

## "A CHILD IS BORN"

The Wise Men who saw the star in the East were probably Persians and Zoroastrians. They were students of the heavens. The unusual star they saw on the night of the birth of Jesus was no accident or legend. Its reality is a matter of historical and scientific record. Modern astronomy tells us that about every 20 years the planet JUPITER seems to pass SATURN in the sky. When this happens, they are said to be in conjunction. Every 805 years, MARS passes close to Jupiter and Saturn while the latter two are near each other. The result is a conjunction of three planets. This happened in 1604 and will happen again in 2409. It happened also in 799 A. D. and in 6 B. C.. Thus in the early months of 6 B. C. a celestial phenomenon like a huge bright, moving star was taking place which had not been seen before by any person then living. Astronomy provides us with strong evidence that the day of birth of Jesus came in the year 6 B. C..

There are other signs which point to this date. Matthew, in his Gospel account, says that Jesus was born in the days of King Herod. We are told that King Herod died in the year 4 B. C.. This means that Jesus was born shortly before the year 4 B. C.. Luke, in his account of the birth of Jesus, says that the birth of Jesus fell in a tax year. Archeologists have unearthed records of such tax decrees in 28 B. C., 8 B. C. and 14 A. D.. Considering the slow transportation and communication in those days, and the fact that Palestine was on the outskirts of the Empire, it is conceivable that the journey of Mary and Joseph may have been under way in 6 B. C..

The purpose of this factual information is to point out that history, archeology, and astronomy confirm the gospel story and the fact of the birth of Jesus. In other words, that birth is no mere legend. The celebration of that event is not simply a nice tradition for the benefit of children and merchants. The Christian religion does not start with fairy stories. It is based on the unquestioned fact

of the coming of Jesus into the world. We must get back to the original source of our faith. It is not enough for us to look back to John Wesley, or John Calvin, or Martin Luther. It is not enough for us to reflect on the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, or Augustine, or the Apostle Paul. We must go back to Jesus. Our Christian witness will never lose its appeal and power so long as it keeps a living relationship with the historical Jesus. And there is no better place to begin than at the beginning.

"For unto you is born this day  
in the city of David, a Saviour  
which is Christ the Lord."

This is the one fixed point in time which establishes our Christian religion. Our own faith is renewed as we attend the birth of the Saviour.

#### I.

We recognize that the birth of Jesus is the most important single event in human history. Regardless of the exact date, the fact itself stands out as the great watershed of human affairs. It changed the moral and spiritual climate of the earth. We can't separate the result from the cause, although there are those who try to do so.

For instance, in the Preface to Androcles and the Lion, George Bernard Shaw took the attitude that our view of Jesus or his existence does not matter so long as we have Christianity. This is a serious fallacy. It may not matter who wrote the plays of Shakespeare, but it does matter that Jesus lived.

Our knowledge of man in society is said to go back nine thousand years. In all this time, declared President Whitney Griswold of Yale, society

"Has depended upon its members as individuals for those creative achievements of mind and spirit that have guided it along the path of civilization. The spark from heaven falls. Who picks it up? The

crowd? Never. The individual?  
Always. It is he, and he alone  
as artist, inventor, explorer,  
scholar, scientist, spiritual  
leader or statesman, who stands  
nearest to the source of life and  
transmits its essence to his fellow  
men....."

We find the supreme illustration of this truth in the birth and person of Jesus. Christianity did not begin in a caucus room filled with cigar smoke. It began with Jesus. Of all men he is the most significant. Name the leading names in every field of human activity. Weigh well their influence, their genius, their power, their character, their works. And not one single name in all the long annals of the race of men, in any department of life, can even faintly compare with the name of Jesus.

Name the statesmen: Gladstone, Lincoln, Washington.  
Name the scientists: Galileo, Copernicus, Edison.  
Name the authors: Shakespeare, Tolstoi, Milton.  
Name the artists: Michelangelo, Raphael, Da Vinci.  
Name the musicians: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms.  
Name the philosophers: Plato, Kant, Whitehead.  
Name the saints: Francis of Assisi, Augustine, Chrysostom.  
Name the religious leaders: Moses, Isaiah, Confucius.

