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IN OUR MID-TWENTIETH century, "Merry Christmas" comes to our lips with a lump in the throat and a chill in the heart. Now that wickedness stalks triumphantly through the earth, and cynicism like a winter fog paralyzes the movement of civilization, who but the witless cry "Merry Christmas" and mean anything else than a mockery?

The tragedy of a modern Christmas is all too clear. For the faithless it is a tinselled carnival broadcasting through its meaningless ornaments the emptiness of their Godless, graceless souls. For the faithful, perhaps, it is a stumbling block, a torturing paradox which celebrates the birth of the Prince of Peace in an age when not a breath of peace ruffles the density of discord born of man's total worship of himself. How can we seal our cards, and wrap our gifts, and light our wreaths, and trim our trees in a strange land among strange people who gaily keep Christ's birthday although they refuse to believe in Him? How can we make merry, or bid others to be merry, when the anguish of our crumbling world weighs heavy upon the shoulders of our mind and wraps us with its grief? Christmas, 1952: a season of lamentation! So it might seem to millions of Christians the world over who feel overcome with sorrow at the evils of our times.

Christmas, 1952: a season of lamentation? It should not be. Despite the enormity of trouble in our world, the Christian heart must rejoice in the birth of its Saviour. Two voices rise to contradict these sentiments of gloom, the voices of two Christmas saints. The first commands us to rejoice; the second tells us why.

St. Leo the Great is the first of the Christmas saints whose summons to rejoice is read each year in the office of Christ's Nativity. St. Leo was Pope during the middle years of the fifth

century when the unity of the Church and the purity of the faith were threatened by some of the worst heresies in the history of Christendom. Often he must have faced the prospect of preaching to a people worn down with anxiety and discouragement. Yet in his beautiful Christmas sermon, he points out the fault of Christians who commemorate their Saviour's birth with sad faces and melancholy spirits.

Unto us is born this day a Saviour. Let us rejoice. It would be unlawful to be sad today, for today is Life's birthday: the birthday of that Life which, for us dying creatures, taketh away the sting of death and bringeth the bright promise of the eternal hereafter. It would be unlawful for any man to refuse to partake in our rejoicing. All men have an equal share in the great cause of our joy, for our Lord, who is the destroyer of sin and death, finding that all are bound under condemnation, is come to make all free.

We hear the mighty voice of the second Christmas saint from out of the pages of Scripture; it was first heard in the hills of Judea seven centuries before the time of Christ. It is the timeless exultation of Isaiah, the Prince of Prophets, foretelling the advent and reign of the Messiah, the Prince of Peace. It is his voice which fills the pages of our liturgy each Christmas with the graceful harmony of his inspired prophecy; it is he who tells us why we must rejoice.

Isaiah lived in times which must have seemed as calamitous as our own Assyria to the east of Palestine had grown into a powerful and oppressive empire bent upon the domination of every nation her conquering armies could subdue. The tiny Kingdom of Judah lay at the mercy of the Assyrians, defenseless and helpless before the successive onslaughts of the enemy. The days of David and Solomon and all their glory were past. Yet the people of Judah, God's chosen ones, turned for help not to God, but to the neighboring pagan peoples with whom they allied themselves. Within the lifetime of Isaiah the Assyrian hordes swallowed up the northern Kingdom of Israel and annihilated her people; little more than a century later, Assyria would strike at Judah and carry her people into captivity. Isaiah had clearly foretold this invasion, which he likened to a terrible inundation, which would flood the Judeans in punishment for their infidelity:

Behold the Lord will bring upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, the king of the Assyrians, and all his glory. And he shall come up over all his channels and shall overflow all his banks, and shall pass through Judah, overflowing, and

going out shall reach even to the neck. And the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breath of thy land, O Emmanuel.

