

*Make we merry, both more and less,
For now is the time of Christmas.*

“Now is the season of the holly and the mistletoe; the days are come in which we hang our rooms with the sober green of December and feel it summer in our hearts.” Saturday Evening Post – 29 December 1866

It is, as the song puts it, “A Wonderful Time of the Year” – the most popular and celebrated holiday in the world. Let us make merry in the feast.

EX ORIENTE LUX
From the East comes Light

As Freemasons we have been taught to interpret symbols and understand allegories. The timeless values and timely virtues of Freemasonry are *‘veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.’* The symbolism of Light pervades all the various rites and orders of Freemasonry – providing ‘a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.’ We are taught to see Light as knowledge, education, morality, virtue, and Truth. This concept is expressed in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament attributed to Solomon the Wise, where we read: *“Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.”* (Ecclesiastes 2: 13)

It is no accidental coincidence that the two traditional Masonic festivals when lodges hold their Installation Ceremonies – St. John’s in Winter on the 27th December and St. John’s in Summer on the 24th June – occur in close relationship to the Solstices.

This season of festivity has its origins in that far distant ‘time out of mind’ – lost in the mists of antiquity – and has been celebrated from ‘time immemorial.’ The most casual reading of history will provide us with a long succession of sacred and secular rites and ceremonies held annually on or about the Winter Solstice. As the Sun retreated and the hours of daylight diminished, our ancestors in remote times instituted celebrations with fire and light at the darkest time of the year to induce the life-giving Sun to return – magical chants and rites to bring the Sun back to life and defeat the powers of darkness. The yearly cycle of the seasons represented birth, life, and death symbolized by the Sun. Each day following the Solstice the sun is already setting a few seconds later and rising a few seconds earlier, bringing hope and promise of new life stirring under the blanket of heavy snow. The origins of this season of festivity may be deeply imbedded in the human psyche. It seems that there is an innate longing to inject a little brightness and cheer into this darkest time of the year when the wheel of time carries us through the Winter Solstice. Under many appellations it is essentially a festival celebrated through time as the Birthday of the Sun.

FIAT LUX
Let there be light

In ancient Mesopotamia the sun was worshipped as the conqueror of night, illuminating the world and chasing away darkness. In Egypt the Sun was the supreme god Re. The Romans held their Saturnalia and celebrated the feast of Sol Invictus – the Unconquered Sun, on December 25th Dies Natalis. The Roman military cult of Mithras, of Persian origin, carried this religion with them and it spread throughout the Empire. Mithras, it was believed, was born to a virgin mother and resurrected after death. The tenets of this faith included the ideal notion of a brotherhood of man, and the promise of eternal life in return for adherence to a strict moral code. It has been suggested with reasonable veracity, that the early theological apologists were trying to put a Christian veneer on a pagan date borrowed from the Romans. The rich variety of customs, legends, customs and traditions that prevail are a mixture of Christian and pagan elements. In modern times, the festivals that cluster around the Winter Solstice – Pagan Yule, Jewish Hannukkah, Christian Christmas – all celebrate Light as the ultimate symbol of life – a spiritual and mystical Light representing the forces of good that dispel and destroy the forces of darkness. In this sense, the valiant efforts Chevy Chase depicted in the ‘Griswald Family Christmas’ although extreme and in questionable taste, are not incongruous or without historical precedence.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870), in ‘Sketches by Boz’ published ‘A Christmas Dinner’ in the ‘Morning Chronicle’ expressed the convivial spirit of the season: *“Christmas time! That man must be a misanthrope indeed, in whose breast something like a jovial feeling is not roused – in whose mind some pleasant associations are not awakened – by the recurrence of Christmas. There are people that will tell you that Christmas is not to them what it used to be; that each succeeding Christmas has found some cherished hope, or happy prospect, of the year before, dimmed or passed away; that the present only serves to remind them of reduced circumstances and straightened incomes. ... Never heed such dismal reminiscences. ... Reflect upon your present blessings – of which every man has many – not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some. Fill your glass again, with a merry face and contented heart. Our life on it, but your Christmas shall be merry, and your new year a happy one!”*

Elsewhere Dickens wrote: *“Christmas comes but once a year – which is unhappily too true, for when it begins to stay with us the whole year round we shall make the earth a very different place.”* As Masons, true to our high calling, it is our professed credo in life to strive to make our small corner of the universe ‘a very different place’ – a better place! In the days and weeks ahead we will hear again the essential message of Christmas that was sung by the heavenly host: *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.”* In the vocabulary of Freemasonry that is what Masons mean by *‘The Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.’*

Brenda joins me in wishing for all, a most joyous holiday season, with good health and much happiness in the New Year.

Raymond S.J. Daniels, Grand Master