

THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

BY N. BRUCE ROGERS

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:13, 14)

A few days ago, in the United States, we celebrated Thanksgiving Day, and we now embark on the Christmas season. Some might say we have already embarked on the Christmas season. Commercial establishments are already using Christmas to advertise and sell their wares, in stores and on the internet. Christmas decorations are already appearing. More than a few people have already begun their Christmas shopping. And all of this, even though Christmas Day is still a month away. Is it too soon to begin a celebration of Christmas?

The easy answer is to say yes, it is too soon. And indeed it is too soon if the spirit of Christmas cannot be sustained. Experience suggests, however, that the spirit of Christmas can be sustained, and is sustained, in the hearts of most Christians, if not universally. The crisp, cold nights. The sound of Christmas carols and Christmas hymns in the air. The colored lights and sparkling lights. The aromas of hot cider and hot chocolate. Warm coats and scarves; people bundled up against the cold. Fire in the fireplace, and the smell of chimney smoke. Who has not felt a kind of electricity generated by these sights and sounds and aromas, a sense of anticipation that something great and good is coming?

But some may object that the focus of the Christmas season is not on the Lord's advent, but on buying and selling. What does all of this commercial activity have to do with a celebration of the Advent?

The question, however, may bear further examination. Who has not heard that many commercial establishments depend on

Christmas shopping to make their annual profit? If that is the case, is there not a value in that commercial activity? Certainly there is a value in it to the owners, managers and clerks, and to all those other people dependent on those commercial establishments for their living.

We cannot condemn commercial enterprise. If it were not for commerce, we would all want for much, if not all, of the necessities of life. We would also go without almost everything else that we use and enjoy in our lives in this world. Commerce is the means by which some people serve other people, and if the service is a useful service, it is not only consonant with charity, but it is a primary exercise of charity.

The book *True Christian Religion* declares that doing the work of one's function honestly, justly and faithfully is charity itself (*True Christian Religion* 422–424). For people engaged in useful commercial enterprises, their commercial activity is their practice of charity. In *The Doctrine of Charity*, a posthumously published work, we read that if a businessman looks to the Lord, refrains from evils as sins, and conducts his business honestly, justly and faithfully, he becomes an embodiment of charity (*Charity* 167).

The Doctrines do not condemn commerce. Rather they speak of the necessity of commerce in this world (*Heaven and Hell* 528, *Heavenly Doctrine* 126). Even if the people engaged in it are without charity in their hearts, still the work they do is termed a work of charity (*True Christian Religion* 424). Can we not view the commercial activity preceding our celebration of Christmas as comprising works of charity in preparation for it?

But still, even so, a further objection may be made that the celebration of Christmas has been tarnished and degraded by fictions that have nothing to do with the Lord's advent: Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus, Santa's elves, the reindeer that draw his sleigh, Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, and songs and cartoons

that can hardly be considered in any sense religious.

Yet do not all of these in their own way contribute to the spirit of Christmas? Do they stand in opposition to the Christian miracle? At worst they seem to be simply neutral; at best they seem to help the human heart open itself to miracles, and at the center of these, to what we have called the Christmas miracle, the virgin birth of the Christ, by which the Lord made His advent into the world.

Consider some of the Christmas movies made: *It's a Wonderful Life* with James Stewart and Donna Reed; *The Miracle on 34th Street*, with Edmund Gwenn; the many makes and remakes of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*; *White Christmas* with Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye, and more. Do some of them not accept the possibility of miracles? Do they not all contribute to the Christmas spirit of a love of the neighbor? For love of the neighbor is the Christmas spirit. That is why we exchange presents. It is why Santa Claus is depicted as distributing presents. The spirit of willing giving and a love of others is at the heart of the Christmas season and our celebration of Christmas. Again some may object that, uplifting as many of these ancillary things may be, still they lead to something else other than the Lord's advent and away from the true reason for celebrating Christmas.

In many cases, that is true, though not in all cases. However, it is also true that in many cases a love for the neighbor is at the center and constitutes the focus of the story or song.

Toward the end of the Lord's life in this world, a lawyer posed to Him the question, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

And the Lord answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

This He said, quoting Deuteronomy (6:5). But then He added, "This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like

it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew. 22:36-39).

This He said, quoting Leviticus (19:18). And in so saying, He elevated the commandment to love the neighbor to a status on par with the commandment to love the Lord. Indeed, this second commandment is the Christian commandment, directed to all who would be the Lord’s disciples. For toward the end of His life in this world, the Lord also said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34,35).

