



O, Come All Ye Faithful!

The great theme of Christmas is an ancient one; it lies, indeed, at the root of our years, for it brought a *before* and *after* to the centuries.

Some may ask if we can write anything new about so old a theme. But let us remember the sunrise. It is the oldest of all things in history, for with it came the dawn of creation; and it is also the newest thing we shall ever know, for with it dawns every tomorrow. What, moreover, can inspire us to new words as can the timeless and new-born light? To ponder the dawn is forever an inspiration to the poet, or to any truly living man — the orange blossom of the sun opening in splendor upon the ever-amazed horizon of the world! Compare it with “novel” things of yesterday; with the neon light, with the Mazda bulb. They are new, they even contain poetry, they are worthy of appreciative words; but how soon they grow old and dated, how soon we have said what should be said — at least as compared with the perennial sunrise.



To choose a theme that is ever new, we must choose the first fire that warmed the ancient days, and not the atoms seething today in the reactor. So it is with Christmas, an ancient theme also ... but ever new because it is more central than time.

As I consider Christmas, I forever find in it some new revelation of truth. For here, in that ancient story, are the timeless needs and the eternal truths of man’s life. Here lay the primal need — four walls and a roof to shelter the Mother and the Child. How fundamental! And how right that for the Creator of the world there should be no place in His world amid the “beautiful people” or the “jet set.” Only a stable, where there was no central heating, nor even a fireplace, but the steamy warmth of animal bodies, warming not only themselves but their habitation.

I am fortunate enough to have lived, as a boy, in the country; and therefore I know that in a tight barn or stable the steaming cows give forth their own animal heat and keep their shelter as warm as a house. So it was here. God, born by miracle of a Virgin human Mother, was kept warm in His swaddling clothes and His cradle of straw by the good warmth of those humble creatures He had made — the ox, the cow, the sheep, the little donkey. How simple. How fitting! How right! In visiting His world the living God, become the living human Child, descended not into the purple of palaces, but into that “deprivation” that was His riches and His right; into the stable, into the straw of the manger, into the companionship of the animals whose simple lives lie trustingly in His hands and who partake of His beneficence with



obedience and love. On this great night — the second birthday of the world — they embraced their Creator by warming Him.

It was as it should have been. I know because I still live very close to the good animals; I love them and find in them a companionship and a friendship that is very dear. If I know anything, I know that they love God, and that God loves them, and I think that the infant Christ, born among them, was nobly at home.

And in all the factual imagery of that great night, we find *reality* — in the true sense of the Latin from which our word comes. Here were foursquare and solid things, not the thinspun “intellectuality” of the cerebral mind. Birth, as it always is, was hard; death, as it always is, was near. Close were the ultimate and elemental realities, the beginning and the end of our earthly pilgrimage. Close, very close, closer than ever before, were the Syrian stars, the stars of the universe, that naturally partook of this epic of the cosmos.

And the actors who shared the scene were real and elemental. In Rome, and in Greece, and in India, there were “intellectuals” — but not here. Here the simple shepherds came, men close to need and hunger and danger and discomfort, bringing their shepherd’s crooks to be blessed by the great Shepherd of the world. And when the Wise Men came, they were indeed wise men and not wise guys, who had not theorized their way into the birth of God, but who had a mystical insight, a vision, a dream of the soul. And the Angels who sang of blessing and beatitude were not brain-spun figures, but the abiding servants of God — only a little higher than man, and yet gifted with an obedience and a power that man does not know — the shining figures that had sung together with the morning stars at the creation of the world. Nor should we forget the tax-mongers of Caesar who occasioned the trip, nor the soldiers of Herod. We know them well. All this, from the beatitude of God to the brutality of man, was *real*.

