

I have been thinking about Christmas a lot this year. I have tried, like Mary, to keep all these things in my heart and to ponder them. And I've been asking myself this question: How ought we as Christians to celebrate Christmas?

If we attempt to celebrate Christmas in a truly Christian manner, there are, I think, several questions that we need to answer.

### **Is Christmas Biblical?**

First, is it biblical to celebrate Christmas?

The answer, of course, is that it is not. There is no command in the Bible to celebrate Christmas, and the Bible does not tell us that any of the earliest Christians ever celebrated Christ's birth. It is true that Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth, and it's possible that they intended that we should follow the example of, for example, the shepherds or the wise men and celebrate Jesus' birth annually. But if they intended this, we don't have any record in the New Testament of anyone doing it.

For this reason, some conscientious Christians refuse to celebrate Christmas. They follow the principle that we shouldn't engage in any religious activities that the Bible doesn't command. I respect their position.

Still, in the end, the principle is probably more restrictive than necessary. After all, most Christians do many things that are not taught in the Bible. For example, we attend churches that have buildings; the New Testament Christians didn't have church buildings. We read translations of the New Testament. We sing hymns that are not in the Bible. We listen to Christian radio. We attend Christian schools. None of these things was done by the Christians in the earliest church. If it is all right for us to do these, then it's all right for us to celebrate Christmas even though the earliest Christians didn't do so.

Some of the Christmas carols are calls to us to celebrate Christ's birth:

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem.  
Come and behold him, born the King of angels.  
O come, let us adore him, o come, let us adore him,  
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

That's what I hope to do this Christmas—come and adore Christ the Lord.

## How Christmas Is Celebrated

A second question is this: What are we to make of the way in which Christmas is celebrated in America today?

The first thing that occurs to many of us is that Christmas is celebrated very badly.

In some cases, the celebration actually excludes Jesus, as astonishing as that may seem. For some people Jesus is like a ladder that they use to climb to the top of a building where a celebration is going on. Once they have got to the celebration, they kick away the ladder.

Once I saw a cartoon in which two women in New York City were viewing a store window during the Christmas holidays; in the store window there was a manger scene, and one of the ladies said to the other, "Now those Christians are trying to horn in on Christmas, too!"

Naturally, we who are Christians will not exclude Jesus when we celebrate Christmas. We will take steps to keep Christ in our Christmas celebration. We do this by things such as going to church and singing Christmas carols.

The loss of Jesus is not the only thing wrong with the way Christmas is celebrated. The celebration has become very commercial. I expect you've seen reports to the effect that, for many businesses, a very large percentage of annual sales occurs during the Christmas season.

This leads to an important question. What ought we as Christians to think about commerce and wealth, about possessions and property.

I think that our view is twofold. On the one hand, we recognize the need for material things for life. We recognize the value of work and the value of commerce. Christianity is a spiritual religion, but it is not an anti-material religion. Our faith speaks of tabernacles and temples and tithes of the harvest, of holy land and daily bread. It tells us that God sent Jesus to be born in a barn and laid in a feed trough. There is a place for the material in the Christian faith.

On the other hand, we Christians know that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Does evil happen at Christmas? It does. There is a lot of inexcusable waste. People who cannot afford to do so give expensive gifts to other people who, all too often, do not want them or appreciate them.

We sometimes describe this as *materialism*, but I have come to think that this is the wrong word for the problem. The problem is not material things. I remember, for example a young man who lived next door to my family many years ago. Over a couple of years he worked and saved his money to buy his first car. It was an old one that many Americans wouldn't want. He repaired it, tuned it up, cleaned it up, took care of it, and made good use of it. That is a responsible stewardship of a material object, and it's a good thing.

No, the problem isn't exactly materialism. The problem is consumerism. It's buying things compulsively. It's buying things we don't need and won't use. It's making purchases in order to relieve our deep anxieties about whether we are getting the most out of life, whether we are getting our fair share, whether there is enough love to go around. It's failing to care for the things we already have. It's spending because we are not contented, and for not other reason. It's a common human problem.

The word *consumerism* is a new word, but it refers to an old human problem. The old name for the problem was *greed*. Greed is spiritually lethal. We need to beware of it, and we need to have compassion on those who are its victims.

So, let's stipulate that as Christians we must conscientiously guard against greed in the celebration of Christmas.

But, as in so many things in life, there is another side to this issue. There is something else to be said.

Giving gifts is a good thing. There are surely precedents for it in the Christmas story. The inn-keeper gave Mary and Joseph a place to stay—not an ideal place, but a place. The wise men from the East gave extravagant gifts to the Holy Family. Most important of all, Jesus himself was a gift from God to the world. *God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son*. Phillips Brooks was right to speak of Christ's coming as God's gift:

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given;  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

Gifts and Christmas belong together. For more than a century here in America, the great symbol for gift-giving at Christmas has been Santa Claus, and business people have capitalized on that.

Santa Claus, or St. Nicholas, was a Christian leader. He was the bishop of Myra in Lycia; Myra was the seaport town at which Paul and his companions changed ships on the way to Rome (Acts 27:5). According to tradition, which admittedly is sketchy, Nicholas was imprisoned during a persecution under the emperor Diocletian which began in 303 A.D. Bishop Nicholas was released and later attended the first ecumenical council, the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., where the church affirmed the deity of Jesus against the Arians.