Does love for the neighbor lead away from loving the Lord? In *True Christian Religion*, we are told, regarding the conjunction of God and man:

Conjunction is effected by charity, because God loves all people, and as He cannot do good to people directly, but only indirectly through other people, He inspires people with His love, as He inspires parents with a love for their children; and the people who receive that love have conjunction with God, and from God’s love love their neighbor; and in them God’s love is within people’s love for the neighbor, and produces in them the will and the ability. (*True Christian Religion* 457:3)

Love for the neighbor is God’s love, and when it finds expression in people, it brings about a conjunction with Him. What other season is more marked by a love for the neighbor, than Christmas? Whether one says God’s love or the Lord’s love, it is the same Divine love; and in people it is the love we call charity. If the Christmas season inspires people with a love for the neighbor, may we not believe that the Lord inspires it?

But are not all the cartoons, the lights, the trees, the secular carols, superficial?

In *The Apocalypse Revealed* we are told that in the New Church there will be no external form or expression without a corresponding internal one (*Apocalypse Revealed* 876,918). And we can view this statement in two ways: we can see it either as

telling us to reject external forms and expressions in which we find no corresponding thought or affection, or we can see it as inviting us to invest them with a proper internal thought and affection. In relation to the forms and expressions attached to the Christmas season, we can either disdain them as empty forms and expressions, or we can personally invest them with thoughts and affections of love for the neighbor and goodwill toward our fellow man—thus filling them with what is justly the Lord’s love in us.

It is all right for people to be happy. It is an essential component of the Lord’s Divine love to endeavor to make us happy (*True Christian Religion* 43, 46). And we are the agents through whom He acts (*True Christian Religion* 457:3).

Admittedly, however, the Christmas season is not a happy one for all people. In fact, the Christmas season can be a difficult one, and even a depressing one, for the lonely—for widows and widowers, for the older person never married, for the divorced, for servicemen and women far from home, for all without families to cluster around them. For them the forms and expressions attached to the Christmas season serve more to remind them of their loneliness and, perhaps, isolation.

But even here, we can find an opportunity to give expression to our love and goodwill toward the neighbor. We can find ways to minister to the lonely. We can offer them our companionship and assistance, in person or through letters and cards and gifts. In His advent, the Lord once said to His disciples:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you

visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” (Matthew 25:31-40)

Service to the neighbor is service to the Lord, for the Lord’s love is a love for all mankind. Therefore, to love the neighbor and to seek to make him or her happy, or at least to alleviate his or her unhappiness, is to love those whom the Lord loves, and whom He seeks to make happy. And again, we are the agents through whom He acts. The Christmas season, therefore, provides us a special opportunity to provide that service, by remembering those in distress and doing what we can to include them in the sphere of our love.

At the time of the Lord’s birth, the angel who appeared to shepherds living out in the fields said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be for all people” (Luke 2:10).

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:13,14).

That is the reading of one set of Greek New Testament texts. Another set reads, “to men of goodwill.” The actual reading, however, is either “peace, goodwill among men,” or “peace among men of goodwill.” But does it make a difference whether the heavenly host promised goodwill among men or peace among men of goodwill? In either case, goodwill is at the heart of the promise, and that is the spirit of Christmas. Goodwill makes the festivity a fitting celebration of the Lord’s birth. We share in the hope of fulfilling that promise to the extent of our own goodwill and love of the neighbor and charity during the

Christmas season—to the extent that we have goodwill among us and are people of goodwill.

May the blessing of the Lord be upon you. *Amen.*

Lessons: Psalm 133:1 3, Luke 2:1 14, *True Christian Religion* 46.



Rev. N. Bruce Rogers is well known for his long time career as General Church translator, having published many modern translations, among them both *Marriage Love* and *Conjugal Love* (according to preference, 1995), *Divine Providence* (2003) and the latest, Volume 1 of the *Apocalypse Revealed* (2007). He has been a General Church translator from 1986 to the present. Bruce as a theolog taught a college course in Hebrew in 1963. He was inaugurated and ordained as a minister in 1969, and immediately became an Instructor at the Academy of the New

Church, adding also head of the Translation Committee from 1976 to 1987. He taught college Hebrew from 1963 to 1987. In 1986 his title changed to Associate Professor of Religion and Latin at Bryn Athyn College, up to 2005—a career of 36 years at our Academy Schools! His many students count themselves fortunate. Rev. Rogers and his wife Kirsten (Rydstrom) live in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania.