To be real means to be not merely theoretic, intellectual, brain-spun, but to come from experience, from living, from the spirit and the soul, from the objective world of shape and form, and the subjective world of reason and passion and imagination. What comes from such sources is forever true. It is not like “scientific” discoveries that soon are superseded by some other new interpretation of the reality that never changes, but the truth that in any age, and in all ages, and forever, remains and abides. World without end, until we enter Heaven, genius and revelation will find no room in the world’s inns, and the highest will be relegated to the lowest; the stars and the shepherds and the Wise Men and the animals and the tax-gatherers and the mercenaries will belong to the reality of life; birth and death, need and love and shelter will be true.

Yet the mood of Christmas is that mystical mood of *joy* — “Come all ye faithful, *joyful* and triumphant!” — which transcends the world because it comes from beyond the world. Even today, in the day of the *unfaithful*, the timeless and deathless descends at Christmas for an hour, for a day, to bless us. The true children of Christmas — Charles Dickens, G.K. Chesterton — fully knew that joy. And hundreds of simple, true, real men and women, who cannot express it in words, experience it in their lives. Beyond all gestures of gifts, all the commercialism and vulgarity which disfigure our world, abides the pure and magical joy that the carols and the candles and the holly symbolize. Something great, potent, *real* abides and touches earth and man with the joy and wonder of Christmas.

And, as I have said, it is the joy of a *birthday*. The world’s first birthday was the dawn of creation — the outward birthday of the world. But Christmas is the inward birthday, the birthday of the triumphant reunion of creation and Creator. Here a new dimension is opened, a new experience and a new mood



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are made real. Here life is re-established in its *origin*. Here life becomes, in the one true sense, original again. For to be original, always, is not to invent the novel, but to return to the eternally *primal*. The brook or stream or river may become broad (and coarse) and massive; but its life is always one with the strong unfailing springs that rise from the heart of the deep earth to be its water of life. In Christmas, man who had strayed far from God, from inspiration, from the Holy Spirit, is restored to the source and the origin. *That* is the basis of the joy of Christmas; and while we feel that, and share that sense of reunion with our origin, we shall know that joy and be reborn into that experience.

Only a few men, here and there, can hold that joy and preserve it. Man is not pure enough, not brave enough, not steadfast enough — genius is a great and a terrible, and a too beautiful, thing. But the flying Light of joy and genius *visits* us at Christmas, and touches our lives, and makes us wistful with a joyous nostalgia for Heaven. It is at least a transient salvation. Christmas wakens a mood that should be, and might be, a steadfast climate of the soul.

Yet this joy is nothing sentimental or thin or false. It is a part of a Divine Tragedy, of a tragic sense of life and yet also, in Dante's great sense, of a *Divine Comedy*. God knew the terrible climax even in the joyous beginning; in His beginning lay His ending ... that was never an end but forever a beginning: "Before Abraham was, I am." The shadow of the Cross fell already over Bethlehem; the great words "It is Finished!" were implicit in the songs of the Angels; but the joy is all the greater because the climax, which is tragedy (accepted), is so implicitly real. If men shut Him out of the Inn, will they not eventually shut Him out of their lives, out of His world? Even in the baby hands, like rose-petals, lay implicit the nail-prints; even in the newborn's side lay implicit the touch of the Roman spear. And in the great vision of Christianity, this does not destroy the joy, it makes it all the greater. Here God was born that He might share with us the woe of the world and find within it, for us, the joy that transcends the world. The brightest halo was to be the shadow of the Cross; the road to the highest joy was to be the *via dolorosa* that led to Golgotha. Christmas faces the worst that it may bring us the best.

Too seldom do we realize the paradox and the marvel of very God become very man. God took upon Himself the limitations of time and space, of the flesh, of the mortal life shut between the covers of a birth and a death. Here — O marvelous, O tragic and yet most comforting, God, like all of us, knew the pain of the first breath, the fright of the alien world. Let us, when we suffer and when we fear, remember this: He too, even God, even the Creator, took upon Himself what He asks us, His creatures, to bear. He who alone is consciousness forever and fully awake, came into the world of the animals where the mind is half mixed with sleep, and into the world of men where sleep is half mixed with the mind. He shared with us all the strange and tragic and joyous circumstances of our lives, yet (being very God) He preserved, ever more purely and absolutely than we ever can, the intromission of the essential being of Life.

