

"PEOPLE WHO DREAD CHRISTMAS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 4, 1994

## "PEOPLE WHO DREAD CHRISTMAS"

### INTRODUCTION

It was about this time a couple of years ago that I picked up an envelope that had been slipped under the front door of our apartment. Opening it, I read, "Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year From the Employees of 1200 Madison Avenue". I thought to myself, "Isn't that nice". 18 names were listed. Christmas greetings from those who work in our building. I put it to one side and went about my work.

About ten days later, I came home to find another envelope under the door. This one said, "Merry Christmas From Your Apartment Employees. Second Notice". We might call this Sunday, "Advent - Second Notice".

### DEVELOPMENT

This morning I turn to the little book of Malachi to hear a "second announcement" of the coming of Christ. In it, the writer confronts us with this haunting question, "Who may abide the day of His coming?" And as you reflect upon that question, you're led along to the thought that not everyone will be pleased at the coming of the Messiah. And strange as that may seem to us, that is exactly what Malachi had in mind. Not everyone will rejoice on the Day of the Lord!

The truth is that there are a lot who do not get excited about Christmas. There are people who dread this time of year. In the "Bah, Humbug" department, no Scrooge could ever beat the outrageous comedian, W. C. Fields. He once was asked by a writer, Will Fowler, who called him, "Uncle Charlie",

"Do you really hate Christmas, or is it just another one of your well-advertised cantankerous poses?"

"All right" said W. C. Fields, "I suppose you'll go blabbing to the whole world about it, but I'm going to tell you why I eschew Christmas and other silly holidays. It's because those days point up to a thing called loneliness".

"An actor on the road...as I was for so long...finds himself all alone on days when everyone else has friends and companionship. It's not so good to be in Australia or in Scotland, or in South Africa, as I was on toure, all alone on Christmas Day and to see and hear a lot of happy strangers welcoming that 'two-faced merriment monger Santa Claus', who passed you by. We're all lonely enough as it is."

W. C. Fields then added with an oath,

"I was born lonely. But Christmas and New Year's and Thanksgiving and all the rest make me even more lonely. So I observe only one day - April 1st. That's my day!"

Now, imagine celebrating April Fool's Day and not Christmas. Even if W. C. Fields was engaging in a little hyperbole, his sentiments come through loud and clear. Christmas can be a very sad season, if you are lonely. And you and I need to be sensitive to the needs of those who have no one with whom to share these special days. Not everyone experiences the deep joy of this Advent Season. Let us be alert to those people in our midst.

THOSE WHO SUBSTITUTE WORK FOR WORSHIP

day of His coming. Let me suggest briefly three groups.

But according to Malachi, there are others who will not abide the

First, there are those who substitute "works" for "worship". The winds of faith blow and sweep around our world at this time of the year and gently caress the hearts of believers and many are renewed. "O Come, Let Us Adore Him". And thank God, many do come and worship and are renewed. But there are some who feel no need for Christmas. Many who feel no need for transcendence in their lives. Good people. They don't need God. They think that if they do enough "good works", life will somehow work out. As long as they are good neighbors, that will be sufficient to earn them points for salvation.

I sometimes find myself wondering how God regards such people. I do know this that if salvation is on the basis of merits, somebody better find out where the line is drawn. How good is good enough? It reminds me of the church member who lived most of his life with this philosophy. Believing that his "good works" would get him into heaven, he one night dreamed of the judgement. And there he stood in line and found himself peeking to see who was ahead of him in line. To his amazement he discovered he was standing right behind Mother Teresa. This saintly nun was called to stand before the Lord just before he was. You can imagine his surprise when he overheard God saying to Mother Teresa,

"Teresa....I was really expecting a lot more out of you!"

A question: does God grade on a curve? Does God forgive little white lies? How much should you give to the "down and out"? Salvation based on good works poses more questions than answers. This is only one group that may not be able to abide Christ's coming, those who substitute "good works" for worship.

David Read who for many years was a colleague over at Madison Avenue Presbyterian church offered a word of warning to churches when he said:

"A church that sets out to do the works of God...spreading into every area of life...yet neglecting the living center of belief, is destined not to renewal, but decay. The passion to do the works of God must be inspired and controlled by a stronger and deeper belief" which, I might add, comes through worship....moments such as this.

