

## "DO WE MAKE TOO MUCH OF CHRISTMAS?"

### INTRODUCTION

Some of you may recall that a number of years ago a Unitarian minister in a town along the Hudson ventilated his belief that we make too much of Christmas. The birth of Jesus, he said, is simply a lovely legend, the celebration of which involves one-third of the world each year in monumental hypocrisy.

This past week I read in the paper about a community upstate whose Board of Education has concluded that the message of Christmas had best be left unstated and unsung in its public schools in the interest of conserving concord in a pluralistic society. The children in the schools in Ithaca will be allowed to sing about Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer, but nothing having to do with Jesus Christ. Do we make too much of Christmas?

Yesterday I heard a television funnyman confess that the much ringing of bells up and down Fifth Avenue was beginning to get to him. He found himself secretly wishing that their clappers would freeze. By now some of you may be feeling that your own personal preparations for Christmas are putting you under some pressure. Perhaps you're finding yourself secretly wishing that it would all go away. Do we make too much of Christmas?

### DEVELOPMENT

If Christmas is a legend without historical foundation, it ought to be curbed. The proliferation of an untruth cannot be defended. And surely it belongs to good manners not to subject others to convictions that are precious to us, but something less to them. In addition, one is quite ready to concede that the Christmas buying season is too noisy and too long. Ringing cash registers and the drive for the dollar seem a far piece removed from what happened on that starlit night long ago in Bethlehem.

But such concessions, and others that might be made, should not blind us to the fact that given what we believe about Jesus Christ, Christian people cannot make too much of Christmas. I believe it is timely and in order that we reflect calmly on what Jesus means to the Christian community. And this we do not in the spirit of argumentation, but rather in the mood of grateful affirmation.

### TRANSITION

In an article in the Westminster Study Edition of the Bible, John Mackay of Princeton Seminary writes about the importance of the Word made flesh for the church. His writing has about it the force of truth and the beauty of light. I want to read his brief statement to you, and then go on to make today's sermon an exposition of his major points.

"Jesus Christ, the Word of God become flesh, revealed to the world what God is and what man should be. His life was not a casual appearance in history - for God had sent Him. His character was not a solitary expression of ideal goodness - for God was like Him. His life purpose, which led Him to a cross, was not a vain beating against a meaningless or hostile universe - for God was in Him"

### HIS LIFE

Let's begin with the line - "His life was not a casual appearance in history - for God had sent Him".

To discover Jesus of Nazareth was a fellow pilgrim on the road of life is joy enough. But our sense of joy goes much deeper and becomes well nigh containable when we go on to learn that He was sent to us by God. We believe that His

"The situation of man before the ultimate realities is somewhat like that of a tribe of simple natives living deep in the jungle on the banks of a great river. They do not know where the river goes. It simply flows ceaselessly by while they watch it and wonder. However, it provides them water for their fields, fish for food and a place to swim for fun".

I believe that man is not content to simply avail himself of the river as it passes by. He has a "built-in" curiosity to know what the source of that river is and the end to which it flows. Albert Camus, in the Myth of Sisyphus, cries, "The world itself, whose meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational. If one could only say just once: 'This is clear' - all would be saved!" (Sisyphus in Greek mythology was the crafty king of Corinth, condemned in Hades to roll up a huge stone, which constantly rolled back.)

It is our belief as Christians that One has so spoken! For we see in Jesus of Nazareth the express image of God, the Father. We dare to believe that He disclosed not only His own mind, but the mind of God as well. We dare to believe, therefore, that ultimate reality is neither abstract nor impersonal. We dare to believe that since God is Father, love is at the heart of all things.

John Baillie of Scotland, one of the great theologians of this century, with whom I had the privilege of studying at the University of Edinburgh, put it this way in one of his lectures:

"The Christian confession of Jesus as Son of God is not only a confession of Christ. It is an affirmation about this universe. It is an affirmation of faith that it is Christ's world - of belief in the Christ-likeness of Almighty God"

HIS LIFE PURPOSE And finally, "His life purpose which led Him to a cross was not a vain beating against a meaningless or hostile universe - for God was in Him".

It would be hard to find a man today who would flatly and outrightly repudiate Jesus. After all, to knock that kind of goodness is to say more about yourself than Him. The masses do not repudiate Jesus; they simply dismiss Him on the grounds that the truth He lived and shared is too fragile and too frail for the kind of world we live in. He is shelved by some of you as a sentimentalist. He talked about responding to hate with love. He spoke about turning the other cheek. He discouraged pride and encouraged humility. He spoke about forgiveness. He rejected the idea of domination and replaced it with the concept of service. And when we listen to that against the noises and abuses of our world, we back away and say, "...too impractical....it will never work"

But think for a moment quietly here this morning - what if His life was not really a vain beating against a meaningless and hostile world - for God was in Him? As the politicians sometimes say, "Look at the record". Jesus was always on the offensive, never on the defensive. There is no place in the Gospels where one could gain the impression that Jesus ever doubted that the light would prevail. He always comes upon the scene, whether it be Herod's scene or Pilate's scene or the Sanhedrin's scene, or whatever - as One who is sure that God's will will prevail. He never solicits our sympathy; His convictions were offered not as an experiment, but as a deep and abiding certainty.