Those who suffer from the somnolence called sophistication cannot understand this. But the poor and simple of the earth, the Shepherds too near to hunger and need and work to be conned by the world's illusions and lendings, and the rich yet sanely simple of the earth, the Wise Men, too awake with genius to be blinded by cleverness; these equally felt the wonder of that hour. Here, they knew, was the Creator entering His creation, to renew from within the world that He had made from without. O marvel, O miracle! O greatest event in history since the primal creation of the world!

And too seldom do we realize what this miracle means. We speak of the "teachings" of Christ; we concentrate on His "ideas." That is to misread entirely what lies here. Christ was a poet and a poem, the essential poem of being; He was true because He was beauty incarnate, great as music and imagery. He



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was the Savior of the world not because He brought a theory and a plan, a philosophical theorem or a mathematical equation or a scientific formula; He is the Savior because of what He is, because of the sheer being of His life, because He is a *poem*.

That men should love each other, that an integrity of conduct should pervade their lives, is not an aim but an effect — an effect that comes when time is seen in terms of Eternity. The *tone* of our lives in Christ is the great truth of right and good, of character and conduct. We experience the cosmos as a mystery and a miracle, a symphony where (in Beethoven's words) we find "through sorrow, joy." We see life as life ever more abundant because it is Life Everlasting, because around and underneath us are the Everlasting Arms. We live and grow as the lilies of the field do, their roots, through earth, touching what is beyond earth.

Many good yet stern and grave men see (and even follow) ethical patterns — the Pharisee, the Stoic, the Puritan — and yet they do not dwell in the Kingdom, they do not experience or express the sounding joy. Francis in his "Canticle Of The Sun," Roland at Roncesvalles, Joan dying into Life within the white flame, the modern Christian witnessing the faith in the brutality of the Communist prison — these are those who have found the Kingdom; they are and they know.

If we would know Christ, let us know that men will most surely give the cup of cold water when they forget all rigid schemes and let their eyes embrace the beauty of the roadside flower. Does the sun "teach"? — the sun gives *light*! Does Spring follow a code? — the Spring is the beatitude of beauty.

The world has grown old and gray with the Pharisees of the hour who pass laws and formulate codes hideous with initials. Their "facts" stamp on the face of truth; their rationalistic scalpels let the blood out of the arteries of love; they "adjust" immortal longings to social temporalities. They have lost all sense of the many mansions, and so they constrict genius and true simple men into the many concentration camps or the many insane wards for the sane. They deny the Living Vine, because they grind out rigidities from the Code-Factory, and so the branches die, and we bear no fruit. They think they know all things, and so they are ignorant of everything; they think they can win the Pearl of Great Price by a "War on Poverty," and so they become the paupers of the soul; they think that they have won the moon, and so they ignore the moonlight over the tossing tides. They never learn what Christ has to do with the sea-lifting moon and the day-giving sun of the inexorable aeons. They never learn that the center of the Gospel is wonder, mystery, romance, *Eternity*. We are saved not by the "words" of Jesus, great and eternal though they are, but by the *being* of Christ.

The modern "church leader," the contemporary "theologian," is a wordmonger, a purveyor of "ideology" and "platforms" and "programs" — all a brain-stirred smog between us and reality. The "mind" of Marx, the "mind" of Sartre, do not know that ginger in the mouth is hot, or a knife in the heart is a thorn of pain; do not know that the golden daffodil or the good wheat grow from the will and the gift of God. They are artificial, theoretic, like the usual mine-run sociologist; not primal and real, like the poet and the saint. Reality comes from *res*, the *thing* — a substance; the new born child, yonder ox with the brown eyes, the straw that pricks the hands and gleams to the eye, the star that dances nearer earth tonight in a robe of flame. Here is — tangible, real — the birth of God as man that came to bring the birthday of man nearer to God.

