

"CHRISTMAS AND THE MODERN WORLD"

TEXT: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem" (Matthew 2: 1)

INTRODUCTION

If Jesus had been born "in the days" in which we live, how would his coming have been handled by the press. Assuming that the news media heard of the event and perceived it to be something of great importance, how would it have been announced in the papers? Would it have been placed in the midst of the routine news of the world, or would it have been treated in a different way?

DEVELOPMENT

Three years ago, in 1962, the editors of the St. Petersburg Times did an unusual thing with their Christmas edition. It had, for that day only, two front pages. The editors of the paper, in a box on the front page, explained the reason for this unique edition. Under the heading, "Good News Today", they said:

"In keeping with the Christmas spirit and tradition, the Times this morning has two front pages. Only good news and news in the holiday vein appear on this page. For full reports on other happenings around the world, please see the second front page, Page 3 A. Merry Christmas"

And true to their word, this one front page had nothing but good news. The large picture on the front showed Santa Claus, dressed in his red outfit and white whiskers, stretched out on a patio chair next to a swimming pool, his boots off, his feet bare in the warm Florida sunshine. Other stories told of how "Pilgrims Enter Ancient Gates of Holy Land", of the way in which the Christmas spirit helped a needy family in the eastern hills of Kentucky, of the Pope blessing the human family, of a first Christmas in Maine in the year 1604. All of it very cheerful and heart-warming.

The second front page had the news of the world. And it was quite a contrast. The headline of this front page read, "Cuban Freedom Fighters Praised by President Kennedy". Other headlines told of how "Masked Gunmen Grab \$100,000" in Chicago. Another story dealt with an account of a father and nine children burned to death in a fire in Nova Scotia. Still another headline dealt with a clash in the Congo and the growing threat in Viet Nam.

NOT TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

Two front pages, two different worlds - at least in the opinion of the editors of the St. Petersburg Times. The impression given by all of this was that these two types of events had nothing to do with each other - that the beauty and loveliness of Christmas could not be touched by the realities of the modern world, that the beauty and loveliness of Christmas would have been destroyed by being set side by side with the brutal and harsh stories of the every day world. And by the same token, the impression was created by this that there was nothing in the Christmas story that could have any possible bearing on the events of the modern world. Two worlds - hence two pages.

Now I am not quarreling with the editors for doing this, for I'm sure they felt they were doing something that would add to the joy of this holy season. Nevertheless, what a tremendous contrast between their approach and the approach of the writers of the Christmas story. Mind you, there are not two front pages in the Biblical account - one announcing the Holy Birth and the other dealing with the historical events of that day. In the Bible, the two accounts are interwoven, kept side by side. The haunting loveliness of the Christmas story is set down in the very midst of the chronicle of human folly, hatred, violence, and sin. There is no evidence that the two belong in

separate accounts. It even suggests by this approach the conviction on the part of the early Christians that the two worlds be kept together, thereby saving faith from a vapid sentimentality and the world from a suicidal folly.

THE BIBLICAL SETTING

We need on occasion to be reminded that the event of Christ's coming did not take place in some never-never land where no problems existed, where all was serene and ideal. This event of Christ's coming took place on this common earth, at a particular time in the history of mankind, in a far our province of the great imperial power of that day which was ruled by ruthless and rough men. The land in which this momentous event took place was small in size, weak in resources, its people had known nothing but suffering and heart-ache for generations. They had been a pawn in the game of power politics and time and again the tides of war had surged across their land. Their memories were bitter; their hopes fragile.

Luke, in his Gospel, anchors the event in history by recording that the decree regarding enrollment for taxation went out "in the day of Caesar Augustus". And Matthew, in his Gospel, nailed it down in history by saying that it took place "in the days of Herod the king". Remember Herod. The world has known many a tyrannical ruler - men intoxicated by power, greedy for gain, cruel in method, ruthless in holding on to power. But few rulers have been able to match Herod's record. He massacred priests and nobles. He had ordered the strangulation of his favorite wife. His own sons were but a few of those who fell victim to his cruel ways.

And Matthew, in his account, tells of the fear that Herod had when he heard the news of the birth of Jesus. His account describes the brutal means utilized by Herod to get rid of what he felt to be a threat. All male children in Bethlehem under two years of age were to be slain. The slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem is a terrible backdrop for the haunting loveliness and tenderness of the manger scene. No special page in the Bible for it. It is right there, anchored in the heart of the Biblical account of the birth of Christ.

"In the days of Herod the king....." Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Not two accounts, but one account. It all took place in one world and the Bible seems quite clear in suggesting that the real need is to keep these events somehow together, and not let them become separated, divided, set apart from each other.