THOSE WHO VALUE RELIGION OVER RELATIONSHIPS

on the day of His coming: those who value religion over relationships.

But there is another group that will not fare very well

We have said that those are "at risk" who substitute work for worship. But I would not have you think that religion can ever save you. Christian faith is not a religion. It is a relationship with God and with the world for which Christ died. Salvation is not a matter of signing on the dotted line. It is far more complicated than that. It is saying "yes" to a LOVE that seeks to flood your life and mine.

More evil has been done through the ages in the name of religion than we would care to recount. Religion is not worth your time, nor mine. But a relationship with God - a relationship in which you give love and you receive love - and a relationship with your neighbor in which you share openly and freely that you might build up your neighbor, that is the most valuable single commodity in this world.

Let me tell you about a man who discovered this the hard way. His name was George Mason. He didn't "much care" for people. A bachelor, a man who spent his evenings and most weekends at home in a comfortable manner in a comfortable apartment, a man who didn't have much of a social life, he often turned down invitations to dinners and other occasions...so that no one bothered to invite him anymore. But that didn't bother George. His life was completely absorbed by his business.

Late one Christmas Eve, after all his employees had left, he went into the office vault to get a little extra cash. Soundlessly, on newly oiled hinges, the great vault door swung shut behind him. Sudden darkness and the final click of the automatic lock startled him. He began to panic and pounded desperately on the door, but then he realized no one would hear him. Everyone had gone home, even the cleaning women. He consoled himself with the thought that surely he would last it out until morning, but then...he remembered that the next day was Christmas and no one would be in.

His heart was pounding and he became frightened. He wondered, first, if he would have enough air. And trying to calm himself, he remembered that when the new vault was installed, they had told him something about a "safety hole". Feeling around in the darkness, he found it at the top of the back wall....too small for burglars, but large enough so that he could breathe.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day passed. He was alone as he usually was, but there was a difference. He was uncomfortable, hungry and thirsty in the deepest darkness he had ever experienced.

Well, the morning after Christmas the chief cashier arrived and unlocked the vault, but didn't open the door. Without anyone seeing him, George Mason slowly walked out of his prison and tottered over to the water cooler. And after a long drink of cold water, he took a taxi to his apartment and freshened up.

In a little while he was back at the office. Nobody asked him how he had spent Christmas. Nobody had even missed him! Nobody seemed to care. And it was after that experience, George Mason put a sign on the back wall of the vault. He put it there as a reminder of those dark and desperate hours. It read:

"To be indispensable somewhere is the secret of happiness.  
To love people is the purpose of life...."

I don't know if George Mason discovered his dependence on God, but he certainly discovered his dependence on other people. It can't be said often enough that the two most important possessions we have is (1) our relationship with God, and (2) our relationship with other people. Who shall abide the day of His coming? Shall those who substitute works for worship. Shall those who value "religion" over relationships. Let's move on...

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS WITHOUT CHRIST

I sense that group is getting larger and larger. More and more folks are falling into this category. The Christmas season overwhelms our entire culture. But not everyone who places a star atop their tree, places Christ at the top of their lives. A lot of those people were brought up in and around the church, but have slipped away...secular Christians is what we might call them.

Herman Wouk is an outstanding Jewish writer. I've read most of his books and am struggling to get through his latest book, Hope. I remember in one of his books he tells how persons with a Jewish background deal with this "all-pervasive" holiday. He tells of Jewish families who celebrate Christmas in their homes with a tree and holly, "Born is the King of Israel"...and all. He tells about a gifted and quite liberal-minded Reformed Rabbi in the suburbs who once preached against Christmas trees in Jewish homes. Would you believe that the Rabbi was called on the carpet by his Board of Trustees and sternly warned to confine his remarks to "religion" and to leave the private lives of his people alone!

That would be funny if it were not so sad. Christmas simply overwhelms our culture. Christmas is everywhere. But many, if not most of the people who put up lights and decorate trees and exchange gifts have little or no idea who Christ is and what He means to the world.

A striking Christmas card was once published with the title, "If Christ Had Not Come". As I recall the card and its message, it told of a certain pastor who fell into a short sleep in his study on Christmas Eve and dreamed of a world into which Jesus had never come. In his dream, he found himself looking through his home, but there were no little stockings hung with care by the fireplace, no Christmas bells or wreaths of holly and no Christ to come, to serve, to lift, to gladden. He walked out to the street, but there was no church with its spire pointing to heaven. He came back, sat down in his library and found there were no books or poems or songs about Christ, the Savior. They had all disappeared.

