

"A PREFACE TO CHRISTMAS"

INTRODUCTION

Right now most of us are busy getting ready for Christmas. We are busy with our Christmas shopping. We are busy with trips to the post office. We are busy decorating, planning our holidays, our parties and our dinners. All of these things are good. It is good to give presents. It is good to send messages of our love and affection to our friends. It is good for us to express at least once a year what we may feel in our hearts all through the years, but are either too busy, too shy, or too inhibited to say.

The danger is that we get so wound up in our preparations that it is almost impossible for us to take anything in, let alone the meaning of Christmas. We go to a concert and we are too tense to listen, too restless to sit still for any length of time; there are so many things that we should be doing in getting ready for Christmas that we fail to enjoy the moment. We go for a walk and we are in too much of a hurry to look at anything, to see anything. We see a person and we are too pressed to listen to what the person says, too anxious to move on, to get the next thing done.

To put it more explicitly, we are so busy getting ready for Christmas that we are likely to miss Christmas when it comes. Christmas, I would remind you, is the celebration of an event, one of those rare events that has cosmic repercussions. Some events are like a stone that strikes the pavement with a dull thud, and that is the end of it; it's over and done with. Others are like stones that fall into water and ripples go out from it - out and out, and do not cease until they reach the farthest shore. Christmas was an event like that, and the ripples are still reaching out to include us. ...across twenty centuries.

THE EVENT

The event itself was almost unnoticeable. A Baby was born at an inconvenient time, in an unsuitable place, and under unusual circumstances, and yet in this very Baby the Meaning of Life began to take shape! The Word of God was spoken so that it could be heard. The repercussions of the event have not yet ceased.

God in a manger; that's a mystery. It's something like this. You have in a cup a drop of sea water and in that drop of water you see the nature of the Seven Seas. You do not see them in their full sweep; you do not see them as they rage and swell in the storm, nor as they rise and fall regularly twice daily in response to the tidal pull of the moon, nor as they idle in the calm of the setting sun. But you see them in their essential nature in that single drop. So, in this Particular Life - in the life of Christ - you see God in his essential nature. You do not see him in the great sweep of his cosmic activity, but you see the essential nature of his being - his care, his love, his understanding and his demands; his desire to reach out and be identified with the people he has made. He is not only the Creator; he has also the will to become a creature.

This is too simple and at the same time too profound to take in on the run or on the go. You have to be still; not idle, but quiet. The best way to get ready for Christmas may be to cut the shopping down to the bare essentials; to trim the Christmas mailing list to those who know you and really care about you; to stay home for a while; to read, to think. Read one Gospel through from beginning to end between now and two weeks from now. Do everything you can to reduce the frenzy that all too often ends in exhaustion. This is the first note in the Preface to Christmas: a celebration against the background of a silent night in which a baby's cry and an angel's song can be heard.

A CONTRADICTION

If you do stop long enough to take Christmas in, you will realize that there is always a contradiction buried in the heart of Christmas. There is always, at least there is for me as I approach the season every year, an inconsistency about it, and in one way or another it troubles me as I suspect it does you.

Christmas is a festival of light. I was reminded of this on Thursday in the late afternoon as I watched on television the lighting of the tree in Rockefeller Center, and this afternoon at five the annual lighting of the Memorial Christmas Trees on Park Avenue will take place. The Boy Scouts of our church, incidently, will be sharing in the lighting of the trees this year for the first time. Christmas is a festival of light.

Cities all over the world are trimmed with lights; yet the world is dark. Wherever you look, you see darkness. The heaviest shadows are over Vietnam; but there are other dark places. There are threats of war and violence in Cyprus where Greece and Turkey have come to the edge of a military confrontation. Friction continues between Israel and the Arab nations around her. Indonesia and Malaya have been have troubles and problems. There is trouble in South Africa. Here at home, we have our troubles and various forms of violence, and all over our nation Black Power is being matched more and more against white power in a frightening conflict that has already burst into devastating flames in a number of our cities.

Also, there is the darkness that hangs over individuals - the darkness of sorrow and unhappiness, fear and anxiety. Some people have been through the dark valley of the shadow of death. Some are facing illness. Some are looking forward to a life that has no future; their days are numbered and their friends have gone.

This is the contradiction of Christmas; there is great darkness over most of the world, yet the cities are all decorated with light, ready to burst into gaiety and song. Somehow this is an inconsistency that makes us feel uneasy.

We say to ourselves: How can we reconcile these two opposities? We cannot, as far as I can see. In the literal sense, light and darkness go together, hand in hand, like man and woman; or positive and negative, like the two poles of a battery. They are never reconciled; that is, they are never fused into one. And they are always present, one over against the other. Using their words in their figurative meaning, it is true to say that never has there been a time in the world when there was not a trace of either sorrow or sin, never a time. Sorrow is something like fog. Fog settles upon us and makes the going hard. We are not responsible for fog. Fog is made when air of different temperatures meet in such a way as to produce a heavy mist near the surface of the earth. Sin is like smog, and smog is a compound of smoke and fog, and we are partly responsible for the smoke. We are not responsible for many of the sorrows that come to us, our responsibility for sin is another matter.

If sometimes we feel uneasy singing for joy on Christmas, when hearts are breaking, bodies are bleeding, people are starving, homes being bombed, we are no different from those who have gone before us. There has never been a Christmas over which there were no shadows - never. Herod's armies marched through the silent night of the first Christmas, and they have been marching in one way or another ever since.

