



## What mystical longing Calls us home for Christmas?

I write this aboard a jet airliner speeding south from one of the nation's great northern cities. I am heading home for Christmas.

How eager I am to see the face of my wife, embrace my now-grown children who are gathering at the old homestead, grab my little grandchildren and swing them high as they squeal: "PaPa's home."

How eager I am to sit quietly with my dear friends, my extended family, to embrace and whisper "I love you" in the ears of those as committed to me as they are to their own blood relatives. We will embrace, take off our shoes, sit in front of a fire (sipping egg nog), and feel "at home" in each other's presence.

Home for Christmas! My oldest son will be driving through the night after finishing his work in the nation's capital—joining his family in Florida. Our youngest daughter will fight the mobs which throng the airports, winging in from college in middle-America.

In all of our efforts to get home for Christmas, we touch others—desperate, happy, lonely, cheerful—thronging crowded terminals, all trying to make that mystical deadline.

What is it on this day that so drives us to be among loved ones?

Busy businessmen forget about buying and selling, creating and convincing, to lounge around the house with the family. Things like trade agreements, real estate deals, marketing and sales—all take a back seat to important things like carving the turkey and opening inane but precious gifts under a tree.

Dignified college professors, their cheeks ruddy and hair blowing in the wind, race up and down sidewalks, laughing and shouting as they hold on to small children riding bikes with training wheels.

Ranchers and dairymen quickly finish morning chores so they can take off muddy boots and join laughing families at Christmas breakfasts.

Computer experts, physicians, engineers—all intellectuals, all degreed and pedigreed) sit cross-legged under trees, waist-deep in wrapping paper, turned into little children—at least for the day.

Gangsters, tax evaders, liars, drunkards, adulterers, prostitutes, even members of the Mafia—all turn aside on this

day to kneel at altars and shed a tear in a communion cup for a baby in a manger.

Home for Christmas! Broken-hearted parents sit and wait by the telephone, anxiously scan the mail, hoping memories of Christmas past will stir the heart of a runaway child and bring word of safety.

Runaway children, some young, some very old, walk city sidewalks, huddle in lonely motel rooms, sit and stare in drab apartments on this, the loneliest day of the year—yearning for some power so they can hurdle the wall of pride and reach out for home.

Soldiers in far-flung military outposts, wet and cold, sweaty and sticky, stand lonely

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watch around olive drab vehicles or shiver in isolated guardhouses at the gates—all dreaming of home.

Airmen, cramped in the cockpits of flying cannons high in the darkened and silent skies on Christmas Eve, look upward for a star, then down over tilted wings at the winking lights below. Misty-eyed, they dream of the touch of a mother's hand, the warmth of a father's chuckle, the squeals of little ones, cookies, candles, and a choir singing "Silent Night."

Home for Christmas? For many it is but an impossible yearning.

In hospitals, while suction machines whirl and monitors bleep, some fight for their lives. Christmas is but a card, a small wreath on a tray, or the gentle touch of a nurse's hand to say, "I am with you on this day."

In jails and prisons, men and women, black and white, lie on rusting steel cots facing concrete walls, or stare upward at gray ceilings where peeling paint covers faded obscenities written by those who walked this angry path before them. All,

strong and weak alike, finally bury their faces in the mildewed canvas of a lumpy pillow and cry away the day.

Home for Christmas! In nursing homes, neglected and forgotten, the grand old people of this world reach out for a small group of strangers with cookies and carols, vainly look for comfort from an indifferent attendant bitter over a rotation system that forces her to work on a day when no person should work, struggle to hear a voice on radio or see a face on television—anyone who might bring a message of comfort and cheer.

The words echo from the centuries: *God rest ye merry, gentlemen.*

God rest ye merry? How can there be any merriment if we are not home for Christmas?

Why all this homesickness? Why does a cup of cold water seem so blessed on this day when loneliness sweeps the world like an epidemic?

Why do the Salvation Army lassies take on an almost saintly hue as they ring their little bells? They, even if you do not, will try to provide a home for those not home for Christmas.

Could this homesickness be from God himself?

Is it possible that Jesus, lying in a bed of straw on Christmas Day, was homesick? Could it be the memory of heaven still lingered? Were some of those infant tears the same tears lonely men and women shed today—tears in memory of home?

This Christmas, missionaries will gather their families about them in heathen cities, will hang red and yellow decorations on banana trees, will walk through maddening Orient markets where the world roars by without even knowing the name of that baby. They are followers of Him—men on a mission.

So He came, to bring heaven to earth, to make the Kingdom He had known and establish it on this planet.

Because of Him, men and women in many sectors of earth no longer throng taverns, no longer blast their brains with ungodly sound, no longer fill their bodies with chemicals. Because of Him children do not have to run away. Because of Him, no matter where we find ourselves on this Christmas Day, we will be home.

*O tidings of comfort and joy!* ⇨