

IV

ON THE FESTIVAL OF THE CALEND

The preacher had no text. His sermon is an earnest protest against the evils into which New Year's festivals had drifted in his day. This is the earliest extant New Year's sermon, and in that respect it is unique. The strange customs portrayed in it make it peculiarly fascinating.

IV

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YESTERDAY and to-day two feasts, not only unrelated and discordant, but wholly adverse and hostile to each other, have been celebrated. One is of the rabble without, gathering, in large sums, the money of mammon, and bringing in its train bargaining, vulgar and mean. The other is of holy and true religion, inculcating acquaintance with God, and the virtue of the purified life. And since many, preferring the luxury and absorption which arise from vanity, have left off going to church, come, let us with a discourse dispel from your souls this foolish and harmful ¹¹⁴ delight, which as a sort of inflammation of the brain, with laughter and jesting, induces death. And in the treatment of the subject I may fittingly emulate Solomon. For in counseling young men to keep themselves from the snares of licentiousness, in order to make his own admonition cogent and effective, he personifies excess as an abandoned woman, and, by portraying all her wickedness, he thus exposes her to her dupes as deserving of their hatred. ¹ Wherefore I, too, after showing the vanity of the human heart in my discourse, will attempt to convert the lovers of pleasure from their misdirected zeal.

Of a public feast, this, then, should be the rule and law: first, that the festival have a distinct object; and then that the mirth be common to all; not that a part enjoy themselves and the rest be left in dejection and ¹¹⁵ pain. For this latter condition is characteristic of war rather than of a feast, since it is inevitable that the victors parade in their victory, while the conquered bewail their misfortune. Now in these days, first, it is not clear for what object this festival is celebrated. For the many legends current concerning it are mutually subversive and disclose nothing certain. Then I see only a few making merry, while the mass of the people are melancholy, even though they try to conceal their dejection by a cheerful demeanor; while all is noise and tumult, the multitude heedlessly jostling one another.

It is a recollection of, and a rejoicing over, the new year. What kind of rejoicing, sir? First, then, I observe the manner of meeting, of what a sort it is, and how suspicious and unfriendly! With a voice feeble and faint the salutation drops ¹¹⁶ from the lips. Then follows the kiss, as a prelude to the New Year's present. The mouth indeed is kissed, but it is the coin that is loved,---the form of a sale and the deed of covetousness! But where there is pure and frank friendship, kindnesses are freely bestowed with no expectation of gain. So, while on this New Year's festival many things are carried about everywhere, and money is given, there is no pretext of legitimate barter, nor does any one claim it. It is not a wedding, so that one might call it the prodigality of a haughty bridegroom. Nor am I able to call the expenditure almsgiving, since no poor man is relieved of his misfortune. One cannot call what takes place exchange, for the multitude exchange nothing with one another. But to call it a free gift is still more inappropriate, since the giving is by necessity. What, then, are we to call the ¹¹⁷ festival, or the money spent in it? I cannot make out. But tell me, you who have been wearing yourselves out in preparing for it. Give an account of it, as we do of the festivals which are genuine and according to the will of God. We celebrate the birth of Christ, since at this time God manifested himself in the flesh. We celebrate the Feast of Lights (Epiphany), since by the forgiveness of our sins we are led forth from the dark prison of our former life into a life of light and uprightness. Again, on the day of the resurrection we adorn ourselves and march through the streets with joy, because that day reveals to us immortality and the transformation into a higher existence. Thus we keep these feasts and the rest of them in orderly succession. For every human event there is a reason, but that which lacks reasonable explanation and purpose is stuff and

nonsense. ¹¹⁸

Oh, the absurdity of it! All stalk about open-mouthed, hoping to receive something from one another. Those who have given are dejected; those who have received a gift do not retain it, for the present is handed on from one to another, and he who received it from an inferior gives it to a superior. The money of this festival is as unstable as the ball of boys at play, for it is passed quickly on from me to my neighbor. It is but a new form of bribery and servility, having inevitably linked with it the element of necessity. For the more eminent and respectable man shames one into giving. A person of lower rank asks outright, and it all moves by degrees toward the pockets of the most eminent men. And you may see just such a thing as happens in the confluence of waters. There a streamlet melts into and mingles its waters with one larger than itself, and it in turn ¹¹⁹ loses itself in one still more copious, and many small streams joined together become part of the neighboring river; this again, of another greater still, and so on, one joining another, until the last one brings the waters to rest in the depth and breadth of the sea.