In his dream, the doorbell rang and a young man asked the pastor to come over and visit his dying mother. The pastor hastened to the bedside of the dying woman and as he sat down there, he said, "I have something here that will comfort you". But opening his Bible to look for that comforting Word from the Gospel, he found nothing. His Bible ended with the Book of Malachi. He could only bow his head and weep with her in bitter despair. A few days later he stood by her coffin and conducted the funeral service. There was no message of consolation, no mention or hope of a life beyond.

CLOSING

Christmas really is a sad joke without Christ. A Jewish friend by the name of David who is a weekly racquet ball opponent up at the 92nd Street "Y" (the Jewish Y), sent me a Christmas card about this time last year. His card has been on my study wall all year. It shows not the infant Jesus, but the grown man, Jesus...and he's holding his hand "up"...like this... with the thumbs "UP" sign...and that's what he means to so many of us. We can put lights up and sing carols and attend services, but if Christ and his "thumbs up" message of life had not come to us and been born in our hearts, it is all in vain.

Who shall abide the day of His coming? Yes, some will have difficulty...

You see the deep joy of Christmas is found both in good works and in good worship. It is found in good religion and in good relationships with others. But most of all, it is found in bowing before a manger and acknowledging that the Savior has come into the world. Who shall abide the day of His coming? I don't know about you, but I know this...and I hope it's the same for you... I'm looking forward to it with glad anticipation and with a song in my heart!

PRAYER

O God, You have put a restlessness in our hearts and a thirst for Yourself in our very nature, turn us now in the right direction. Help us to simplify our lives that we may not be so concerned with unimportant things that we miss the real things.

Open our eyes to Him who is already among us and who will come again into our midst on Christmas, that we may see His brightness even in dim surroundings, and recognize His greatness even in His weakness. Give us this second sight, O God, that our lives may be saved from sin and emptiness and without meaning. As we move toward Christmas, help us to search our own hearts and prepare room in our lives for His coming.

In His spirit, we pray.

"PEOPLE WHO DREAD CHRISTMAS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 4, 1994

## "PEOPLE WHO DREAD CHRISTMAS"

### INTRODUCTION

It was about this time a couple of years ago that I picked up an envelope that had been slipped under the front door of our apartment. Opening it, I read, "Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year From the Employees of 1200 Madison Avenue". I thought to myself, "Isn't that nice". 18 names were listed...Christmas greetings from those who work in our building! I put it to one side and went about my work. But then...

About ten days later, I came home to find another envelope under the door. This one said, "Merry Christmas From Your Apartment Employees. Second Notice". We might call this Sunday, "Advent - Second Notice".

### DEVELOPMENT

This morning I turn to the little book of Malachi to hear a "second announcement" of the coming of Christ. In it, the writer confronts us with this haunting question, "Who may abide the day of His coming?" And as you reflect upon that question, you're led along to the thought that not everyone will be pleased at the coming of the Messiah. And strange as that may seem to us, that is exactly what Malachi had in mind. Not everyone will rejoice on the Day of the Lord!

The truth is that there are a lot who do not get excited about Christmas. There are people who dread this time of year. In the "Bah, Humbug" department, no Scrooge could ever beat the outrageous comedian, W. C. Fields. He once was asked by a writer, Will Fowler, who called him, "Uncle Charlie",

"Do you really hate Christmas, or is it just another one of your well-advertised cantankerous poses?"

"All right" said W. C. Fields, "I suppose you'll go blabbing to the whole world about it, but I'm going to tell you why I eschew Christmas and other silly holidays. It's because those days point up to a thing called loneliness".

"An actor on the road...as I was for so long...finds himself all alone on days when everyone else has friends and companionship. It's not so good to be in Australia or in Scotland, or in South Africa, as I was on tour...all alone on Christmas Day and to see and hear a lot of happy strangers welcoming that 'two-faced merriment monger Santa Claus', who passed you by. We're all lonely enough as it is."

W. C. Fields then added with an oath,

"I was born lonely. But Christmas and New Year's and Thanksgiving and all the rest make me even more lonely. So I observe only one day - April 1st. That's my day!"

