

CHRISTMAS-TREES AND CHRISTMAS GIFTS

“And Simeon blessed them.”—Luke 2: 34

We see today in the temple at Jerusalem two aged persons, Simeon and Anna, who had waited long and patiently for the expected Messiah: and when Mary and Joseph presented the divine Child to the Lord according to the law of Moses, they beheld for the first time him whom they had so ardently longed to see. What joy, what comfort for those holy souls to be permitted to see the Saviour with their own eyes, to take him into their arms and to press him to their heart! Oh, now their eighty years' sighing and longing is ended, they have no longer any wish here below, they are ready and willing to die, for they know him to be upon earth who after a few years will redeem the human race and reconcile it with God.

A heavenly joy is that also which fills every faithful heart during the holy season of Christmas. And this joy is manifested not only at the divine service in our churches, but also in Christian families, by erecting cribs, putting up Christmas-trees, and bestowing Christmas presents. Having already spoken of cribs in the foregoing discourse, I choose for the subject of our meditation today,

I. Christmas-trees, and

II. Christmas presents.

Christmas-trees.

On Christmas Eve many families put up a Christmas-tree in a spacious room, trim its branches with apples, pears, gilded nuts, tempting candies, a number of lighted wax tapers, and various other things. This is all done secretly. As soon as everything is in order, the door is opened, and lo! What a surprise for the little ones! Before them stands the beautiful green Christmas-tree with its shining lights and laden with lovely fruits, inviting them, as it were, to pluck to their heart's content.

1. What does the Christmas-tree symbolize?

(a) *The tree of knowledge of good and evil.* This tree bore the most delicious fruit, and was very inviting to Adam and Eve, who were still in the state of innocence. Unfortunately, they ate of it, contrary to the express prohibition of the Lord, and thereby brought misery upon themselves and all their posterity. The Christmas-tree reminds us of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, so much the more as on Christmas Eve we have the commemoration of Adam and Eve in the calendar. In this relation, the Christmas-tree would, indeed, be anything but a tree of joy, for it would recall to our mind sin with its long train of misery. But the Christmas-tree symbolizes also another tree, namely:

(b) *The tree of the Cross on Calvary,* on which Jesus, the Saviour of the world, suffered and died. This is for us, in truth, the *tree of life*, for on this tree Christ expiated the guilt of our sins, destroyed the kingdom of Satan, reconciled us with God, and opened for us again a pathway to heaven. The Christmas-tree reminds us of this consoling truth. It spreads around the whole room a friendly flood of light, and this signifies that Jesus is the light which enlightens every man that comes into the world. The fruit and good things on the tree represent to us the fruits of the Redemption which ripened on the tree of the Cross. And seeing the Christmas-tree green in the midst of winter, we are forcibly reminded of the blessings of the tree of the Cross, which shall never fail to be laden with the fruits of salvation.

2. What does the Christmas-tree teach us?

(a) The Christmas-tree is green. Green is the color of hope, and in hope we can live and die, since Jesus Christ has offered himself for us on the tree of the Cross. And how precious beyond measure are things that we are

permitted to hope for! We hope for heaven and everything necessary to obtain it, the forgiveness of our sins, and the grace of God. And we hope for these goods with confidence, because God has promised them to us on account of the merits of Christ. As the verdure [verjer – lush greenness] of the Christmas-tree continues even in the midst of winter, so hope remains with us even in the wintry days of tribulation; and in the possession of this blessed hope we may live cheerfully and die tranquilly. Examples: the Machabean brothers.—*II Machabees 7*; Saint Paul.—*II Corinthians 1: 10*; *Ephesians 1: 12*.

(b) *The Christmas-tree is covered with resplendent lights.* Christ tells us what these lights signify in the following words: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”—*Matthew 5: 16*. Good example is one of the most effectual means of leading the erring back to the right path, of encouraging the lukewarm to Christian zeal and fervor, of strengthening the weak, and of urging the good on to perfection. Let these lights on the Christmas-tree be an admonition to you, “that you may be blameless and sincere children of God, without reproof in the midst of a depraved and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”—*Philippians 2: 15*.