This is misnamed a feast, being full of annoyance; since going out-of-doors is burdensome, and staying within doors is not undisturbed. For the common vagrants and the jugglers of the stage, dividing themselves into squads and hordes, hang about every house. The gates of public officials they besiege with especial persistence, actually shouting and clapping their hands until he that is beleaguered within, exhausted, throws out to them whatever money he has and even what is not his own. And these mendicants going from door to door follow one after another, and, until late in the ¹²⁰ evening, there is no relief from this nuisance. For crowd succeeds crowd, and shout, shout, and loss, loss.

Such is this delectable feast, the source of debt and usury, the occasion of poverty, the beginning of misfortunes. And if a man become prosperous by honest industry, incredible as that may seem, and not by the craft of the usurer, even he is dragged along as one who has failed to pay the royal taxes; he weeps like one whose goods are confiscated, and he laments like a man who falls among thieves. He is dogged, he is flogged, and if there be in the house any little thing for the support of his wife and wretched children, this he lets go, and sits him down hungry with his whole family on this glorious feast-day. A new law this, of evil custom, that annoyance be celebrated as a feast, and man's want be called a festival! ¹²¹

This festival teaches even the little children, artless and simple, to be greedy, and accustoms them to go from house to house and to offer novel gifts, fruits covered with silver tinsel. For these they receive in return gifts double their value, and thus the tender minds of the young begin to be impressed with that which is commercial and sordid.

But as to the sturdy and honest farmers! What things this feast-day brings to them! It renders the city a place to be shunned rather than visited, and they fly from it more timidly than hares from nets. Such as are found within it are flogged, treated with drunken violence, what they have in their hands is snatched from them; they are warred upon in time of peace, are jeered at, and mocked with words and deeds. Even our most excellent and guileless prophets, the unmistakable ¹²² representatives of God, who when unhindered in their work are our faithful ministers, are treated with insolence. Thus it is, then, with those in office, thus with the poor, thus with the children, thus with the rustics. For some are distressed, some murmur, and some learn what it were better not to know.

And let us consider how the soldiers under arms, too, are benefited by this feast. As to money they are losers. They offer their entire wages as pay for one debauch. As to manners and habits they are made worse. For they learn vulgarity, and the practices of actors. Their military discipline is relaxed and slackened. They make sport of the laws and the government of which they have been appointed guardians. For they ridicule and insult the august government. They mount a chariot as though upon a stage; they appoint pretended lictors and publicly act like buffoons. This is ¹²³ the nobler part of their ribaldry. But their other doings, how can one mention them? Does not the champion, the lion-hearted man, the man who when armed is the admiration of his friends and the terror of his foes, loose his tunic to his ankles, twine a girdle about his breast, use a woman's sandal, put a roll of hair on his head in feminine fashion, and ply the distaff full of wool, and with that right hand which once bore the trophy, draw out the thread, and changing the tone of his voice utter his words in the sharper feminine treble? These are the good uses of the festival, these the advantages of to-day's public feast!