Now, imagine celebrating April Fool's Day and not Christmas. Even if W. C. Fields was engaging in a little hyperbole, his sentiments come through loud and clear. Christmas can be a very sad season, if you are lonely. And you and I need to be sensitive to the needs of those who have no one with whom to share these special days. Not everyone experiences the deep joy of this Advent Season. Let us be alert to those people in our midst....

THOSE WHO SUBSTITUTE WORK FOR WORSHIP

day of His coming. Let me suggest briefly three groups.

But according to Malachi, there are others who will not abide the

First, there are those who substitute "works" for "worship". The winds of faith blow and sweep around our world at this time of the year and gently caress the hearts of believers and many are renewed. "O Come, Let Us Adore Him". And thank God, many do come and worship and are renewed. But there are some who feel no need for Christmas. Many who feel no need for transcendence in their lives. Good people. They don't need God. They think that if they do enough "good works", life will somehow work out. As long as they are good neighbors, that will be sufficient to earn them points for salvation.

I sometimes find myself wondering how God regards such people. I do know this that if salvation is on the basis of merits, somebody better find out where the line is drawn. How good is good enough? It reminds me of the church member who lived most of his life with this philosophy. Believing that his "good works" would get him into heaven, he one night dreamed of the judgement. And there he stood in line and found himself peeking to see who was ahead of him in line. To his amazement he discovered he was standing right behind Mother Teresa. This saintly nun was called to stand before the Lord just before he was. You can imagine his surprise when he overheard God saying to Mother Teresa,

"Teresa....I was really expecting a lot more out of you!"

A question: does God grade on a curve? Does God forgive little white lies? How much should you give to the "down and out"? Salvation based on good works poses more questions than answers. This is only one group that may not be able to abide Christ's coming, those who substitute "good works" for worship.

David Read who for many years was a colleague over at Madison Avenue Presbyterian church offered a word of warning to churches when he said:

"A church that sets out to do the works of God...spreading into every area of life...yet neglecting the living center of belief, is doomed not to renewal, but decay. The passion to do the works of God must be inspired and controlled by a stronger and deeper belief" which, I might add, comes through worship....moments such as this.

THOSE WHO VALUE RELIGION OVER RELATIONSHIPS

on the day of His coming: those who value religion over relationships.

But there is another group that will not fare very well

We have said that those are "at risk" who substitute work for worship. But I would not have you think that religion can ever save you. Christian faith is not a religion. It is a relationship with God and with the world for which Christ died. Salvation is not a matter of signing on the dotted line. It is far more complicated than that. It is saying "yes" to a LOVE that seeks to flood your life and mine.

More evil has been done through the ages in the name of religion than we would care to recount. Religion is not worth your time, nor mine. But a relationship with God - a relationship in which you give love and you receive love - and a relationship with your neighbor in which you share openly and freely that you might build up your neighbor, that is the most valuable single commodity in this world.

Let me tell you about a man who discovered this the hard way. His name was George Mason. He didn't "much care" for people. A bachelor, a man who spent his evenings and most weekends at home in a comfortable manner in a comfortable apartment, a man who didn't have much of a social life, he often turned down invitations to dinners and other occasions...so that no one bothered to invite him anymore. But that didn't bother George. His life was completely absorbed by his business.

Late one Christmas Eve, after all his employees had left, he went into the office vault to get a little extra cash. Soundlessly, on newly oiled hinges, the great vault door swung shut behind him. Sudden darkness and the final click of the automatic lock startled him. He began to panic and pounded desperately on the door, but then he realized no one would hear him. Everyone had gone home, even the cleaning women. He consoled himself with the thought that surely he would last it out until morning, but then...he remembered that the next day was Christmas and no one would be in.

His heart was pounding and he became frightened. He wondered, first, if he would have enough air. And trying to calm himself, he remembered that when the new vault was installed, they had told him something about a "safety hole". Feeling around in the darkness, he found it at the top of the back wall....too small for burglars, but large enough so that he could breathe.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day passed. He was alone as he usually was, but there was a difference. He was uncomfortable, hungry and thirsty in the deepest darkness he had ever experienced.

Well, the morning after Christmas the chief cashier arrived and unlocked the vault, but didn't open the door. Without anyone seeing him, George Mason slowly walked out of his prison and tottered over to the water cooler. And after a long drink of cold water, he took a taxi to his apartment and freshened up.