Name them all! Call the roll of every great of every age. Above and beyond them all is the one name with a dignity, a meaning, a place, a depth, a power, a beauty, an influence....all its own, the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

It's no accident that this is so. Much of the greatest in art, literature, music, architecture, has been inspired by the name of Jesus. Much of the progress in education, law, healing, decency, and enlightenment, dates from the birth of Jesus. Most of the worthwhile achievements in history since the birth of Jesus were made possible by influences he set in motion. Women have been liberated. Children have been honored and protected. The aged have been cared for. The ordinary man has been made great. In Jesus' name, men and women of every age and of all ages have found strength for the burdens of life, have been made victorious in suffering and have kept faith with themselves, with others and with God.

"For unto you is born this day  
in the city of David, a Saviour  
which is Christ the Lord."

So you see, it's no small affair we celebrate when the honor the birth-day of Jesus. To make it a matter of sickly sentiment or an <sup>OCCASION</sup> ~~orgy~~ of commercialized greed or a time of riotous pleasure is to miss its meaning. With humble minds and radiant hearts, we kneel before the manger where Jesus was born. For we see that his birth is the most important single event in human history!

## II.

The meaning of the birth of Jesus lies in its demonstration of the presence of God in human life. From the beginning of time, man had sought to know and appease the Unknown and the Unseen. He had worshipped the sun God and the moon God. He had populated the skies with demons and witches and strange spirits of many descriptions. Then, in the fulness of time, Jesus came to show men what God is like. It was a demonstration of God showing himself as a factor in human experience. It meant that God's world is not bound by impersonal laws. God has a part in it, a personal part. The measure of life is not nature, but persons. The key to understanding God is not fear, but love. God resides not in the winds or sun or moon, but in human life.

Certainly it was not an auspicious time for such a demonstration. It was no fair and happy day on which Jesus was born. The world was an armed camp. It was a harsh and cruel Roman world reeking with hatred and wracked with injustice. Roman legions were everywhere. The world was ruled by a totalitarian dictator. Freedom was unknown to the majority of people. All men paid tribute to Rome, and Roman soldiers were enforcing the laws without mercy. Fear, cruelty, passion and misery were everywhere.

Yet in such a time as that God dared to declare his love for men in this strange, unlikely manner. He sent his son into the world in the form

of a newborn baby! From every human viewpoint this was an absurdity. What chance did a baby have against the might and pomp of the Roman Empire. What chance did love have against the ruthless cruelty of the Roman armies. What chance did the Babe of Bethlehem have to triumph over the authority of Emperor Caesar Augustus? History has given us the answers. The power and glory of Rome have long since vanished. Centuries later millions around the world still rever the Child as Lord and Master. why? Because, ~~[in the words of John Buchan]~~ the one born in Palestine "was to proclaim a kingdom mightier than the Romans and to tell of a world saved not by Man who became God, but by God who became Man."

Thank God for a God like that! A God who is all-wise, all-sufficient, and all-powerful. Yet a God who does not dwell in some remote place unconcerned and unapproachable. But a God who comes to live and suffer with men. not in some spirit form; but in one person at a given point in time. This is the supreme idea of the centuries. This is the tremendous reality that gives the Christian faith to the ages. ~~This is the theme song of the Christian faith through the years.~~ If God were not in him, then, in the words of Beverley Nichols:

"For nearly two thousand years the world  
has been in the thrall of a Jewish lunatic."

We can believe this demonstration of God in human life because we have seen it repeated in different forms and lesser degrees. Always in some dark hour, when the world least expected it, when odds were against it, some Paul, some Martin Luther, some Jane Adams would demonstrate its truth. For instance, take the case of William Booth as he undertook to bring God to the slums of London. He said:

"I hungered for Hell. I pushed into the midst of it, the East Side of London. For days I stood in the seething streets, drinking it all in and loving it all; yes, I loved it because I loved the souls that made up the muddy stream. I went home one night to my wife and said to her: I have given myself, I have given

you, and I have given our children to the service of these souls."

Yes, the birth of Jesus is God's guarantee that he is not content to leave the world in its misery and darkness without a light. When the night is the darkest, his star appears in the East to those who have the eyes to see. When men are bewildered, there are Wise Men who are led by God to the truth. When it seems that men have forgotten God, it becomes plain to loving hearts that God has not forgotten them.

This, you see, is the meaning of Christmas.