Even the eminent consuls who have attained the pinnacle of human rewards, spend their money in vanity, scattering large sums for no righteous end, but for the fruit of sin. Their folly is as conspicuous ¹²⁴ as their throne is high. For being seated on many human thrones, and administering the greatest offices of the kingdom, they take unsparingly from every source the largest possible amounts, some appropriating the provision money of poor soldiers, others oftentimes selling justice and truth, and others extracting untold wealth from royal coffers and greedily gathering together money from all quarters, disdaining no source of income, however unbecoming or unjust. They provoke God: now presiding in public, and, a little later, lavishing their gold upon charioteers, ill-starred flute-players, buffoons,

dancers, the effeminate and harlots, who offer their persons for sale to the public. Moreover, they squander their gold upon the beast-fighters, blood-stained and desperate, and even upon the beasts themselves. For it is manifest that their gold supports the wild beasts, too, ¹²⁵ buying flesh for some, grain for others. And all this money is prodigally spent for one object, that their names may be written upon contracts.² What folly! What blindness! God promises to write the names of those who feed the poor in living books, immortal, incorruptible, which moth does not consume, nor time destroy. For these inscriptions you do not care. Do you take no account of the blessed promise, nor seek to be written in the remembrance of God? For this is the Book that abides. But you count it of great importance to have your names written down by the notaries, to be mentioned by those who buy slaves, and to be applauded by vulgar flatterers. You thus show yourselves poor judges of what is truly useful and advantageous. Give to ¹²⁶ the crippled beggar, and not to the dissolute musician. Give to the widow instead of the harlot; instead of to the woman of the street, to her who is piously secluded. Lavish your gifts upon the holy virgins singing psalms unto God, and hold the shameless psalter in abhorrence, which by its music catches the licentious before it is seen. Satisfy the orphan, pay the poor man's debt, and you shall have a glory that is eternal. You empty a multitude of purses for shameful pastime, and ribald laughter, not knowing how many poor men's tears you are giving, from whom your wealth has been gathered; how many have been imprisoned, how many beaten, how many have come near death by the halter, to furnish what dancers to-day receive. And what is the end? Vanity. After it all, a little grave, a garment worth a few obols, shrouding the poor body. ¹²⁷ After a little, forgetfulness,---the inevitable experience of time, veiling all the things striven for. After that, the judgment of God and the inexorable punishment of evil choice.

Where now are the consuls? Consider those of very recent times. Was not one caught in the sudden uprising of an armed multitude and did he not lose his head like a malefactor?³ And after death he was more paraded than when aforesaid riding in his chariot he used to exult in his dignity. And another, with a military command, attaining the same honor, fleeing the penalty of condemnation, perished miserably on the frontiers of Egypt and Libya, at last ending his life on the sands, since all the region through which he fled was waste and without habitation. And what can we say about that one of the generals and ¹²⁸ consuls who is now living in disgrace in the Colchian country, and who is kept alive only by the generosity of the barbarians there? And that one of the prefects, that man invincible and lion-hearted as was supposed, what an end his life had! For first he beheld his own son beheaded; then he himself also was doomed to die, but when the noose had already been adjusted around his neck, the royal clemency stayed the hand of the executioner. And the old man, after living a short time amid woes and calamities, departed this life in disgrace, having found this the end of his august consulship. And that other, so much discussed by both men and women! how last year he planned greater things than the giants! Escaping his masters' rods, he aspired to the rods of a consul.⁴ He acquired land to an amount not easy to ¹²⁹ describe; but he was buried in only as much as the pitiful gave him.⁵ Are not all such things then, according to the wise Preacher, Vanity of vanities?⁶ And are not these political eminences like visions of baseless dreams, delighting for a little, then fleeting away; blooming and withering? Let us therefore end our discourse at this point, and render glory to the Saviour.

[Footnotes renumbered and moved to the end]

1. ¹ Proverbs 5; 3-6.

2. ¹ In the Byzantine period contracts were usually dated by the names of the ruling consuls, who thus became the eponyms of the year.

3. ¹ The allusion is to Rufinus, who fell A. D. 395.

4. ¹ *i. e.*, the fasces.

5. ¹ The allusion is to Eutropius, and supplies the only fixed date in the life of Asterius, who must have preached this sermon at the beginning of January, A. D. 400.

6. ² Ecclesiastes 1: 2.

Early Church Fathers - Additional
Texts