

INTRODUCTION

The history of American business is filled with many a story of companies that slipped out of the hands of the founding family and came under outside control. Poor performance together with a sound strategy for gathering up sufficient votes are usually enough to get it done.

I've always had a soft place in my heart for family members who have been ousted in this way - however deservingly. Once in charge of policy and production, they look on helplessly as other hands and minds move in.

As a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I confess to being distressed at times that Christmas has passed from the "family control" of the church and come under the influence of secular celebrants. In those alien hands Christmas has been commercialized, sentimentalized, vulgarized and mythologized. Such, I suppose, is the price for going public.

What really hurts is that we seldom let the Gospel message speak to us at those deeper levels of need where the human spirit cries repeatedly for hope and certainty. Christmas has some vital things to say to the larger questions of life, and this morning I should like to illustrate what I mean and do this in the manner of a personal testimony.

DIFFERENT VIEW OF TIME

Because Jesus came, I have a different view of time than might otherwise be the case.

In a way time is one of those realities we all understand until we sit down to think about it. At the personal level, each of us must come to terms with time sooner or later. At some point along the way I suspect that every normal human being feels threatened by the irreversibility of time's one-way flow. We know that while the clock ticks off time evenly we do not experience time evenly. Hence, we have been known to say on some occasions, "How time flies", and on other occasions, "How the time seems to drag".

But the big question regarding time has to do with its ultimate meaning. Is time going anywhere?

Loren Eiseley gives us a striking vignette of life as he encountered it while departing from New York City on a weekend train. It was midnight, and he was tired as he moved into the smoking section of the car. After seating himself, he noticed a man a few seats forward who was obviously pale, poor and disheveled. The little brown sack in his lap suggested that this was all he had to his name. Let Eiseley tell the story from this point on:

"By degrees the train filled and took its way into the dark. After a time the door opened and the conductor shouldered his way in, demanding tickets. I had one sleepy eye fastened on the dead-faced derelict. It is thus one hears from the Gods. 'Tickets' bawled the conductor. I suppose everyone in the car was watching for the usual thing to occur. But what happened was much more terrible. Slowly the man opened his eyes - a dead man's eyes. Slowly a stick-like arm reached down and fumbled in his pocket, producing a roll of bills. 'Give me' he said then, and his voice held the croak of a raven in a churchyard. 'Give me a ticket to wherever it is'"

Is time going anywhere?

The coming of Jesus into our world at a given point in time, after adequate preparation in time, with a future mission and program for time, helps me to understand time in a linear way. Time moves on an upward slanting line. It is highly significant that the years, after Christ's birth, are numbered forward and backward from that centering event in time.

As you know, there are cultures in our world and have always been, where time is seen as circular, cyclical, repetitive. In such a view of time nothing sticks, nothing finally matters. Time is simply a wheel that keeps spinning on a fixed axis to no ultimate purpose or meaning.

Let us be reminded than on this Christmas Sunday that we are heirs of the Hebrew view of time. We believe that time has a beginning and an end. We differ from our Jewish friends only in our belief that the mid-point has already come in the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem. Time is not the enemy of eternity. Eternity has come to dwell in time. Every year is ANNO DOMINI - a year of our Lord, just as every month, week, day and minute is of and to the Lord.

DIFFERENT VIEW OF HISTORY

Because Jesus came I have a different view of history than might otherwise be the case.

One way of looking at history is to see it as nothing more than the result of natural necessity. Mindless forces simply carry life along. History is lacking in any transcendent reference point and partakes of no durable forms of meaning. Shakespeare caught this sentiment and philosophy when he described history as:

"A tale told by an idiot, full of sound
and fury, Signifying nothing."

Those who believe in a purely naturalistic view of history look for no salvation - for none is possible and none is necessary.

With the coming of Jesus into the world I learn that God, however, takes human history seriously and that I must take it seriously, too. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us". History is not to be endured. It is not to be transcended. It is to be thankfully received as the theater of God's work and God's glory! Jesus - the Child of Bethlehem - became involved early on in the very concrete stuff of history.

