

A REAL CHRISTMAS: *Hope for the Hurting*

By Steve Adams

Who is not thinking about Christmas? I was thinking a while back about the essential elements of our Christmas celebrations and I decided to try and identify what those ingredients would be. Without too much effort, I came up with a quick list of six couplets, nice and neat, a full dozen. This Christmas we will want to fill our lives with *decorations and gifts, food and fun, family and friends, stories and songs, cards and notes, wonder and worship.*

I was being quite pleased with myself for how I'd covered just about all there is in Christmas but then, as is often the case, another thought came to me. It wasn't something that just popped into my head and I wasn't really looking for it. It just came, forcing its way like a bully. There is something else. Something else will be a necessary part of our celebrating whether we like it or not, and we don't. I have to add another couplet to my list ... *sorrow and suffering!*

Now, we might want to protest. No one likes a bully who pushes his way into where he doesn't belong. After all, what does suffering have to do with celebration? Well, I don't mean to say that we would choose it, but the reality is that for many of us, sorrow and suffering will be a part of our celebrating this year. Not by choice but because that's just the way it is.

Someone once gave this counsel to a pastor. They said, "*Preach to the hurting and you'll never lack an audience for your sermons.*" The reason is quite clear – because at any given time, there is no shortage of people who are hurting. This Christmas will be no exception. They are everywhere - people with cancer, people who've lost loved ones, people who just can't seem to cope with all that life is throwing at them.

But once again you might be wondering, what does this have to do with celebrating Christmas? Well, it has a lot to do with how we celebrate Christmas. Just think about it ... an oppressed people longing for freedom; a juicy scandal about an illegitimate child; a young woman nine months pregnant, riding for days on the back of a donkey only to be turned out and forced to give birth in a cold, dark, dank cattle stall, likely little more than a hole carved into the side of a lonely Judean hill!

And that isn't even the half of it. One of the elements of the Christmas story that seldom gets told has always gripped my heart. Matthew tells how, "*When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'*"

I recently stood by a grave while a mother buried her son. And once again I heard the sound; the sound of Rachel weeping, the sound that reverberates from the depths of a soul in despair, the sound that causes the hearer to feel it's intense pain in their own soul. It was her grief, but at that moment I felt it, and I wasn't the only one. We all did. It is the fellowship of the suffering. For who can pass through this world without experiencing loss? Only those who die very young are spared from grief. This was the patriarch Job's sentiment when he said, "*Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb*".

Life can at times be very hard and harsh. Real life, at least life in this world, is a mingling of great joys with intense sorrows. Sometimes those of us who have been largely spared for the time being cling to the illusion of happiness allowing the hurting to sink back quietly into the shadows to hide their pain. But though we don't always see them they are still here. And it's Christmas time and they are still here.

But can they celebrate Christmas? Or better, can they celebrate with us? Or, even still better, can we celebrate with them? I think we can and we must. The amount of hardship and heartache in our world can be overwhelming, especially for those who grieve, and especially when everyone else seems happy. One of the greatest pains of sorrow is the loneliness that is in it.

Now at this point some of you are wishing for a more 'cheerful' topic. I know because if I was sitting where you're sitting I'd be thinking the same thing. I am not a person who likes to dwell on the 'gloomier' prospects of life. I have myself, to this point in my life, been spared much of the pain that others have had to endure, and I am just as tempted as any to nurse myself upon the illusion that everything is OK.

The thing is that many of us this Christmas will try and celebrate by shutting ourselves off from those who can't be happy along with us. But I remind you that this really is at last only an illusion. We cannot in truth separate ourselves from the pain of others because, in the end, it is our pain. The words of John Donne come to mind, "*No man is an island ... everyman's death diminishes me ... Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.*"

Not only that, but all of us have some measure of pain in our lives most of the time. Whether it's an actual crisis or what we commonly just call 'stress'. Yes, this too will all be a part of our celebrating this year, like it or not, and we don't.

It is quite likely that a number of you who are reading this have great pain in your lives and you're thinking, "*How am I ever going to celebrate Christmas this year?*". Well, I have something very important to share with you and it is this - You are precisely the ones who Christmas is for. That's right! You see, the message of Christmas isn't for the happy. Christmas isn't about happiness. It's about hope. It isn't for the wealthy, healthy and prosperous ones or those seemingly untouched by life's sorrows. Jesus didn't come for those who had no need. He said himself, "*The healthy don't need a physician... I*

have come to seek and to save them who are lost.” There were those to whom Jesus could never speak for they didn’t need him, or at least so they felt.

