

Eric Butterworth Speaks

Essay #21
A CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION

Christmas is magic...pure magic! But like all magic there is illusion involved. For the mistletoe may be plastic, and the Santa Claus beard is false, symbolizing the great facade of Christmas that is put up like a Hollywood set.

The song sings, "Put on a Happy Face..." The suggestion is that if you go through the motions, you will tend to experience the corresponding emotion. So we put on the face of Christmas and enter into the annual charade. It is a symbol with a beautiful inner meaning; but putting up a Christmas tree does not fulfill the meaning. It is like uncovering a road marker. It is not the end of the journey, but a pointer suggesting the road ahead.

Some feel that keeping Christmas is being loyal to a time-honored tradition, almost as if it were a "great historic creed" of religion. Actually, the Christmas holiday was not established in America until the last half of the 19th Century. In Pilgrim America "making merry" was not only frowned upon, it was against the law. For many years people who refused to work on Christmas either went to jail or paid fines.

What does Christmas mean? The average person, if he can get out of the Santa Claus syndrome, might say, "Christmas is the birthday of Jesus." But one thing December 25th probably is not is the day Jesus was born. There is no history of the early life of Jesus...only a variety of conflicting legends. The December 25th date was arbitrarily set by an obscure church historian in the 6th century A.D., undoubtedly influenced by the Roman feast of Saturnalia which occurred at this time.

It is said that Christmas is too commercial. But it is still commerce whether it is the manufacture and sale of Bibles or baubles. The problem is not materialism, but a false spiritual involvement. The three wise men, the star of Bethlehem, the Babe in the manger, all make it tempting and easy for us to forget what the whole thing is about. They deal with something of another day and another world that is totally irrelevant to ours, so we can engage in it, sing the carols, dramatize the stories, and paste it as a facade over our everyday lives, and not really get involved.

We don't know when Jesus was born, but when we understand his mission, it is not really that important. For Jesus did not come to proclaim himself but man...not to tell us of his divinity, making him the great exception, but to tell us of our divinity, and to in his overcoming show the example of the I AM reaching its full potential expression in man. So the great event in the life of Jesus was not his birth, but the awakening that took place within him during the years of his growth, his discovery of the divine dimension of man. Christmas, then, should celebrate the awakening in each of us to that divine dimension. As the poet sings, "Though Christ be born a thousand times in Bethlehem, If he's not born in thee, thy soul is all forlorn."

Christmas then is a celebration of the Christ self, the expression of the very highest consciousness that man is capable of realizing. This celebration must entail the emulation of Jesus and the application of his message which in essence says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar." Christmas is not putting on for a while a "happy face" of "peace on earth" and "joy to the world." It is, rather, removing the mask of the "Scrooge" of human consciousness, and spending a few hours or days just being our unconformed and non-pressured selves, letting love that is the reality of our inner self freely express.

So it is not the merchants who are to blame for any supposed loss of the Spirit of Christmas. It is the "believers," who mistake form for substance, prayers for performance, worship for practice, sentimentality for the commitment of consciousness. It is not our false commercialism that prevents it, but the jingle of bells, calling us to sentimentality, and seducing us from the year-round task of brotherhood and love.

Walt Whitman was accused of egotism when he sang, "I celebrate myself." But it may be that he was closer to the meaning of Christmas than most perfunctory celebrations. So much of the time we are "conformed to this world," that we put on the face and the manners and the reserve and even the coldness that the mores of our world seem to call for. Thus, we need the challenge of Christmas to let go of this human facade and let the reality of ourselves express.

This is a good time to probe deeply into ourselves against the backdrop of Christmas. We might use Dicken's Christmas Carol as an outline--Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. In Christmas Past reflect on the Christmas experiences of other years, the joys and sadness, the fulfillments and disappointments. These tell you much about where you are today.

In Christmas Present be willing to admit that the face of Christmas is a facade behind which there is a potential for a happening, but which does not happen just by engaging in the charade. It is interesting that the word "present" has a connotation both of "now" and also of a "gift." The challenge is to engage in the giving process completely in the "now," giving without strings, implying no future demand for reciprocation or appreciation, and carrying over no obligation from the past.

In Christmas Future remember that the Nativity is an unfinished story that must be resolved into completion by a birth experience within you. In a kind of "Christmas dream" reflect on the Christmas you would like to experience, the gifts you would like to receive, the inner potentialities you would like to unfold. Project yourself in imagination to Christmas night of 1976 and write a diary account of the year as if it had happened...and as you would like it to happen. Deal with all the facets of your life, your finances, your relationships, your health, your work-life, and your spiritual awareness. This will be a kind of "master plan" for your life in the coming year. Put it in a gay colored envelope marked, "Do Not Open Until Christmas, 1976." Then, after keeping it somewhere secure, put it on next year's tree. It will be your gift to yourself.

Christmas 1975 is now past. Soon you will dissemble the facade and pack away the colorful paraphernalia. But the "celebration" that Christmas is all about has just begun. If the happening has, even for one moment, happened then you have realized that you can remove the mask and be your true self. You will find it progressively easier to be loving, forgiving, patient, and peaceful. May your every day be a Christmas as you commit yourself to the celebration of your true self.