

I was recycling old Christmas cards the other evening, trimming off the fronts and then remounting them on folded card. By the time I'd done a hundred and managed to get adhesive over most of the table, and certainly all over my fingers, I was quite glad Christmas came only once a year. And I still had to print the insides. Mind you, I'm all for recycling.

One of my Christmas cards came from a friend working in Brazil. She travels a lot among the outlying villages and shanty towns, and her description of the poverty there is as vivid as any visual documentary. Yet the welcome she receives is total and they share with her whatever food they have – even if she has to close her eyes before actually consuming it. She told me that they were invariably happy too, always ready to laugh and finding cause for celebration of some sort at the slightest excuse. A far cry, she added, from those gilded cities along the sun-washed coastal strips nearby.

Re-reading that message from Brazil, I decided against turning that one into a card for next Christmas. I've kept it as a reminder. So often I am disparaging about something, or groan when asked to give time I think I haven't got. Recycling Christmas cards is one thing, but you can't recycle giving or listening or loving or being happy. Those precious life-lines are not transformable, they are the real thing.

Sister Giles