The tradition that Bishop Nicholas gave gifts to children is also an old tradition. Nicholas is not a bad choice for a Christmas saint.

If Santa Claus can help people to give to others, I think that's a good thing, and I'll tell you why. One of the greatest problems that human beings have is that we are naturally self-centered. I once knew a man who was so self-absorbed that he did not know the names of his five grandchildren.

Christmas is the only time of the year at which some people ever think about anyone other than themselves. The celebration of Christmas helps them to escape their self-centeredness and to become aware that they are not alone in the universe. They give to special Christmas offerings to support missionaries and to the Salvation Army for the poor. They give toys for the children of prisoners. They give gifts to their family and send cards to their friends. All this is to be welcomed.

So, as Christians we resist the greed but embrace the generosity of Christmas, and we try to cultivate generosity in our lives. Christmas is a wonderful time to learn why Jesus said that *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35). And sometimes some of us will enjoy giving to others so much that we'll ask ourselves, "Why don't we give to others more often?" And that will help us to move toward the agape love that Christ called us all to have.

### **The Wonder of Christmas**

The third question is this: What can we who are so familiar with the Christmas story do to rediscover it afresh? This, I think, is the most serious issue for many adult Christians. Familiarity breeds contempt. We have been through it all so many times. How can we manage to care about it all again, as we did when we were children and as many children still do?

One thing is certain: It is not wise to attempt to do this either by doing more and more sensational things at Christmas or by saying more and more eccentric things about Christmas. These are real temptations. I suppose an occasional spectacle is permissible for Christians, but we want to be careful. Jesus was tempted by Satan to throw himself down from the temple; we should be wary of doing what Jesus refused to do. And we do not need to continue to seek for overlooked things in the Christmas story to emphasize.

What is needed at Christmas isn't a new message; what is needed is a new appreciation of the old message, that God showed his love for us by sending us his Son as a little baby. "This gift of God we'll cherish well, that every joy our hearts shall fill" ("How Great Our Joy").

What we must do, I think, is to re-experience it all ourselves. We must retrieve the sense of wonder that is the only proper response to what God has done.

One of the best ways to do this is to watch the children. Their capacity for wonder, unlike ours, is undiminished by years of experience. That why we arrange for children to sing and perform in the Christmas pageants. It's all so wonderful, so full-of-wonder, to them. And their wonder is contagious; we catch it from them. "A little child shall lead" us.

Another way to retrieve the wonder is to sing the old Christmas carols. I know this doesn't work for everyone, but for me it is the very best way. I love Christmas eve services, especially when I can be with my family afterwards. To tell the truth, I love almost everything about Christmas: Christmas trees, the decorations, the candles, the gifts, the food, the family and friends, and the music, especially the carols.

Here is one of my favorites:

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining;  
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining;  
Then he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.  
The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder beams a bright and glorious morn.  
Fall on your knees; O hear the angel voices;  
O night divine; O night when Christ was born.

The dear Savior . . . the soul felt its worth . . . the weary world rejoices. It is a grand message, a glorious story.

We must all find out how to retrieve the wonder of it all for ourselves. It's a spiritual matter, really, a matter of our souls' welfare. Do we sincerely believe that, for us and for our salvation, the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us? Do we really believe that the one true and living God sent his Son to earth through a line of ancestors that includes Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba? Do we sincerely believe that God put a special star in the heavens in order to alert some astrologers who were priests in a pagan religion about the coming of his Son into the world? Do genuinely believe in a God who became a Jew?

A lot is at stake here. In fact, everything is at stake here. The hopes and fears of all the years are met together here.

I'll tell you what my ultimate hope for myself in this life is. It is that, when I come to the end of my life, I may be able to pray with all of my heart the prayer that Simeon prayed a few days after Jesus was born. With Jesus in his arms the old man said to God,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For my eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel.

If I manage to do that, I know that one of the things that will have helped me will be the same thing that helped Simeon, namely, experiences I've had related to the birth of Jesus Christ.

I remember one in particular. My family and I were living at Oxford in England. I was riding in the upstairs section of one of those red, double-decker buses. We were passing through an area called the Summertown shops. The shop owners had placed loudspeakers outside their stores, and they were playing Christmas carols over the speakers. There was snow on the ground, and it was cold. Suddenly, on the bus, I had an extraordinary experience, entirely unbidden, that I can best describe as a *recognition*. I recognized in a fresh way that the Jesus whose birth was being sung about in all those carols, and for whose birthday all this activity was taking place, was my dear, personal friend.

The desire of all the nations was someone whom I had known intimately for years.

That is what Christmas at its best can do for us. It can be the means that Christ uses to be born in your heart and mine. I hope it happens again to you this year, and to all those whom you love.

As we pray, I will use the words of a prayer written by the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson:

*O God our loving Father, help us rightly to remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, in the gladness of the shepherds, and in the worship of the wise men.*

*Close the door of hate, and open the door of love all over the world. Deliver us from evil by the blessing that Christ brings, and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.*

*May the Christmas morning make us happy to be Thy children and the Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*