(Is. 8, 7-8)

O Emmanuel! The Prophet is torn with grief at the thought of his beloved Juda ravaged and wasted for its sins. But it is the land of the Messias, "thy land, O Emmanuel." The land will not remain desolate forever; Emmanuel, the Holy One of Israel, Christ, will come to save His people. When Isaías beholds the vision of the Messias to come, he breaks forth in words of ecstatic joy:

A child is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace. (Is. 9, 6)

He describes the character of the Messias and the spiritual kingdom He will found:

There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse: and a flower shall rise up out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and of godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge according to the sight of the eyes, nor reprove according to the hearing of the ears. But he shall judge the poor with justice, and shall reprove with equity for the meek of the earth. And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth: and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. And justice shall be the girdle of his loins: and faith the girdle of his reins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb: and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the lion and the sheep shall abide together: and a little child shall lead them. (Is. 11, 1-16)

He depicts the glories of the Messianic kingdom:

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened: and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall be free. For waters are broken out in the desert, and streams in the wilderness. And that which was dry land shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water. In the dens where dragons dwelt before shall rise up the verdure of the reed and the bulrush. And the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and shall come into Sion with praise: and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness: and sorrow and mourning shall flee away. (Is. 35, 5-7, 10)

He foretells the office and mission of the Redeemer :

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me. He hath sent me to preach to the meek, to heal the contrite of heart, and to preach a release to the captives and deliverance to them that are shut up : to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God : to comfort all that mourn : to appoint to the mourners of Sion : and to give them a crown for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, a garment of praise for the spirit of grief. And they shall be called in it the mighty ones of justice, the planting of the Lord to glorify him. (Is. 61, 1-3)

These are the very words in which our Lord spoke of Himself in the synagogue at Nazareth, when He rose and read from the book of Isaias, and said : "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4, 21)

Fulfillment ! All this has come to pass, and it all began on Christmas. The Child of marvels was born in a cave at Bethlehem, and His glorious reign began from the throne of Mary's arms. All this is prophecy no more ; we live in this resplendent kingdom. The wondrous age of which Isaias writes was far in the future for Him ; for us it is the present. We are the redeemed with everlasting joy upon our heads ; our blind see and our deaf hear ; to us has been proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord, and to us has been given a crown for ashes, a garment of praise for the spirit of grief. To us the Prophet speaks : "Lift up thy eyes round about and see." (Is. 60, 4) Here about us before our very eyes are all these things fulfilled ; and it all began on that first Christmas when Christ was born.

Seven centuries before Christ came, Isaias in a vision saw the distant figure of his Saviour, and he rejoiced in an exultant canticle of thanksgiving :

You shall say in that day :
I will give thanks to thee, O Lord.

You shall say in that day :
Praise ye the Lord, and call upon his name.

Make his works known among the people :
remember that his name is high.

Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath done great things :
show this forth in all the earth.

Rejoice and praise, O thou habitation of Zion:
for great is he that is in the midst of thee,
the Holy One of Israel. (Is. 12, 1, 4-6)

"Thou shalt say in that day:" "that day" is our day. This is why we must rejoice: the Holy One of Israel is in our midst. We know that He has come to us, and we abide in the full flowering of His kingdom.

The world is in misery this Christmas. If we look to it for our joy, we shall turn away in sorrow and bitterness. It is painfully obvious that the world has little part in Christ's kingdom; He Himself told us His kingdom was not of this world. His kingdom is a kingdom of hearts: our hearts. It is there that all the prophecies are fulfilled; it is there that the King of Peace reigns with magnificence; it is there that we must rejoice. Though nation upon nation perish in the enormity of its sinfulness, we need no excuse for happy hearts at Christmas, nor need we let the rumblings of despondency tincture us with depression or dull our peace. Christmas is the time to be merry, and to rejoice in the birth of our Saviour. "From Sion, His dwelling of peerless beauty, God flashes forth: our God." (Ps. 49, 2)

We of *Dominicana* wish all our readers everywhere a joyous Christmas.