Christ came to save the world not by changing the fiats of Caesar, but by His own life and death, by a miracle of sheer being, by the truth that is beauty and the beauty that is truth. He did not bring any "revolution," but rather a *return* to primal and first things that had been, and will be, because they *are*. His birth was not an overthrowing, but a fulfillment of Eden. He was the heart of creation, and He



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reawakened the heart of man to beat once more with that primal rhythm. He reaffirmed all changeless things that forever are — the tonal scale, the seven-hued spectrum, the beauty of all holy and noble creation — the Parthenon, the Taj Mahal, the cathedrals of Chartres and Rouen that (in Him) were born this night, the stars and the seas, the forests of redwood and the splendid dandelion proclaiming that the heart of earth is gold, the Dante who was being born in Him, the Bach whose music came into being with His birth.

And this Christ, born in the stable, proclaimed that the heart of things lies *there* — and not in the Cadillac or the private yacht or plane. The sons of Lucifer are endowed by all the great Foundations, but the Son of God does not dwell in the Manhattan Penthouse, nor is His picture on the cover of *Time*. For He dwells in the Inner Kingdom whose heart is Eternity — where a Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it not....

Christ, He said, came not to destroy the law — but to fulfill it. He Himself fulfilled all that truly is in the will of God: the granite that is sturdy and strong; the rainbow that shimmers in the equally strong areas of the air; the snowflake and the rose and the butterfly at the pinnacle of the breeze; the eternal Mother; the wholesome clichés that grass is green and that two plus two are four.

Our Lord would not seize this noble scheme of things entire, and shatter it to bits, and remould it nearer to the idiot's whim. He does not revolutionize the colors into new fantastic vibrations — lest He prevent a Turner from painting His gorgeous chaos of sunset . . . or a humble Merrill Root from driving safely through the Boston traffic. He did not come as the politician, that dealer in lies; He saw the Hell toward where even whited sepulchres of the world journey, and the Heaven where even the *repentant* thief may come this night; He knew that in no world of essential reality is the crooked straight, or the rattlesnake a rose, or green a casual relativity of red.

Surely at Christmas, if at any time, we should see all this. The great daylight of death will reveal it to us; but in the grace and revelation of Christmas, we may see it even while we live. Let us then, at Christmas, repeat the great lines of Francis Thompson:

The angels keep their ancient places;—
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendored thing.

Miracle? Christ came not to perform miracles, save incidentally, *but to show that the world and earth and life are one eternal miracle*. Men had forgotten the miracle of creation; Christ came to reaffirm and to restore it.

The character, the being, the great *I am* of Christ, born here at Christmas, was *in itself* the message and the meaning of God's birth into the world. I once tried to express this in a poem, "Thief Upon The Right." I quote it here, hoping that it may express what I believe is the secret and the essence:

Lord of Love, and Heart of Light,
With two thieves to left and right!
What desert had either thief
Thus to share God's mortal grief?
On the left the one thief said:
"Thorns are crown upon thine head! —
"If thou art a God indeed,



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Why dost hang on wood and bleed?
"If thou art a God, command
The nails to loose from out thine hand!"
On the right, the other cried:
"Justly we are crucified —
"We for hate, but He for love!
Master in Thy realm above,
"Stoop in mercy, and recall, —
'Tis Thy word! — the sparrow's fall."
Christ from off the sanguine wood
Where upon the nails He stood:
"Thou past this brief agony
Shalt sup in Paradise with me."
(In His eyes the thrust of pain
Was red lightning through grey rain.)
Then the neighbor of His death,
Mid the torture that was breath,
"By what mercy, grave and broad,
Do we share the life of God?"