Does it ever bother you to find among your Christmas cards a notice from the IRS or the monthly bill from the Telephone Company, or perhaps a statement from the bank advising you of some financial matter? It bothers me. I received all three on Friday of this week. Why can't they wait until after Christmas. Or, why can't they wait so that we might at least have our happiness in certain weeks of the year and our misery in others. But, it is the very mix of Christmas and bills that goes to make up human history. You always have the stable and the star connected - the shepherds and the angels, Caesar and God. Jesus came into history in all of its concreteness. Let it be remember, especially on this Christmas Sunday, that God's glory and peace on earth are part of the same angel song!

We cannot at Christmas simply sing about angels and listen to the ringing of the bells. To be consistent with the One whose birth we celebrate, we must take history seriously. We must not weary in so doing. We must beware of turning to a pietistic inwardness that would renounce the world and live above the needs of man.

God takes history seriously. Earth is not the opposite of heaven; it is the object of God's love. We pray, as Christians have always prayed, "that His will may be done on earth, even as it is in heaven".

DIFFERENT VIEW OF GOD

Because Jesus came, I have a different view of God than might otherwise be the case.

Those who think of God at all tend to think of Him in terms of unapproachable power, majesty and righteousness. The common figures for God that rush to our minds are those of moral judge, ruling monarch, omnipotent creator. When we contemplate the manner of Jesus' coming - the style of His life, and note the suffering love that marked His years on earth, we must review such views of God.

And care must be taken not to go along too glibly with those who suggest that since man has so come of age, God is merely on the inside in the role of a recording secretary. He still has power. He has not abdicated His position.

A professor widely known for his great ego was recently one-upped in a very galling way by one of his students. This learned man was showing a friend into his office. As he neared his typewriter, he noticed that someone had typed him a message. He couldn't resist taking it out of the carriage and reading it. The note said:

"Today is Tuesday. Yesterday was Monday. Tomorrow will be Wednesday. Is this alright with you?"

Signed,
God.

The Almighty, I believe, is not in that position, however much the advocates of Christian secularism might suggest to the contrary.

But as we near this Christmas Story we learn that God came not to judge nor condemn. He came to save us not from without by fear, but from within by love.

God came in Jesus to make a name for Himself! By the nature of Jesus, we begin to learn what the nature of God is like. Through the lens of Jesus, I see God as a Father who loves, who forgives, who suffers, who cares.

A DIFFERENT VIEW OF MYSELF

Finally, because Jesus came I have a different view of myself than otherwise might be the case.

I confess that I frequently experience a crisis inwardly in self-confidence. I wonder...do I have some company among any of you? At times I feel so physically insignificant. When some of our finest men go cavorting into outer space they remind me again of how small we are in relation to the universe that is our home.

Light travels at a little over one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second, far beyond the conceivable speed of any space vehicle yet devised by man, and

yet it takes light something like one hundred thousand years just to travel across the star field of the Milky Way. It has been estimated that to reach the nearest star field to our own - four light years away - would require at the present speed of our space ships, a time equivalent to more than the whole of written history.

I feel politically insignificant. No matter what I think or feel or say, nothing really happens that I can see. At times I feel vocationally insignificant. Who of us is not interchangeable with another or replaceable by another? And when I look within I feel the pressure of my own moral failings, my lack of growth. The faults I readily renounce in others are present in a large and annoying manner in my own life.

And yet - with Christmas I sense that however small my worth might be in my own eyes, I am of worth, ~~incalculable~~ worth to God. Made in God's image, the object of His seeking and saving love, He took our human flesh upon Him. And what higher compliment can be paid to a human than this, that God chose to dwell among us as a human being.

SUMMARY Because He came, I have a different view of time, of history, of God, and of myself. In short, Christmas is a revelation. And the correlate of revelation is faith. And what is Bethlehem, or Nazareth, or Galilee, or Gethsemane, or Golgotha, or Joseph's Garden - but an invitation to faith. And quietly here this hour, I invite you to take this "leap of faith".

PRAYER Lord, clarify our thoughts and purify our will as we journey once again to Bethlehem's manger and brush up against eternal truth.

Whatever be our state or condition, or age, education or background, grant that the glorious wonder of the Word made Flesh may claim our lives anew - with deep compelling force, and make each of us forever different. In the name and spirit of the Christ Child.