**Two Mistaken Attitudes to Christmas**

“If a man called Christmas Day a mere hypocritical excuse for drunkeness and gluttony, that would be false, but it would have a fact hidden in it somewhere. But when Bernard Shaw says that Christmas Day is only a conspiracy kept up by poulterers and wine merchants from strictly business motives, then he says something which is not so much false as startling and arrestingly foolish. He might as well say that the two sexes were invented by jewellers who wanted to sell wedding rings.”

This is a quote from one of my favourite Christian writers - GK Chesterton. Chesterton was a large man – about 6’4” tall and not far of that from back to front. He stood rather like a Christmas tree. But he was also a man of what I call “deep-breathing thought” and, I think, he sets out here two mistaken attitudes towards Christmas. But whereas one attitude is mistaken only in its *application*, the other is mistaken in *substance*.

First, the mistake of substance. This attitude is that of dismissal. Christmas *means* essentially *nothing*. It is based on earlier beliefs and practices of greater meaning, to be sure, but it is now degenerated into pure selfish commercial activity.

This won’t do because at Christmas what is essentially being celebrated is a *metaphysical* event – the event of love itself presenting itself within the human sphere. By calling that first Christmas a ‘metaphysical’ event, I mean that what is really happening is something beneath the surface, something that meets more than the eye – and that includes something that meets more than the kind of eye that science casts upon the world. It is an event that has a deep connection with the very meaning of the world. *Love* is that meaning. Colloquially, “love came down at Christmas”.

But that means, again as Chesterton put it, “What life and death may be to a turkey is not my business; but the soul of Scrooge and the body of Cratchit *are* my business.” Elsewhere he added that Christmas “is built upon a beautiful and intentional paradox; that the birth of the homeless should be celebrated in every home.”

This is a deep-breathing thought if there ever was one, for it captures the beauty of the twin ideas that Christ is our real home and that *this* home is presented to us a pure *gift*. Forget that gift – that pure *metaphysical* gift – as did the cynicism of George Bernard Shaw, or the graspingness of those who see it purely as an opportunity for extra business - and we forget the *meaning* of our very lives. This gives Christmas also an *ontological* significance. That is, it is something that adds value to our very *being*.

Now we come to the second mistaken attitude towards Christmas, that of seeing it as an opportunity for gluttony and drunkenness. Yet, Chesterton suggests that this is the *lesser* of the two mistakes. He talks of it containing a “hidden fact”.

What *is* that “hidden fact”? It is, of course, the idea that Christmas is a *time* for celebration. And if Christmas, alongside Easter and creation itself, is the time for remembering one of the most important metaphysical events in history, and if it really is pure gift, then the celebration must in some sense itself be *excessive*.

Excess should *beget* excess. How can one greet such a great ontological excess as Christmas with *mild* gratitude? How can one celebrate a metaphysical gift of such magnitude with mere good sense and carefully apportioned measure?

The glutton and the drunkard, in a paradoxical way, bare unintentional witness to this fact. Both glutton and drunkard have thrown caution to the wind. Both want to consume *beyond* the point of bursting. Neither can get enough of what they take in. What they desire is worth more to them than can be got from any exercise of mere good sense. Finally, both want others to be like them. “Go on”, they will urge us, “have another sherry wine, and do try some of this champion pie. It’s Christmas”. (I make no apology, by then way, for sounding like Charles Dickens. I wish I sounded more like him. *That’s* as old-fashioned as I am.)

The *mistake* made by drunkard and glutton lies not in their attitude of excess but in their *application* of it. The “hidden fact” of which Chesterton speaks, is that our attitude towards the excessive gift of Christmas should itself be excessive. Nothing short of excess will do. Nothing short of overflowing measure will be remotely appropriate.

But if Christmas is a *metaphysical* gift, an *ontological* excess, on God’s part, for *us*, then our response should be in like kind. So! Whatever else one may do this Christmas, however many sherries or mince pies one may get through, perhaps we should also do one *extra* thing – something quite excessive, something the fallen world of good sense and steady measure might regard as a bit silly. Let’s capture something of the overflowing, couldn’t-care-less attitude of the drunkard and glutton but simply *re-direct* it, as God directed his excessive, overflowing love upon us.

Amen