That was the Gospel. That was the work and the wonder of Christ. Let us never forget that, in the innocence and the joy of Christmas, it was the Lord of Love who had come into the world to touch and change the souls of men, to forgive and to welcome them into Eternal Life. The Child of Bethlehem was the Lord of the Cross, and all the mystery and the greatness that were to come were implicit here.

That is why Christmas turns all wise souls from the surface which is time to the center which is Eternity. Does Christmas mean all that it should to you? Then you see in it, you find through it, the living seed; and it will affect the very bread you eat and the very stars you follow. In Christmas you touch the first act of the greatest drama in all history. The great fruitful creative eras of earth are those that have loved Christmas as the seed of Christendom. Dante and Bach, Michelangelo (*not* the women who in the London salon go to and fro talking of him!), Francis and Bernard and Joan, Rembrandt and G.K. Chesterton, Dickens and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, these are multi-flowers and multi-grain from that living seed.

And where Christmas is scorned and denied, we find the dry eras, the withered flowers and the sterile grain, Ionesco, Sartre, Genet, Mailer, and all their ilk, and the gentler yet very bitter fruit of Camus. As the late [American author] Joseph Wood Krutch said of these: "Hence the truest picture of life [that they give] consists almost exclusively of unhappy, but usually cruel and debauched people, behaving irrationally in an irrational universe."

It is not that these Dead Sea Apes have suffered more than the Child of Bethlehem. So far as I know they have never hung upon the Roman cross; most of them have done very well at the hands of men and even of Caesar. The reason that, to them, "The universe is meaningless, without rhyme or reason; or as their endlessly repeated shibboleth has it, is *absurd*," is that they have never found the center of life, the root of Eternity. And that center and that root lie in the Christmas that they know not of.

Krutch goes on to say: "All this, so they tell me, is inevitable. Nihilism is the only possible modern philosophy. For the first time in history we know the facts and we have the courage to face them. The



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literature of the absurd is the only literature the future will tolerate and despair the only mood intelligent men can ever know.”

Such ignorance!

The world of antiquity knew as much of sorrow, and evil, and despair, and sophistication, as any world has ever known. And the “facts” are no different now than they ever were, and the anguish of the crown of thorns and the nails was as terrible then as it can be now in any Communist prison, and yet here God came to bear all of this with us — and to find it not “absurd,” but full of meaning. Unlike these sick whiners of a modern dry-as-dust sophistication, the Child born in Bethlehem bid men to be of good cheer, “For I have overcome the world.”

So, rest ye merry. And let nothing you dismay! The Child for whom the world found no room has indeed overcome the world. The Good Tidings had come to a world grown old, and cold, and dreary (even as ours), and recreated that world. It may do so to our world, if we will listen and heed. The Child in the Manger was to say: “Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” He was to say: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one of my words shall pass away.” He was to say: “Father, into Thy hands!”

In 1957 I wrote an article on Christmas for *Human Events*. I venture to quote from it the conclusion that I reached then, which in these last days of 1973 is the conclusion that I reach now. It is this:

“As long as Christmas renews the world — as long as we ask and receive, and knock and it is opened — as long as we see the Many Mansions and the Living Vine of which we are the branches — the positivists rage in vain. Let nothing you dismay! ‘Christ’s own renaissance’ shall come, the candles and the holly shall glow, the carols shall ring. There is no room in the academic inn, and the children of this world, like Herod, hold the sword. But the children of men can never prevail against the Child who is God.”

And therefore, my friends, today as always — *Merry Christmas*

... and good night!

E. Merrill Root (1895-1973) was once referred to by Robert Frost as “the second best poet in America.” After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Amherst College, he went on to a distinguished 40-year career as a professor of English literature at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana . He authored 11 volumes of poetry and numerous other works, including America’s Steadfast Dream, a compilation of his essays that appeared in American Opinion magazine (a forerunner of The New American). The present article originally appeared in the December 1973 issue of American Opinion.



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