to give more to the community as a whole.

Laudato Si' has gifted us with our own star to follow like the Magi on their pilgrimage many Christmases ago. Let it guide us to a better tomorrow and, whatever way you decide to celebrate the festive season, spare a thought for our planet. ♡