TEMPTATION

There is a temptation on our part to separate the two. There is always a temptation on our part to keep our religious faith separate from the events of daily life. I think we are growing in our realization that we cannot and ought not to do this, that we ought to interweave the faith we claim with the world in which we live. It's not easy. There's a temptation to become sentimental about religion; it is always stronger at Christmas. There is so much joy and gaiety associated with this season. The music is uplifting, joyous; mood of people is happy. For many it a sort of an oasis in the midst of life's weary desert. We know we cannot preserve it, that we cannot keep it all through the year. For these few days we want to forget the world and center our attention upon the loveliness of this Christmas story.

The mood is understandable, and in a sense there is a need for us to do this. It is good for us to be reminded that angels sang of peace and goodwill, that wise men followed a star, that shepherds came to worship. All this helps to keep alive in our hearts the reality of the world of the spirit, and to remind us that this world does touch our world with gleams of aspiration and with hints of hope.

There is a danger if we permit ourselves to go to far in letting our religious faith be turned into sentimentality. This is never the vindication of faith, but rather it is the debasement of faith. To become sentimental and unrealistic is not to make

spirit more real; it is to deny the spirit's relevance for man's daily existence. A sentimental religion has little power to deal with the daily events of man's lives. It has no word to speak to cruel tyrants, no judgment to utter upon power mad nations, no hope for a divided mankind. It can never overcome evil and sin, because it is too tenderminded to admit that there are such realities. It is apt to live in a little dream world of its own creation, where all is lovely and harmonious, and hence has no ability to deal with the ugly realities which are undeniably a part of man's experience.

A FAITH FOR THIS WORLD

Don't let your faith dissipate into this sort of softheaded sentimentality. Remember that the mature Christian faith anchors the events of Christ in the events of the day and is bold to affirm that those events find their redemption - their solution - only in the event of Christ. Far too many of us refuse to let the Christ child grow up. Our faith is all apt to be centered in the lovely picture of the Holy Family - Joseph, Mary, the infant Jesus - all touched with great beauty as on our Christmas cards. We hear the echoes of the angels singing, we watch the shepherds and the Wise Men as they come to pay their homage. But it stops there and beyond that point we will not let Christ go. For many, He remains the infant child, he never grows into the man.

But that child grew up into strong, mature manhood. The songs of the angels died out in the Judean hills and some thirty years later the raucous shouts of the people rang through the streets of Jerusalem, "Crucify Him, Crucify him". The manger was replaced by a cross. The stable by a tomb in the garden. The soft cries of the infant died and its place the hard demands, the haunting words of the Man of Nazareth are echoed across the hills of Galilee and make their way into the hearts of men. "He who would cometh after me, let him take up his cross and follow me." "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" "If any one forces you to go one mile..." "Love your enemies and pray for them that despitefully use you". "He that loseth his life..."

Ours is a faith that faces the brutal realities of daily life. It is not a faith that hides its head in the sands of sentimentality. He came into a world filled with darkness and cruelty, a world very much like our own. He faced it realistically, and with courage, with hope, with patience - and We must do the same. Not sentimentality, but reality - this is the heart of the Christian message.

AND WE CAN HAVE HOPE

And as we face the modern world with all of its greed, sin, pride, prejudice, violence - we can have hope. There can be no healing of the wounds of this world except as God himself comes to us. And this is the glory of Christmas - that God has come to us in this man Christ, in that incomparable life lived long ago in this world. He came to us, into the heart of man's desperate need, with the power of a great love.

And so the angelic song of "peace on earth, good will to men" is not just a haunting melody and wild dream; it is the divine symphony which continues to sound through the hearts of men. The visit of the Wise Men is a portent of the conviction that the world's truth will one day find its answer in Christ. The Holy Family becomes a preview of all genuine family life, united in bonds of love and service. The shepherds, gathering around the manger, becomes a parable of the world's work finding its proper focus in the service of men and the glory of Christ. It is with real things that Christmas deals.

Therefore Christmas is a time of great hope and deep joy. It is the sort of joy which comes only after we have looked at the darkest side of man's inhumanity and at the brightness of God's coming in Christ. This aspect of our Christmas faith finds reflection on the plaque which stands in the chapel of Staunton Herold in the English Midlands. For three hundred years people have gathered to worship in that chapel where this inscription is found:

"In the year 1653, when all things sacred were throughout the nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirely, Baronet, founded this church: whose singular praise is to have done the best things in the worst times, and hoped them in the most calamitous"

Since the first Christmas, Christians have believed that "the best things happen in the worst times", and we therefore are enabled to hope them "in the most calamitous". For we recall that line in Matthew's account of the Christmas story:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.....in the days of Herod, the King".

LET US PRAY O God, as we try to find our way through the world we live in, help us to remember how into our imperfect world thou didst once come - simply and quietly, and how the spirit of Christ comes again and again to us, and through us to other people to save their lives from sickness and sin, drudgery and fear, prejudice and pride. O God, let this spirit be in us this Christmas tide. In His name we pray. Amen