

## Christmas in Korea

My earliest memory of Christmas is of standing shivering at the window at 4:00 A.M. holding a candle (there was no electricity) while listening to Korean choirs sing their favorite carol below the window: "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!" More than any other, these words carried the message which could be sung with "great joy" by those to whom salvation in the name of Jesus was not only "good news" but "new news!" This custom of more than 50 years ago when my parents were missionaries in Korea has now been replaced by our Western practice of caroling by young people on Christmas Eve, yet the joy of witnessing to the birth of our Saviour now rings out to every corner of a land which celebrates the 100th anniversary of the arrival of Protestant missionaries in 1984.

Christmas observance in Korea centers in the church and on music. Her Christians do not have all the traditions we Americans associate with the day. Santa Claus, elaborate decorations, gift giving, family gatherings, and turkey with all the trimmings are so much a part of Christmas for us that we cannot think how it could be celebrated otherwise. Only recently have some of these things such as Santa Claus and Christmas trees, come to Korea. Gifts are exchanged, but not to the degree with which we are familiar. Much of the festivities we enjoy are observed by Koreans on the Lunar New Year's Day which comes later in January or early February. On Christmas Day, Christian activity is in the churches with numerous programs of music.

Every Korean church has a service on Christmas Day, and most church members are present. In many respects it is like a Sunday morning worship service, except that the sermon is shorter and there is more music. Koreans love music and some of them are attaining world recognition as professional musicians. Many of the latter, including an astonishing number of stars of movie and TV fame, are Christians who learned their music in Sunday School and church choirs which on the average (at least in the cities) probably excel those in America. I sometimes wonder if it could be proved that Handel's "Messiah" is performed in its entirety by more churches and musical groups in Korea (on the average) than in any country in the whole world!

A more modern feature of Christmas in Korea are the magnificent Christmas television shows. Though largely government controlled, our Korean networks provide some of the finest musical entertainment to be found anywhere. One Christmas morning some years ago when I was sick and could not go out, I watched the "Messiah" with full choir and orchestra, other splendid musical shows, and an inspiring sermon from one of the great churches in Seoul. Knowing that many of the performers are Christians and sang from the heart made it all the more meaningful. Enormous Christmas trees, brilliantly lighted, are set up on the DMZ (de-militarized zone) within sight of the half-million man North Korean communist army a mile or so away, and the loudest amplifying systems Korean electronic experts can devise blare the Christmas carols and the spoken news of the Saviour for the benefit of those just beyond all those bristling guns who know no such light and joy.

It has been the practice of the Hoppers for a good many years to attend the Christmas morning service at the Soh-seng Church about 12 miles from Chonju. Most of the members of this church have had leprosy, though it is claimed the disease is now arrested or cured. Nevertheless, the scars of that terrible disease still show on many faces and some have lost fingers and toes. Their service is always a festive occasion, with the church gaily decorated, the choir singing perhaps a half dozen music numbers, and others, including children's groups, singing. Awards for attendance at Sunday School, or faithfulness as choir members, are distributed on that day, and we come away feeling that here the birth of the Saviour has been remembered as He would like for us to remember.

For Korean Christians, Christmas is also a day of gift-giving to the unfortunate. Food and other necessities are taken to orphanages, homes for the aged, the prisons, the sick, and soldiers in lonely outposts. We praise God that in this way, they remember the words of John 4:11, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Joe B. Hopper