And John, in the Prologue to His Gospel, catches the spirit of that Light that

coming was a prepared visitation. Israel had been taught for centuries to watch and to wait for the One who was to come. "Are you He who is to come, and look we for another?" asked John the Baptist of Him. The furniture of history was readied for His coming. He came by God's design. He did not simply drift in upon the human scene. His life is not a passing incident in the world's ongoing history, but rather a critical and a decisive event. This is our belief.

Jesus himself possessed what might be called this "sense of sentness". This is why at the age of twelve he could astound his parents who went looking for Him in Jerusalem: "How it is that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house". He lived as one under command, as one who was responsive to a larger purpose than the purpose that claims other men. As one reads the Gospels, he is driven to conclude that Jesus felt that more was being done through Him than by Him. Hence, in the upper room in his final discourse with His disciples, He could say, "The word which you heard is not mine, but the Father's who sent me".

"His life was not a casual appearance in history, for God had sent Him".

#### HIS CHARACTER

Move on now to the second sentence in Dr. Mackay's quotation:

"His character was not a solitary expression of ideal goodness - for God was like Him".

Here again, there would be cause for thanksgiving if his life merely stood alone. When we are tempted to underlive life, we can point to Him and take heart. He has lifted for us and for all men the level of the possible. In a world that is hurting for models of good and creative living, certainly we can look to Him and encourage our children to do the same.

More than once we have heard this anonymous tribute to Jesus that ends with these moving words,

"I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as has that one solitary life".

And this is just the point I wish to stress. It was not a "solitary life". Jesus is cherished in the Christian community and revered in the hearts of the faithful because we believe that in what He was and said and did He represented, or better yet - He re-presented God.

As you know, debates on the nature of Jesus have racked the church in just about every century. And even if I had the mind to sum them up for you this morning I doubt very much that you would have the heart to them. But this much you may find helpful in trying to comprehend the relationship between God and Jesus. The major concern of Jesus was not to show us that He was like God, but rather that God was like Him. And this is why Johannes Herrman, the theologian, could say flatly, "But for Jesus, I should be an atheist".

I believe the God question is still our most persistent question. It is not unrelated to the crisis of faith in our time. However rapidly we immerse ourselves in contemporary affairs, concerns, drives, crusades, and programs - no preoccupation with the present can permanently banish the God question from our minds or hearts. Kenneth Cauthen in the book Science, Secularization and God, says:

comes and keeps on coming when He says, "The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out".

CONCLUDING SECTION

It has been said recently by church leaders that the next generation will go to the faith that can enkindle hope.

We stand within a tradition that at its best is hopeful. We are more than simply optimists - for what you and I believe about today and tomorrow is grounded not in how we feel, but in how we understand God. Our hope is grounded on the strength of God's invincibility as we find it affirmed in the life of Jesus of Nazareth - in that life, His character, His purpose, His teachings, His death and ultimately His resurrection.

A little boy was given a part in his church's nativity pageant. He was cast or perhaps we should say "mis-cast" as an angel. He had one important line to say. This was his line: "BEHOLD, I BRING YOU GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY WHICH SHALL BE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE". He memorized his line carefully, saying it over and over again - at breakfast, at supper, to his mother and father before going to bed. Finally, came the day of the performance, but as you might guess, on the occasion of the performance when he moved out on the stage and saw all the people there and suddenly realized the loftiness of his parent's expectations, his little mind went blank. He could not remember. And when it came time for him to speak all he could think to blurt out was, "SAY...HAVE I EVER GOT SOME GOOD NEWS FOR YOU!"

We began with this question: can we make too much of Christmas? Yes...we can if His life was but a casual appearance on the stage of human history; if His character was only a solitary expression of ideal goodness; if His life's purpose was a vain beating against a meaningless and hostile universe.

Do we make too much of Christmas - if  
BUT - on the other hand - if God did send Him. If God is truly like Him. If God was in Him, working through Him? What then?

PRAYER Be near to us, Our Father, in the hush and quietness of these moments, as we again brush up against eternal truth. In this day when everything that was once nailed down seems to be coming loose, help us to hold fast to what we have learned of Thee through Jesus of Nazareth.

Assist us in the great mystery of things to take it is "leap of faith".

And make us in these coming days partners with the wisemen of old in their curiosity; partners with the shepherds in their wonder; and partners with the angels in their great joy. Amen