

## CHRISTMAS, WITH OR WITHOUT CHRIST?

### INTRODUCTION

This is the time, of course, when people are busy getting ready for Christmas. The stores are crowded. The traffic is unusually heavy. Students and people away from home are busy making their plane and train reservations in order to be at home on Christmas Day. You can feel it in the air; it's a wonderful time of year. Some people, of course, start getting ready for Christmas quite early. I was interested to read somewhere recently that our president's wife, Mrs. Eisenhower, starts the day after Christmas to get ready for the next Christmas. Not too many of us follow her example although I can't help but feel that we'd be a great deal better off if we did. Most of us, including myself, leave it all until the last week or two and then we rush about making all of our Christmas preparations. The Church starts getting ready for Christmas four weeks before Christmas. The Christmas season officially begins in the church with the first Sunday of Advent which as many of you know was last Sunday.

### THE QUESTIONS

On this second Sunday in Advent I would like to consider a question with you that's been on my mind these past few days. It has to do with our celebration of Christmas. It's a question that we shall not be able to answer dogmatically with a simple yes or no. This is the question that I want to put to you today: is the celebration of Christmas in this country gradually being displaced by a somewhat secular American Winter Carnival. Is the Winter Carnival, so to speak, taking the place of our great religious celebration?

Unfortunately there are signs as I observe these things that would indicate that something like this is taking place. For instance, more people send out more Christmas cards with each year that passes, and yet as I look at some of these cards, fewer and fewer of them have anything to do with the deeper meaning of the day. And this too - more people have bigger and better Christmas parties with each year that passes, and yet, as I hear about some of these parties, fewer and fewer of them have anything to do with Jesus' birth. A great deal of our Christmas spirit, I think, has been caught up in these lines:

"Christmas time is here by golly,  
Deck the hall with hunks of holly  
Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens,  
Mix the punch, Bring out the Dickens"

And then too our Christmas decorations and Christmas music have become more lavish with each passing year, more completely devoted to commercial interests. Instead of honoring the baby Jesus, we here in this country seem to honor the manufacturers of the nation. In view of all this, it might be well for us to sit down and rewrite some of the old Christmas carols and make them more suitable to the present day observances. For instance, we might come up with something like this: "Hark the Herald Tribune sings, Advertising wondrous things" or "Angels we have heard on high, Tell us to go out and buy" or even better yet, "God rest ye merry merchants, may ye make the Yuletide pay". To be sure there are too many signs that make you wonder whether the religious festival of Christmas is gradually being displaced by a pagan time of merrymaking.

WHY THIS CONCERNS ME: I feel it's important that I point out to you exactly why this concerns me so very much. It's not because I'm against carnivals or merrymaking. It's not because I feel that merrymaking is out of place in a Christian's celebration of Christmas. Not at all. As a matter of fact if there is any time when a Christian should be full of joy and gladness, it's on Christmas Day when he remembers how God so mysteriously and beautifully broke into our world - to live in it, to die in it, in order to take it back unto himself.

I think the real reason as to why this bothers me is because of what is happening to Christ in all of this. More and more it is becoming a Christmas without Christ. More and more it seems to me we are taking him out of the manger of Bethlehem and putting him safely away into some corner of a museum where we don't have to worry about him. You might say that we've taken him out of the House of Life and installed him in a Hall of Fame. Do you see what I'm getting at. And I can't help but wonder whether all of this is a sign or a symptom of the graduallebbling away of the influence of Christ in our lives. This is why it concerns me.

And, of course, if you know anything at all about the history of religions, you'll know that this is a familiar pattern repeated over and over again. For instance, there was a time when man worshipped the moon and the sun. They were sources of life. Alive and real. But now - they're simply two of the earth's companions..competitors in outer space. No divinity about them at all. And then too there was a time when Juno and Jupiter, Mars and Mercury, Venus and Neptune were alive and real. No leader of his army would start off to battle without first consulting Mars, and no lover would go off to woo his lady without first offering tribute to Venus. But now - they're simply statues in a museum. Men, you see have a way of sending their gods. off to Siberia when they are through with them. Or to put it another way, gods have a way of disappearing when they no longer satisfy the deepest needs of the human heart.

Is this what is happening to the man from Galilee? Is he gradually withdrawing from the center of life to the circumference. Is he being elevated to the rank of God Emeritus because he is no longer relevant to the atomic age? Is he being tactfully retired because he can no longer communicate with people in this scientific age, because he is not at home in outer space? Is it possible that the world has outgrown its need for Christ?

