

Mirth and Madness

Prof. D. Engelsma

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At no other time of the year does the behavior of the American people as closely approach insanity as at Christmas. One glance at a red-colored date, five sixths of the way through the December calendar, and an entire nation lurches into incredible activity. Like the fabled hordes of the Ghengis Khan, its people descend upon welcoming stores. Every available mail pouch bulges with every kind of greeting card. Forests of evergreens disappear overnight. There is a spontaneous generation of several million red-coated, white-bearded imbeciles who roam street and store for weeks, with no other function than a periodic bellow of inane and un-nerving laughter. The people eat and people drink – furiously. They laugh and they talk – with a vengeance. They are incomparably, indescribably, unimaginably and absolutely violently happy.

When the child of God disentangles himself from this rampaging madness, he ponders a sober “Why?” Who or what can be responsible for this universal fervor? Approaching a typical specimen on the Eve of Christmas, he may ask, “Sir, what does all this hubbub mean?” To which question comes quick and hearty reply, “Why man, it’s Christmas. You know, Dicken’s A Christmas Carol and that sort of thing. ‘Tis the season to be jolly.” And just before the festive soul goes fah-la-lahing unsteadily down the boulevard, comes the consummation, “Jesus was born.” Ah yes, Jesus was born. But it’s hardly the answer one expected. Is that the foundation upon which this monstrous tower of December-babble is built? Upon the birth of Jesus?

The child of God needs no special brilliance to realize what the ungodly merry-makers understand by the “birth of Jesus.” A little baby lies in a manger. Several well rubbed, golden Guernseys moo contently over him. A beaming mother nestles “non-travailingly” in a shiny-yellow, non-prickly straw stack. At the door of this rustic “stable” stand three rich uncles about to deliver the child from any inconvenience he might have. Throw in a halo to indicate something about “divine” approval and that is the birth of Jesus. Everybody likes babies and cows and rich uncles and happy endings, “Why man, tis the season to be jolly.”

Out of every pore of the American celebration of Christmas seeps irony, deep, rich, and horrible. The rioting unbelievers have the right answer, “Jesus was born.” But He is not the creature of their stable scenes and His birth is not an isolated event. He “came down from heaven” and He went to the cross and He accomplished His purpose, “For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind” (John 9:39). And the blind ones frolic at the occasion of their condemnation. They are jolly in the season of their woe. But not completely. Through the raucous din of revelry is heard the thin, penetrating wail of despair and fear. At times very loud, at times scarcely audible, the cry of a horrified world acknowledges that death reigns and all is vanity. The world despairs and the world fears

because the Babe was born and they believe not, for “he that believeth not is condemned already . . . The wrath of God abideth on him.”

Because the Babe was God in human flesh, became the man of sorrows, and is the Lord of Glory, Christmas is the season of merriment for the elect of God. Their joy is rooted infinitely deeper than in presents and trees. God gave His Son into the dirty poverty of Bethlehem for the salvation of His people. And that is the reason why the Christmas mirth of believers not only exists, but exists powerfully as a joy which cannot be swallowed up in sorrow. To their wretched cry, “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner,” comes the reply, “Your sins are forgiven you.” As they, too, peer fearfully into a war-threatening future, they hear the reassuring words. “All things work together for good to them that love God.” And some may mourn at Christmas with real tears but the mirth is not drowned. For death itself stood doomed when the Babe was born.

Merry Christmas, indeed. Not the Christmas of hollow customs and empty actions. Not the anxious merriment that frantically intensifies itself as the drumbeat of judgment rolls even louder. But a Christmas “good tidings of great joy . . . A Savior which is Christ the Lord” and the merriment of “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.”