(c) The Christmas-tree is laden with many delicious fruits and sweet things. As fruit is to the tree, so are good works to the Christian. The husbandman (farmer) naturally expects the tree to bring forth good fruit, but if it bring forth bad fruit or none at all, it is worthless and is cut down and cast into the fire.—*Matthew 7: 19*. The same fate awaits the Christian who, like the bad tree, produces no fruit for the divine Husbandman. Like the unprofitable servant mentioned in the Gospel, who buried his talent, he shall be rejected, cut down, and cast into hell-fire. The Christmas-tree with its fruit admonishes us, as does the Apostle [Pope Saint Peter saying]: “Wherefore, labor the more, that by good works you may make sure your vocation and election.”—*II Peter 1: 10*. Thus the Christmas-tree not only proposes important truths of our holy religion for our consideration, but also teaches us how we are to conduct ourselves in order that, as good, fruitful trees, we may hereafter be transplanted into the heavenly Paradise by Christ, the divine Husbandman.

Christmas gifts.

Christmas gifts stand in close connection with the mystery of the Christmas feast, and remind us of the words of the prophet: “A child is born to us, a son is given to us.”—*Isaias 9: 6*. As God out of pure love has given his Son to mankind as a present, so men, moved by this divine love, give tokens of love and esteem to one another.

1. These presents are called *Christmas gifts* and little innocent children firmly believe that Jesus puts all these beautiful things there for them. Is not this belief of the little ones based upon truth? Do we not owe to our divine Saviour all the supernatural gifts and graces which are necessary for our salvation? Our holy faith, the holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Sacraments, sanctifying grace, heaven itself with its joys, are they not all gifts which Christ merited for, and bestowed on us?

What shall I say? We owe to the Infant Jesus even our temporal goods, for this Child is the “Word by whom all things were made,” (*John 1: 3*); and it is the Christian religion that transforms barbarians into civilized people, changes deserts into fertile fields, encourages art and science, thus establishing happiness and prosperity among nations. May we never be unmindful of this!

2. Christmas presents *are prepared* without the knowledge of those to whom they are to be given. Although the principal object may be to surprise the receiver, yet a deeper meaning lies at the bottom of this secrecy, to which expression is given in the introit of the mass: “For while all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course, the Almighty Word leapt down from heaven, from the royal throne.”—*Wisdom 18: 14, 15*. Jesus Christ, the precious gift of heaven, comes secretly as it were, upon the earth at midnight, into a stable, as a weak child. Mary and Joseph alone are aware of the wonderful mystery, as generally only father and mother know of the gifts which their children are to receive.

3. Christmas gifts are made especially *to children*, who, on account of their tender age and innocence, are the most faithful images of the divine Child. If we look upon a child in its simplicity, humility, candor, and innocence, what is more natural for us than to think of the divine Child who was born on Christmas day? Our heart expands and we feel urged to give the holy Child proofs of our love and gratitude, and, as we can bestow nothing upon him personally, we make our gifts to innocent children, who most resemble him, and who are dearest to him. The gifts, therefore, which we make to children on Christmas Day are in intention made to the Infant Jesus.

4. Adults also receive Christmas gifts. These, too, have their foundation in the Christmas mystery, for this feast is one of joy to the heart of every Christian. The angel announced, “Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people: for this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.”—*Luke 2: 10, 11*. Christmas gifts flow from Christmas joy, for joy makes us benevolent. This feast reminds us vividly of the words of Jesus: “God so loved the world, as to give up his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him may not perish, but may have life everlasting.”—*John 3: 16*. This infinite love of the Father urges us to show ourselves liberal and merciful towards our fellow-men. Lastly, let us all consider ourselves as children, because, through Jesus Christ, who as a child came into the world, “we have received the spirit of adoption of sons of God, whereby we cry: Abba, Father,”—*Romans 8: 15*. As children love and distribute to one another what they possess, so let us give presents to one another.

PERORATION

Thus Christmas-trees and Christmas gifts are most intimately connected with the Christmas solemnity, and refer to Jesus Christ, the new-born Saviour, in whom God the heavenly Father hath given us everything. Oh! That we would penetrate deeply into the mystery of the Christmas feast, and comprehend its meaning, that our cold hearts would be warmed up, and in holy love turn to him, “who hath loved us, and hath delivered himself for us, an oblation and a sacrifice to God.”—*Ephesians 5: 2*.

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