

ADVENT III
Matthew 3:1 & 2

“In those days came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Matthew 3:1 & 2)

To the modern mind, this text for the season is passing strange--an anachronism. Between two great celebrations--scarcely seems a time to “repent”. It would seem more appropriate to us to say: “Rejoice, for the Kingdom of heaven is about to arrive”. For doesn’t one rejoice at celebrations? Especially if important guests are coming? And if the chief guest be God, shouldn’t the affair be especially gala?

Why turn a Christmas to New Year’s party into a penitentiary?

Do you suppose that’s the reason “the club” is more crowded at this season than the church? Because people line up to get into parties, but who lines up to get into a penitentiary?

And what a party this really has been--all the way from Thanksgiving to New Years Eve! We have all ventured life, limb, and savings accounts on this annual spending spree, a grand winter frolic to warm the blood and harden the arteries! And who’s to say to us “No”? But the church? Well, the old church traditionally turned into a penitentiary today--a place to repent. “Repent”, it says, “for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”. Some way to celebrate the new Year. Fiddle faddle! No wonder people don’t line up to get in.

Who goes to a celebration to feel guilty? Why bring pain and sorrow for sin into it? Not much fun in that, so “Come on; therefore, let’s leave the ancient church, that moldy, 2,000 year old penitentiary. Gives one the claustrophobic creeps anyway, that spooky, smothery, churchy, closed in, sinful feeling. Phew! Penitence at a celebration indeed! The church seems so anti-celebrant, really, and that’s practically anti-American, don’t you think? So come on, let’s get back to where the party’s going on and we can breathe free air again, be natural and normal and all that. “Look--look! Here comes the parade, with an inflated duck, seven stories high, and as I said, kid, diamonds are a guy’s best friend. And did I tell you about who I just did in? It wasn’t a deal. It was a steal. Yeah, and a happy new year to you too. Party’s over! They’re all gone, thank the gods. Quite a party, eh baby? And

while you're up, get me one too, will you? Or something stronger. We've still got the clean-up!

Now it isn't that the adventure of God into human history, your history and mine, doesn't call for a celebration, a party, it's just that without the penitentiary spirit, it becomes more simulation than celebration, for what is celebrated? The whole purpose of the Christmas to New Year adventure is to celebrate a break with the past and the hope of new and better days. And this sort of party, or parting of the ways, is better celebrated in a penitentiary than an orgy. One doesn't drink or double-deal guilt and fear away. Guilt and fear are always left over, hung over, after an orgy.

Whereas, strangely enough, real fun, lasting pleasure, happiness, joy, blessedness, contentment (choose your own word) lies in, of all places, repentance. Whatever else John the Baptist was. he was no fool.

He was absolutely correct, historically, theologically, psychologically, when he said: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". There's no heaven of a life ahead without it. No God-ness, no goalness, no gladness otherwise. Repentance, is really something to celebrate.

For like Jesus, it ventures to face both ways, backward and forward, yesterday and tomorrow in order that today, Christ may come in. The point is, life now is very hard to celebrate until the past and future have both been faced and dealt with realistically. It's only when one is no longer intimidated by "O, what I've done!" or "What's to come?" that life at the moment--at the now--can really be free, be constructive, be creative, be any fun.

What's a chronic worrier got to celebrate at New Years or any time of year, but guilt and fear, and that isn't exactly a festive mood, for the person or the family. If one wants a most unhappy new year, just be or live with a person who doesn't know the meaning of repentance, who has never looked back and said, "O Lord, I regret" or looked forward and said, "God, I resolve", who's never said, "Honey, I'm sorry" or in spite of hell and high water, "I have hope".

What a different atmosphere is created when in honest repentance, in a true penitential spirit, a man or woman, by Christ's grace, faces both ways, both past and future, and says in effect: "I am sorry, forgive me. I here and now quit justifying my idiot ego--my silly

rebellion, my self-excuses. I admit, plain and simple, I've been not only stupid, but wrong. Before God and these witnesses, I admit between the seasons, the whole sorry story of me: No more pretense, no more repression, no more neurotic nonsense. I just confess. And now that I've got it off my chest, and discover that God doesn't damn me, but that I'm sentenced only to be loved by God for the rest of my eternal life, I can now, by this miracle, join resolve with remorse, and can look forward to tomorrow without fear, with renewed faith in God's providence and hope for my life, come what may. Now I can join the human race in labor and in laughter and in love."

Don't you see? John was right. Following repentance like this, why, the very "Kingdom of God is at hand", within anyone's reach. It is the work of Christ. Such a change in life as this calls for a New Year's celebration. It's a penitentiary turning into a party, a real party, a very happy new year, for one is now free, free at last, free forever. So, throughout the coming year:

**"God rest you merry, gentlemen,
(merry, merry, merry!))
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Savior
Was born on Christmas Day;
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray.**

.....

**O tidings of comfort and joy,
Comfort and joy;
O tidings of comfort and joy!"**

Amen