CONCLUSION (Punch it out) Personally I cannot believe it. We have not outgrown our need for him. His ways are still relevant to the complex problems of this scientific age. Our need for him has never been greater. This Christ spirit is still very much alive in the world today. It is still able to satisfy the deep hunger of the souls of men. This man from Galille will continue to conquer because he still makes very clear to us that in spite of all of our scientific explorations, our few years here on this earth are still very much in the hands of God.

But to bring all of this back around to our own observance of Christmas, let me ask you this: what will it be for you? A Christmas - with or without Christ. You can have it either way, but not both ways.

Will you be so taken up with the glitter and tinsel of Christmas that you miss out on the real meaning of the day. Will you be so taken up with office parties and purchasing presents that you fail to see the shepherds and the wisemen kneeling before the manger of the Christ Child? The place where wisemen of all ages have knelt. Will you hear only the raucous sounds of the winter Carnival, or above it all will you hear the song of the angels: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill toward men.

As you come to the altar this morning and share in this meal that we so intimately associate with him, ask yourself what position he holds in your life. Have you taken him from your House of Life and put him into the Hall of Fame where he can't get to you. Have you taken him from the manger and put him safely away into a museum. And finally remember this: those who drift into Christmas never really experience the deep joys of that day. They never really benefit. But those who take time to prepare themselves spiritually in these days leading up to Christmas often experience his coming once again - in strange and unpredictable and mysterious ways with the result that their lives in turn are blessed in strange, unpredictable and mysterious fashion.

"There's a song in the air,  
There's a star in the sky,  
There's a mother's deep prayer  
And a baby low cry."

"There's a tumult of joy  
O'er the wonderful birth,  
For the virgin's sweet boy  
Is the Lord of the earth."

LET US PRAY:

Once again, our Father, Thou hast brought us safely to this glad season when we celebrate the birth of Thy Son. And as we center our thoughts more and more on his coming into our world, may something of his spirit be born anew in our hearts. Lead us to that place where the wisemen of all times have knelt. And help us not to allow our lives from becoming overcrowded so that we have no room left for thee. All this we ask in the name of him who for so many has become "The way, the truth, and the life".

Amen

## FIRST SUNDAY ANNOUNCEMENTS

It is the custom of this church on the first Sunday of the month to observe the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Participation in the Lord's Supper is not limited in any sense of the word. It is our conviction that the table of the Lord is open to all who are sincerely trying to grow in their understanding of the will of God and the ways of the Christian life. We invite all of you to come to His table this morning and trust that the time may be for you an occasion of spiritual dedication and reconsecration. The service on Communion Sunday is a little longer than it is on other Sundays of the month and if for some reason you do not wish to receive the sacrament here this morning and desire to depart before the service has ended, may I suggest to you that your departure be made during the singing of the second hymn.

We are always happy to welcome visitors to our Service of Worship and it's our hope that you find the service helpful and the fellowship warm and friendly. We would encourage you to take a moment following the service to leave your name and your city address in our Guest Book and also if time permits to come to the coffee hour following the service.

We come now to that time in our service when all of us have an opportunity to participate by sharing with God and with the work of his church our own material gifts and blessings. As we do this, let us remember the words of our Lord that it is more blessed to give than it is to receive.

## CHRISTMAS, WITH OR WITHOUT CHRIST

### INTRODUCTION

This is the time, of course, when people are getting ready for Christmas. You can feel it in the air. The stores are crowded. The traffic on the streets is unusually heavy. Students and people away from home are making their reservations with the airlines in order to be at home on Christmas Day. Some people, of course, start getting ready for Christmas quite early. I read somewhere recently that our president's wife starts the day after Christmas getting ready for the next Christmas. Not too many of us follow her example although I can't help but feel that we'd be far better off if we did. Most of us leave things until the last minute and then rush around making all of our Christmas preparations. The Church, as you know, starts getting ready for Christmas four weeks before Christmas. The Christmas Season in the Church officially opened last Sunday - the first Sunday in Advent.

### THE QUESTION

On this Second Sunday in Advent I would like to consider with you a question that has been on my mind these past few days. It has to do with our own observance of Christmas, and it's a question that we shall not be able to answer dogmatically with a simple yes or no. This is the question: is the celebration of Christmas in this country gradually being displaced by a somewhat secular American Winter Carnival. Is the Winter Carnival, so to speak, taking the place of this great religious celebration?

Unfortunately, there are signs, as I observe these things, that would indicate that this may be happening. For instance, more people send more Christmas cards year after year, but as I look at some of these cards, fewer and fewer of them have anything to do with the meaning of Christmas. And this too - more people have more parties and bigger parties year after year, and as I hear about some of these parties, fewer and fewer of them seem to have anything to do with the event of Jesus' birth. I think a great deal of the spirit of the 20th century American Christmas has been caught up in these lines:

Christmas time is here by golly,  
Disapproval would be folly.  
Deck the halls with hunks of holly,  
Fill the cup and don't say when.  
Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens...  
Mix the punch, drag out the dickens.  
Even though the prospect sickens,  
Brother here we go again.

