

Midnight

I want to wish you a happy Christmas, and to assure you that everything you need to make you happy is according to the will of God. As St Paul says, *Rejoice, rejoice in the Lord, and again I say Rejoice!*

People often talk about the splendour of a Victorian Christmas, by which they mean something grand, warm, highly-coloured, slightly exotic, and very merry. I'm afraid that realistically that was rather rare, because the vast majority of Victorian people lived lives of a hardness we wouldn't be able to bear today. What made Christmas wonderful for people in ages past might simply have been that most of them had a holiday - freedom from heart-breaking toil and paid service to others. This has left us with the feeling that to celebrate, all we need is the freedom to do what we like. I would say that leaves something vital out of the recipe.

I believe that in order to celebrate we must have *something real to rejoice about*. If you've got that, naturally you also want to open a bottle, cook the best meal you can, decorate the house and act like a child for a while. But suppose you *haven't* got anything to make you deliriously happy? Suppose your life is habitually shut off from joy, and never finds the urge to leap like a deer? Well, then, for Christmas you have to spend lots of money faking a feast, in the hope that if we decorate the place till it looks like Blackpool, and pour out alcohol in massive streams, and have too much on the table for anyone to finish, we shall somehow catch sight of the reason to be glad. No wonder some people find Christmas a time to dread, and no wonder they feel cheated and disappointed with it. This goes very deep in us, because it seems to whisper to us that if even at Christmas we can't find our way to joy, then there is something fatally wrong with us.

You'd expect me to say that without a religion you can't find joy. All that means is, that if you want to rejoice, you have to *believe in what you're celebrating* with every fibre of your being. If all you're celebrating is your own comfort and happiness, you still have to believe in it with all your heart. Maybe it works for some of us. For me, I need something bigger than that if I'm going to have joy; and oddly enough I think that's what I have.

The birth of a baby is always an experience which transcends all grief and pain. A baby has no biography to spoil him. He has no disappointment and no sorrow; we will make sure of that. For a little precious time we have a human being to cherish who has nothing to offer but his own humanity, and who asks nothing of us but our wholehearted welcome. Is anything so bewitching as the joy of a baby, who asks so little of us before he is twinkling and chuckling with delight? You can pick up a little child, and throw him at the ceiling, and he will shout for joy that is free and simple. Playing peep-bo with a baby brings forth gusts of thrilling laughter that is pure transport of happiness. If anyone exists who is not renewed in all departments by this experience, I should be pained and surprised. Jesus once said that unless we change and become like that little child we shan't get into the Kingdom. But he goes further than that.

Throughout the story of our faith we have imagined what it would be to meet God. We have conjectured a thunderous advent on the clouds of heaven, bringing judgment and disaster to a world sunk in evil. Practically every prophet has been at some point a prophet of doom. Tonight we celebrate the fact that when God comes to us, he comes as a baby. No huge and threatening finger, decimating us from a line of prisoners: but the tiny fingers of a new-born child reaching out for our communion, our welcome. No-one who has been at the mercy of a baby can refuse him what he wordlessly needs. That is how the coming of God is into our life. We think that God is hiding, that he has put on a mask, that he is pretending. It isn't so. When we say of the new-born Jesus that he is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God we say no more than the whole truth. The virgin Mary welcomes him and holds him close, and in that she is saved by him, because she has already taken him to herself with total love.

Let this coming of God steal into our hearts too, and take us for life. We already know what lies in wait for him, and we can imagine what lies ahead for us. But this Christmas encounter, like every new birth, transcends all of that, and outbids it all in depth of meaning. Let the vulnerable, dependent, totally poor and naked child enter our hearts, and we shall have a lifetime of celebration to draw from him, in whatever way his life and ours may unfold.

Then I shall be able to wish you a happy Christmas, whose joy will survive all that you may suffer.

All the footgear of battle, every cloak rolled in blood
is burnt and consumed by fire;
For there is a child born for us,
a son given to us; and dominion is laid upon his shoulder
and this is the name they give him: wonderful counsellor,
mighty God, eternal Father, prince of peace;

(remember that I am still talking about the baby)

his dominion is in peace that is endless
for the throne of David and for his royal power.
From this time onwards, and forever,
the insatiable love of the Lord of Hosts will do this.