

What do *Christians* expect at Christmas?

December 25, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr.

In the weeks before Christmas, the leading figure, as you've heard for the last few weeks, is John the Baptist, who, as the forerunner, the herald proclaiming Jesus the Messiah, prepared the way for the Lord. He came out of the desert baptizing and preaching repentance and the people asked him, *who are you* (Jn. 1:19) and he replied, *I am not the Christ* (v. 20), *but among you stands one whom you do not know* (v. 26b).

The suggestion is that John's personal honesty and insight into his own nature and destiny tell us something about how we can best use Christmas. We can use this holy time to achieve that self-knowledge which wise men from the time of the Greeks have held out to be the chief duty of everyone and the goal of human existence. Our most important task if we are to meet the Christ is first to meet ourselves.

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This is not an easy thing to do, but it is more readily done now than at most other times. The basic question is *who are you?* but it breaks down into one or two other questions as we think about the different characteristics of the season.

First of all, it is a season of memories. Charles Dickens was right when he called up before Old Scrooge *the Spirit of Christmas Past*. And so while memories of other years and other places crowd in upon us, unbidden and irresistible, the question *who are you* becomes *Am I the same person who was, not so long ago, a child at Christmas?*

The common sense answer is *No, of course not*. The years have brought too many changes. I feel different. I certainly look different. I live in a different place. My interests, obligations and concerns are all different. Healthy men and women are not children. They cannot feel like children, they should not behave

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like children. So, no, I am not the same person I used to be.

But the more profound answer is, *yes*, of course I'm the same person, because there is a continuity in every life, and what I am now has grown out of what I once was. I am the one who remembers Christmas at my grandparents' home overlooking a mountain lake; the drive to the city for Church, the sound of the Carols; the family around the table, the clink of the glasses and the smell of cigar smoke, the women chattering in the kitchen; the men half-dozing in the living room; the stocking hung by the chimney with care that no matter what else it may have held, always contained a switch and a potato, a reminder to snap me back to reality. Then there were the thank you notes that had to be written whether I was thankful or not for some inappropriate gift. I am the one who remembers the first Christmas for our own children, the thrill and excitement of it, and, much, much later, the first

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Christmas for each of our granddaughters. I remember all this and more, and I wouldn't forget any part of, even if I could, because it is all woven into the fabric of my life, the same life. So, of course, I am what I am, but at this time I am also what I *was* at earlier Christmases.

Christmas also is the celebration and renewal of relationships, intimate and not so intimate. To *keep* Christmas, as we say, is also to *make* Christmas by being aware of what our relationships are by enriching them, and we do it by the grace and in the light of Him who came amongst us at this season.

Finally, Christmas is the time of expectation. John the Baptist was expecting the Messiah. The question becomes, *what do we expect?* At Christmas little children mainly expect gifts; the center of their attention is themselves. The question they will ask each other tomorrow and the next day is *What'd ya'*

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get? What'd ya' get? Half of the excitement is in sharing with their friends. This excitement is natural enough in children and they have a right to this joyful anticipation. This kind of expectation is not the main concern of adults.

Mature adults are mainly concerned to give happiness to each other and especially to children. The magic of Christmas is its ability, even for a little while, to shift the center of our expectation away from ourselves to other people. More than any other season it breaks through the crust of that selfishness which is the relic of childhood, and makes us *spiritually* adult and mature. At Christmas we expect what we ought to expect at all times, that life will offer us the opportunity to give love and service to people where we find them.

If this is what children expect and what adults expect at Christmas, what do *Christians* expect, we who are

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partly children and partly adults? What we expect is Jesus Christ and a fresh vision of his beauty and a new comprehension of his being. He comes to us at this time with an innocence calculated to pierce the coldest indifference and overcome the most callous rejection. No one can totally ignore what he gives to the hearts and hopes of his people. And we come to him with the shepherds and the Wise Men responding to his love given to us, by our love given to him. What I really expect at Christmas, what all Christians really expect, is that in the giving and receiving of this time, I shall find the true center of my life recalled with new brightness and exerting a fresh power in what I am now and what I still must be.

St. John said of Him who came to us at Christmas, *In Him was life and the life was the light of all people* (Jn. 1:4). Who are you at Christmas? May each of you be one who discovers both the *life* and the *light*, and

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being led by the light, know the joy of the life from
this time forth and forever more.

AMEN.