My dear friends, understand this - that Christmas isn’t for those who are safe in their homes surrounded by all their loved ones spared from all the pain and misery of life. If that is how we think, then we have made a fairy tale out of Christmas, but alas, perhaps we have done just that. But the real Christmas is for the lost and the dying; for those who are oppressed and burdened down; for those being, even now, crushed under the weight of the world. The real Christmas is for those whose hearts are breaking so they can’t go on. Yes, those are the ones, the very ones, and the only ones the truth be known, who can really celebrate Christmas. Because they are the only ones who can understand how desperate we are for God to come into our lives and to give us real hope. And while hope may seem worthless to those who feel no need of it, for the desperate hope means everything because it is the only thing.

People are always talking about the real meaning of Christmas and how to really celebrate Christmas. Every year I hear it over and over. It’s on television and in conversation. It’s everywhere. Absolutely everywhere! The search for the illusive meaning and spirit of Christmas. Why does it seem so illusive? And why is it that most, sadly, will not find what they are looking for? Why? It is because we don’t perceive it even when we are staring straight at it. Because we are looking for something else. The true gift God has for us, the gift that so many in different times have found to be so wonderful above all else, so wonderful to break open the darkest night with the glorious angelic host, is something that not everyone wants. Simply because they don’t recognize its value. They see it as something they don’t need because they don’t see their need. Because they have no need, not that they perceive. We cushion ourselves against the harshness of life with things. We insulate our private worlds with pleasures. We entertain ourselves to sleep. And we cut ourselves off from those who would remind us of our real need - those who hurt. We are like the proverbial man with his fingers in his ears humming loudly to himself in an attempt to defy reality. We think that if we repeat over and over, “*There’s no place like home ... there’s no place like home ... there’s no place like home ...*”, that all of the things we fear will somehow never come upon us. But they do. And when they do, God offers hope for the hopeless.

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” **Isaiah 9:2**

[Recommended Reading: **Isaiah 9:1-7 ; Isaiah 61:1-7**]

Christmas is about a gift, the greatest gift ever given or that could be given. It is a gift offered by God to a lost and dying world. It is about a gift to you and to me. That gift is Jesus Christ, God’s own Son who came to give His life in a great act of deliverance which has brought us salvation. The promise is that if we place our trust in him we will be forgiven; our souls will be saved; that ultimately every injustice in this world will someday be put right; that someday there will be no more pain or suffering, only unbroken fellowship forever in heaven. That isn’t just sentiment. That is reality. The

prophet Isaiah called him *“a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief”*. And not just his own grief, for He *“carried our sorrows”*. He has been called *‘The Wounded Healer’*. *“Cast your cares on Him for He cares for you”*.

Are you hurting? Is your heart broken? Have the things you feared come upon you? Then there is only one thing to do. Celebrate Christmas. No, you don't have to shout, sing and jump for joy. But you can have his peace, joy and love in your heart. Receive the glorious message of hope that God has for you and for all mankind. *“To as many as will receive him... whosoever will may come.”* Because when it comes right down to it, we're all in the same boat. Any sense that we do not need Christ is little more than a sadistic illusion. The bell tolls for us all.

And for those of us who are not experiencing at present some tragedy or loss or sorrow? Suffering should still be a part of your celebrating this Christmas because Christ is calling you to reach out and embrace those who are.

One of the things that God does with our sorrows when we give them to Him is that He uses them to make our hearts tender to others. If we try and cut ourselves off from the pain of others we must numb ourselves to do it. And the capacity to know joy and the capacity to know sorrow are one in the same. It is the capacity to feel and to experience life. That is why when the little boy asked his mother, *“Mommy, why are you crying?”*, the answer came back, *“Because I am happy”!* That is why the Bible tells us to *“weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice”*. That is life. That is relationship. Close yourself off to pain and you close yourself off to joy. Don't allow your heart to be hardened. Don't allow yourself to sink down into despair or to become numb or callous. Whether you are personally hurting and dealing with personal loss or whether you feel spared for the present, open your heart wide to receive God's presence and joy in your life. Receive the gift of Christ. Receive Him. You can experience the miracle of Christmas; the miracle of Christ; the miracle of hope and peace and love. And it will become your own personal miracle; a story of *‘beauty for ashes’*. And you can pass it on in a world that so desperately needs it.

Christmas means that God has given His Son. To those who see no need, the promise means little if anything. But when you are living in the shadow of death, the dark watches of the night, life takes on a whole different meaning and so does the gift. To these it means everything.

“UNTO US a child is born... UNTO YOU is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord... and suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.’”

Someone a while back sent me a list of wonderfully wise saying. Included in them was this statement – *“I believe that no matter how bad your heart is broken the world doesn't stop for your grief.”* As I read it, I thought that it is true enough, the world doesn't stop for our grief, no matter how broken we might be. But then another thought entered my

mind, freely this time and quite welcome. The world doesn't stop for our grief, but God does. Will you welcome Him this Christmas. Will you allow Him to come into your life. Will you worship Him and find healing for your hurting soul?

Have a real Christmas; one filled with hope.