And of course our Christmas decorations and music are becoming more lavish with each year that passes, and more completely devoted to commercial interests. Instead of honoring the baby Jesus, we're honoring the nation's manufacturers. I'm even tempted to change some of our Christmas carols:

"Hark the Herald Tribune sing  
Advertising wondrous things."

or

"Angels we have heard on high  
Tell us to go out and buy"

So without giving any dogmatic answer to the question, we can say that there are signs that make you wonder whether the great religious festival is now being displaced by a pagan time of merrymaking.

WHY THIS CONCERNS ME

I think it's important for me to make it clear to you exactly why this concerns me as it does. It isn't because merrymaking is out of place in a Christian's celebration of Christmas. Not at all. If there is any time when a Christian should be fully of gladness and joy, it is on Christmas Day - the Day on which he remembers how God so beautifully and mysteriously broke into our world - to live in it, and to die in it in order to take it unto Himself.

I suppose the real reason as to why I'm concerned with this is because of what is happening to Christ in all of this. More and more it seems to me that it is becoming a Christmas without Christ. We've taken him from the manger and put him safely away into the museum. We've taken him from the House of Life and put him into the Hall of Fame. Do you see what I mean? I can't help but wonder whether or not this isn't a sign or a symptom of the gradual ebbing away of the influence of Christ in our lives. This is why it concerns me.

And of course if you know anything at all about the history of religions, you'll know that this is a very familiar pattern repeated over and over again. For instance, once man worshipped the sun and the moon as sources of life, but now they are simply two of the earth's companions. There is no divinity about them any more. There was a time too when Juno and Jupiter, Mars and Mercury, Venus and Neptune were alive and real. No leader of his army would start out to battle without first consulting Mars. No lover would go off to woo his lady without first paying tribute to Venus. Now they are statues in the museum gathering dust in the museum. Men, you see, have a strange way of sending their gods off to Siberia when they are through with them. Or, if you want to put it another way, gods have a way of disappearing when they cease to meet the deepest needs of the human heart.

Is this what is now happening to the man from Galilee. Is he gradually withdrawing from the center to the circumference of human life? Is he being elevated to the rank of God Emeritus because he is no longer relevant to the atomic age. Is he being tactfully retired because he no longer communicates to people in this scientific age, because he is not at home in outer space. Is it possible that the world has outgrown its need for Christ.

CONCLUSION

I personally cannot believe it. We have not outgrown our need for him. His ways are still relevant to the complex problems of this atomic age. The Christ Spirit is still very much alive in the world today and is still able to satisfy the deep needs of people. And this too - I think this man from Galilee will continue to conquer because he still makes very clear to us that our few years are still very much in the hands of God.

But to bring all of this back around to our own observance of Christmas, what will it be for you - a Christmas, with or without Christ. That's the question. You can have it either way, but you cannot have it both ways. Will you be so taken up with the glitter and the tinsel of the season that you'll miss out on the real meaning of the

Day? Will you be so taken up with office parties and purchasing presents that you'll fail to see the shepherds and the wisemen kneeling before the manger of the Christ Child. Will you hear only the raucous sounds of the Carnival, or will your heart be tuned to the glorious songs of the Angels: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill to men.

As you come to the altar this morning and share in this meal that we so intimately associate with Him, ask yourself what position he holds in your life. Have you taken him from the manger and put him into the museum. Is he in your House of Life or have you put him into the Hall of Fame. And finally remember this if you will - those who drift into Christmas never really experience the deep joys and blessing that attend that day. They never really benefit from it. But those who do prepare themselves spiritually in these days leading up to Christmas often experience his coming once again in strange, mysterious and unpredictable ways with the result that their lives are blessed in strange and unpredictable ways.

"There's a gong in the air.  
There's a star in the sky.  
There's a mother's deep prayer,  
And a baby's low cry!"

"There's a tumult of joy  
O'er the wonderful birth,  
For the virgin's sweet boy  
Is the Lord of the earth".

LET US PRAY:

Once again, our Father, Thou hast brought us to this glad season when we celebrate the birth of thy Son. And as we center our thoughts upon his coming into our world, we pray that something of his spirit may be born anew in our hearts.

Help us to see that in that little babe of Bethlehem there rests the only real hope for our world. Keep our hearts from becoming too crowded that no room is left to receive the blessings of Thy Son. In his name we pray. Amen