

## TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY!

By David Morsey

"Joy to the world, the Lord has come!" The wellsprings of joy ought to be bubbling up in Christian circles at this season of the year. The message of joy ought to be on every sanctified lip. Our King has come, and conquered. Our souls are safely sheltered in the bastions of His mercy. Life is rich and full. Even its sorrows bear a certain indefinable sweetness when seen in the light that by them we are in some way serving our great King, and following in His footsteps. The greatest concentration of joy and rejoicing in all the Scripture occurs at the birth of Christ. The angels rejoiced; the shepherds rejoiced; the wise men rejoiced; Mary rejoiced; even the babe in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. Let the Christian rejoice and be exceeding glad. Let him lift his voice in song. Let him radiate the abounding joy that is his rightful portion.

It is sad that many Christians in their sincere effort to be proper have let the world rob them of their joy at, this season. Thousands of words have been written on the subject of what the Christian should not do at Christmas, because "the world does this." Well meaning individuals have ridden roughshod over many harmless and meaningful symbols and traditions of Christmas with the contention that they are foolish baubles of the world and not proper for mature Christians. This attitude has often clouded the joy of the occasion and many have made of this day a solemn mockery. Gladly would the Pharisees have picked up such a chant. It provides a legal sanctuary for uncertain thinking. The question is why should we relinquish symbols of joy just because the world has made commerce of them? As well should we quit eating because the world sells the food. It is shallow thinking that sees only the symbol and not its meaning. David danced before the Lord, and Michel with clouded vision saw only the folly of the dance. What lover does not delight in the foolish but meaningful symbols of the beloved's love? It is truly a heartless individual who sees only the folly of the act and not the expression of the symbol.

The symbols which have been employed by the Christian community for centuries as expressions of joyfulness have frequently been the objects of criticism. There are many symbols which are employed by the world and the Church alike. The world rejoices with singing. Should the church refuse to sing because it is a symbol used by the world? The world of David's day danced as a symbol of joy. Was it wrong for David to dance because the world used that symbol? (We are saying nothing here about modern dancing). Rather God punished Michel for rebuking David. The very elements which we use in the celebration of our most cherished sacrament—the Communion—are used by the world in pagan festivals. A material substance has of itself no intrinsic significance. Its meaning must ever lie in the realm of attached values. It will be our lot as long as we are creatures of the earth to express ourselves in earthly symbols. The significance of that symbol must of necessity depend not upon any intrinsic worth of its own, but upon the inner motives of its user.

This may be illustrated by the contention surrounding the traditional Christmas tree. Jeremiah 10:3, 4 has been used as evidence against the use of it. *"For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not."* Now what is the prophet condemning? Is it the use of a tree as a symbol? One of the most significant symbols of all ages was a tree in the garden of Eden. Is he condemning the use of silver and gold ornamentation? Consider the Tabernacle and

the Temple. Obviously he is condemning the use made of the tree—an object of worship. If one sets up a Christmas tree and worships it, then this verse can be appropriately applied.

And what about the legend of Santa Claus? This has long been used as a simple device to bring delight to the hearts of the children. As long as the children understand that it is only a fairy tale, is there any more reason for withholding this from the children than for withholding any of the classic fairy tales or bedtime stories? At least the issue centers not around the use of this legend at Christmas but the use of fairy tales at any time.

Perhaps the most pressing problem in the use of the traditions and symbols of Christmas celebration is the question of preeminence. Do these things take the place of Christ? The answer is simple and pointed. If the presence of material things can succeed in dethroning Christ in the heart, then the absence of them will not enthrone Him.

The guiding star of appropriate Christmas celebration is the setting of an atmosphere of abounding joy. There are as many ways of expressing joy as there are personalities to express it. Some families, especially where there are children, find expression in the traditional Christmas tree and gift-giving. Some rejoice in quiet fellowship with friends or loved ones. Whatever means one chooses to express that joy, let it be genuine. Let us not deceive the Lord by saying that we find our joy in abstract thinking all day long, and then sit at home on Christmas day with an acid heart, condemning the folly of those who celebrate by material symbols.

In this whole issue, the children are a primary consideration. What is the message we are trying to convey to them? Are we trying to teach the child to find his source in and expression of joy on this occasion only in abstract ideas? If we are, we have a hopeless task. Can a child know the meaning of happiness just by meditating on principles of truth? It would be hard to find many adults that could do that. Are we trying to teach the child that material things have no place in Christian thinking? If we are, I hope we never succeed. What then are we trying to teach them? In the first place, we are trying to teach them that Christmas is the birthday of Christ. There is no problem here. An examination of overwhelming evidence will demonstrate that any child properly trained will embrace easily and gladly this truth. Even amid the joyous distractions on Christmas day, the child will not forget the beautiful nativity narrative. Secondly, we are trying to teach them that this is an occasion of great joy. Will the child find the facts of the incarnation a sufficient source of joy? He would be a remarkable child indeed who did. We must demonstrate joyfulness to him in symbols he will understand. Certainly lessons of joy cannot be taught by denying him the material symbols enjoyed by those around him. A child cannot make the same associations an adult can make. If he is happy on Christmas day, he associates the birth of Christ with joyfulness. If he is unhappy, he associates it with unhappiness. If the children do not make all the associations which we as adults think we do, then let us be content to encourage them in the associations which they can and will make—the birth of Christ with abounding joy.

Let us make this a truly merry Christmas. Let us use whatever material symbols are appropriate to achieve a setting of joyfulness. If in the legend which Christ told, the father could be merry at the return of the prodigal son, then surely we can be merry at the coming of the Son of God. If Christ will welcome His bride with a great feast, then let us welcome His coming to us with similar symbols of rejoicing. The heart of Christmas is joy. Make it a joyful Christmas for His sake. To one and all

### **A MERRY CHRISTMAS!**