This, my friends, is the kind of world we live in, and nothing makes this paradox, this inconsistency, this contradiction, more clear than the first line of the 97th psalm: "The Lord is King, the earth may be glad thereof.....clouds and darkness are around him". Way back in the Old Testament days there was the inconsistency both seen and faced. The two irreconcilable opposites stand there, neither yielding to the other: the King on the one hand, clouds and darkness on the other.

TIMES WHEN WE SING IN THE DARK

There are times, however, when we can and do sing even in the dark. You might almost say - in spite of the dark. We go to a hospital; we see someone there who is pushing back the darkness by relieving pain, sometimes curing the disease completely; sometime setting a person free to go about his way as a well human being. There is sickness all around us in the hospital, but when we see that happen, we can sing in the dark and give thanks for the doctors and the nurses for this breakthrough of light into the shadows that hang over every hospital ward.

We go further in the same hospital and we see another person who is facing the darkness without any possibility of recovery, without any hope of pushing the darkness back; he or she is facing the dark - but facing it so quietly, so calmly, with so much courage and confidence that we sing for joy and we say: "Here is a marvelous spirit...one that is shining like a brilliant light in the darkness".

We watch the news of the world. We see, if we look at it honestly, the blunders of men and nations. We wonder if we shall ever learn the lessons that history has to teach us. We become depressed. We see what it means to other people to suffer the pain and the agony of war. And then suddenly, we see someone in a high and important office, close to the heart of political power, make a dramatic shift from Secretary of Defense to head of the World Bank that has responsibility for loans to under-developed, backward nations. When we see this happen, all sorts of guessing games begin as to WHY it happened. When we see a man like Robert McNamara express interest in the economic development of the under-developed nations of the world, when we read of his brilliant speech in Montreal a year ago when he spoke of the "irrefutable relationship between violence and economic backwardness....and that security is not military hardware, although it may include it. Security is development"...when we see this shift from the weapons of destruction to the weapons that overcome poverty - we begin to shout for joy in the darkness.

We watch the news of the world each day hoping and praying that the two rival powers on Vietnam's battlefield will be able to negotiate a cease-fire at Christmas, and that we shall stop the bombing for the celebration of the birthday of the Prince of Peace. Such agreements, I suppose, seem to intensify the inconsistency of Christmas. Some say, "Why stop for a day" "if you are going to start it again"....

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But such an agreement, if it is worked out, is a sign that the two rival powers are able to agree about something.....that they have been able to put down on paper something that they can agree to do, and this is something that we can be thankful for, and look upon it as a first step. It may also be a sign that the human conscience is not completely dead and buried. It may be a sign that the present darkness is being pushed back by the light, by all that is best though often buried in human beings - pushed back only for a moment, perhaps, a day, but if pushed back even for a day, it may be pushed back further until finally it recedes in the face of the positive power of light.

TWO THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT CHRISTMAS.

There are two things to remember as we approach Christmas this year.

The first thing to remember is that darkness is the absence of light. ~~Light is the positive thing.~~ Darkness is the absence of light and when light asserts itself, the darkness disappears. When the light of intelligence asserts itself, the darkness of ignorance is gradually pushed back. When the light of understanding and care asserts itself, the darkness of hostility and hatred is pushed back, not always as completely as we wish it were, but we have seen it happen. You have seen a person come in to a situation that is bristling with hostility, with friction, with animosity - a

person can come into that situation - a person full of understanding, care, fairness, and honesty - and by his very presence push back that whole cloud of hostility, until there is calmness and sanity in the group. This is the first thing to remember and this is the thing that all of us should pledge ourselves to do....not only during this season of Christmas, but all year long.

The second thing is this: the clouds and the darkness that you can not get rid of you can sometimes rise above. Let me illustrate what I mean. A year ago last summer, my wife and I had a short fifty minute flight from Brussels to London. Brussels was grey, dreary and overcast as we made our way to the airport. The clouds were low and thick as the plane took off. As we rose higher and higher into the air, something happened that many of you I'm sure have experienced over and over again. We rose completely out of the clouds into the brightness of the sun which it seemed to me had disappeared from the earth while we were in Brussels. As we flew through the air across the English Channel, it was as if we were riding upon the clouds, as upon a floor. When we came down, we came back through the clouds into a gray, over-cast London. But for close to an hour, we were out of the clouds, above them in the light and we could see the light and we knew it had not gone out.

There are times when you are lifted above the clouds and the darkness that cling to the earth. The clouds and the darkness are not eliminated. They are there just the same, but something lifts you up so that you see the brightness of the immortal Father's face, which is always there, always shining, no matter how the clouds and the darkness ~~may~~ may hide him from those on earth. Everyone has experiences like that. Sometimes you have it at concerts; sometimes at a play; sometimes sitting beside a friend; sometimes viewing new life through the window of a hospital nursery; sometimes sitting at the deathbed of a person. You feel as though you were taken right up above the clouds and you ride on them in perfect sunlight.

Christmas is one of those times. It takes us, perhaps only for a brief spell, above the clouds and the darkness that hang over this earth of ours and in that moment we see what the psalmist said long ago: "The Lord is King, the earth may be glad thereof.....even though clouds and darkness are still around ~~about~~ him!"

PRAYER Help us, O God, as we draw near to the birthday of Jesus; keep us free enough from the things that are so likely to clutter our lives that we will not have time to stop and think what his birth means to us.

Open our eyes that we can look fearlessly at the clouds and darkness all around us; but grant that we may be lifted above them long enough to see that the sun is never blotted out, never goes down, is light - now and forever. Amen