In a little while he was back at the office. Nobody asked him how he had spent Christmas. Nobody had even missed him! Nobody seemed to care. And it was after that experience, George Mason put a sign on the back wall of the vault. He put it there as a reminder of those dark and desperate hours. It read:

"To be indispensable somewhere is the secret of happiness.  
To love people is the purpose of life...."

I don't know if George Mason discovered his dependence on God, but he certainly discovered his dependence on other people. It can't be said often enough that the two most important possessions we have is (1) our relationship with God, and (2) our relationship with other people. Who shall abide the day of His coming? Shall those who substitute works for worship. Shall those who value "religion" over relationships. Let's move on...

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS WITHOUT CHRIST

What about those who celebrate Christmas without Christ? Now-a-days I sense that group is getting larger and larger. More and more folks are falling into this category. The Christmas season overwhelms our entire culture. But not everyone who places a star atop their tree, places Christ at the top of their lives. A lot of those people were brought up in and around the church, but have slipped away...secular Christians is what we might call them.

Herman Wouk is an outstanding Jewish writer. I've read most of his books and am struggling to get through his latest book, Hope. I remember in one of his books he tells how persons with a Jewish background deal with this "all-pervasive" holiday. He tells of Jewish families who celebrate Christmas in their homes with a tree and holly, "Born is the King of Israel"...and all. He tells about a gifted and quite liberal-minded Reformed Rabbi in the suburbs who once preached against Christmas trees in Jewish homes. Would you believe that the Rabbi was called on the carpet by his Board of Trustees and sternly warned to confine his remarks to "religion" and to leave the private lives of his people alone!

That would be funny if it were not so sad. Christmas simply overwhelms our culture. Christmass is everywhere. But many, if not most of the people who put up lights and decorate trees and exchange gifts have little or no idea who Christ is and what He means to our world.

A striking Christmas card was once published with the title, "If Christ Had Not Come". As I recall the card and its message, it told of a certain pastor who fell into a short sleep in his study on Christmas Eve and dreamed of a world into which Jesus had never come. In his dream, he found himself looking through his home, but there were no little stockings hung with care by the fireplace, no Christmas bells or wreaths of holly and no Christ to come, to serve, to lift, to gladden. He walked out to the street, but there was no church with its spire pointing to heaven. He came back, sat down in his library and found there were no books or poems or songs about Christ, the Savior. They had all disappeared.

In his dream, the doorbell rang and a young man asked the pastor to come over and visit his dying mother. The pastor hastened to the bedside of the dying woman and as he sat down there, he said, "I have something here that will comfort you". But opening his Bible to look for that comforting Word from the Gospel, he found nothing. His Bible ended with the Book of Malachi. He could only bow his head and weep with her in bitter despair. A few days later he stood by her coffin and conducted the funeral service. There was no message of consolation, no mention or hope of a life beyond.

CLOSING

Christmas really is a sad joke without Christ. A Jewish friend by the name of David who is a weekly racquet ball opponent up at the 92nd Street "Y" (the Jewish Y), sent me a Christmas card about this time last year. His card has been on my study wall all year. It shows not the infant Jesus, but the grown man, Jesus...and he's holding his hand "up"...like this... with the thumbs "UP" sign...and that's what he means to so many of us. We can put lights up and sing carols and attend services, but if Christ and his "thumbs up" message of life had not come to us and been born in our hearts, it is all in vain.

Who shall abide the day of His coming? Yes, some will have difficulty...

You see the deep joy of Christmas is found both in good works and in good worship. It is found in good religion and in good relationships with others. But most of all, it is found in bowing before a manger and acknowledging that the Savior has come into the world. Who shall abide the day of His coming? I don't know about you, but I know this...and I hope it's the same for you... I'm looking forward to it with glad anticipation and with a song in my heart!

PRAYER      O God, You have put a restlessness in our hearts and a thirst for Yourself in our very nature, turn us now in the right direction. Help us to simplify our lives that we may not be so concerned with unimportant things that we miss the real things.

Open our eyes to Him who is already among us and who will come again into our midst on Christmas, that we may see His brightness even in dim surroundings, and recognize His greatness even in His weakness. Give us this second sight, O God, that our lives may be saved from sin and emptiness and without meaning. As we move toward Christmas, help us to search our own hearts and prepare room in our lives for His coming.

In His spirit, we pray.