"Welcome! all Wonders in one sight!  
Eternity shut in a span.  
Summer in winter, day in night,  
Heaven in earth, and God in man.  
Great little one! Whose all-embracing birth  
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven down to earth!

LET US PRAY:

Our Father, fill our hearts with joy, and our tongues with praise as this day we celebrate the birth of Thy Son. Stir up in our hearts the gift of faith, that his spirit may be born in us. In Thy name we pray. Amen.

## A CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

A child was born in a stable....

There was no room in the crowded inn for Him....

His cradle was a crude manger in a stall for cattle....

His coming was known only to a few shepherds who heard the voices of angels, and a few astrologers who had enough wisdom to follow a star....

It's a tender story of plain people in a simple setting....

With all of our love for the spectacular and glamorous, we would not have it otherwise....

It's a story that thrills our hearts every time we hear it....

The underlying circumstances attending the birth of Jesus REFLECT the beauty and the simplicity of our Christian Faith. There's something in this story that tells us that SAVIORS are not born in palaces, and that God is perfectly at home in a barn.

It's easy to mistake GRANDEUR for GREATNESS in our kind of world. Often we confuse GLITTER with GOLD, GAIETY with GLADNESS, and FANATICISM WITH FAITH. But things are not always what they seem to be. We need to know that often the most real and genuine and valuable things in life come in the plainest garb and are to be found in the most unsuspected places.

Some years ago a Chicago art gallery sold the art objects of the estate of a wealthy banker, J. I. Cooper. There were many marbles and tapestries which brought big prices. Included in the lot was an old painting of little apparent value. ~~Robert Grant~~, the dealer, said: "The painting looked like it was worth \$14.75 to us.....very primitive." And that was the price it brought. But a few years later the man that bought it, W. L. Lerche, resold it for \$50,000. The painting had been recognized as "Flight Into Egypt", by Pelegrin Minerva, an early Greek artist. Its whereabouts had been unknown since it was stolen in Italy in the 17th Century.

It is too often that way with us. ~~We wouldn't expect to find the Holy Family living in a crowded slum area of this city.~~ We pass up the most valuable things of all in our admiration for the Glitter and Tinsel of life. Sometimes we put a cheap price on such old fashioned things as LOVE and FAITHFULNESS, and REVERENCE, and PURITY, and HONOR; because we think they are primitive and out of date..... The birth of a child in a stable and the flight into Egypt - these things never seem important. YET NOTHING in all the galleries of the world can mean more to our hearts and lives than these. For they speak to our hearts of the love of God for men and the faith of God in human personality.

We miss the deep truths of the Christian faith sometimes because we are afraid to be simple. We need to know that the greatest things are the simplest things. God doesn't want our doubts and questions..... He wants our worship!

He wants our hearts!

He wants us to be wise enough to follow a star!

And simple enough to hear the songs of the angels...

We shouldn't let our sophistications and our intellectual snobbery get in our way....

There are things our hearts know that our heads will never know....

We do not have to know everything in order to believe....

~~Consider the words of the distinguished scientist Sir James Jeans:~~

"The ultimate realities of the universe are at present quite beyond the comprehension of the human mind...."

~~So it is that SCIENTISTS have to believe without knowing.~~ || To be sure, our faith needs to be as intelligent as possible. But thank God we do not have to know all the answers to KNOW him and LOVE him as he is, the Father of love and mercy as revealed in Jesus, his Son. This is the ultimate reality, and we find it at the manger in Bethlehem.



The world little knew or heeded what was taking place that night so long ago. The Child was born and the world passed by. The inn was crowded and the people were preoccupied...

The world we live in is also cluttered and unheeding. But this need not keep us away.

The Child of Bethlehem lures us from our empty and shallow living...

~~The Child of Bethlehem warns us against being too smart for our own good...~~

The Child bids us learn again the greatness of simple things....

Child invites us to become as children in our love of wonder and our eagerness for life...

The Child touches our aching and burdened hearts with joy and peace from heavenly places....

~~Tired.....~~

~~disillusioned.....~~

~~lonely....~~

~~we bring our choicest gifts of devotion.....~~

O Wondrous night of star and song,  
O blessed Christmas night!  
Lord, make me feel my whole life long  
Its loveliness and light!  
So all the years my heart shall thrill  
Remembering angels on a hill,  
And one lone star shall bless me still  
On every Christmas night!