

"IT ALL BEGAN IN BETHLEHEM"

INTRODUCTION

What began in Bethlehem is one of the authentic miracles of history. We do well to celebrate it with great joy and thanksgiving not only during this glad Christmas season but on every other day of our life. Will any man attempt to measure the difference made in human affairs by what began in Bethlehem so long ago and which the world now pauses to remember.

When the always-belittling man is through with his disparagement of the Church, when the cynic is through with his cheap observations about the Church and finished with his criticism of the church, the continuing glory of the Christian tradition remains to be acknowledged and celebrated. What a tragedy - at least, what a pity - it is when we miss or minimize the glory of what began in Bethlehem and has continued for nearly 2000 years!

Christmas is an attempt to recenter our thought and our life in what L. P. Jacks once called "The Lost Radiance of Christianity". And the moment we try to do this, we are led in a straight line to Him whom we hail "Immanuel - God with us".

JUDGMENTS AND TRIBUTES

As of old, wise men as well as common folk approached Him whose life and whose teachings are the beginning of it all. The wise men of old brought their exotic and symbolical gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The wise men of our world bring varied gifts, but all seek to praise Him with the highest valuations they can command. Some do better than others at this.

I think of Irving Cobb's description of Jesus as "the greatest gentleman that has ever lived". That may well be true, but it hardly seems an adequate explanation of how he died on a cross or of his probing influence on men across the ages.

It was Voltaire who referred to Him as "an incomprehensible mystery". To be sure there is much about Him we do not understand, but "incomprehensible" is not the best choice of a word; immeasurable, perhaps, but not incomprehensible. We have understood Him better than we have let on more times than not. As a matter of fact, his teachings are searchingly simple and direct. His hearers protested them often enough, but seldom on the grounds that they did not get His point. It was usually on the grounds that His point had caught them dead-center, and that they did not like.

There are other judgments offered by contemporary wise men that seem to do more justice to His importance. Spengler calls Him "an incomparable figure" - which, of course, He surely is. Ibsen hails Him "the greatest rebel that ever lived" - and, if we can overcome our initial, instinctive reaction to the word 'rebel', we will have to admit that He is that. Will Durant, the great historian, concludes that He is "God's highest incarnation" - a fact we celebrate in our creeds. We often speak of Him as "the hope and the light of the world", and the chances are that we feel more at home with a designation such as this. Somehow, such a line brings what began in Bethlehem down to the very day and hour in which we live. For truly in our darkened world, He is the best "hope and light" we have.

But long before the Magi had found their way to Jesus, the common people had brought their tribute of silent awe and quiet adoration. The shepherds were at the manger first of all from the outside world. They and their successors - His companions in His daily activities in Galilee - were the ones He knew best, from whom He learned the most and to whom He turned for followers and disciples when He began his public ministry. Their tributes to Him are no less moving than those of the wise men; in fact, they are much more so.

Whereas the Magi returned home, once their act of adoration had been completed his humble followers stayed. One of them said, "Lord, we have left all and followed Thee". And when a fisherman fresh from his boat saw others turning away, he refused to leave, asking and answering the question, "Lord - to whom shall we go? Those hast the words of eternal life". Even an official spy brought this amazing report to his superiors in Jerusalem: "Never a man spake like this man". The common people heard him gladly - then as now. That, I am sure, is the truest reason why what began in Bethlehem has gone to the ends of the earth and will not rest until it has probed the depths of these dark heartssoffours.

There are times when I find myself simply enjoying this cascade of superlatives that history has rained down on Jesus Christ. Yet not for long. For how can He mean so much to so many, yet so little to so many more? If He deserves even a tenth of the praise heaped upon Him, how is it that anyone can treat Him as lightly and as casually as so many do? If within the brief span of His thirty-three years, He made so profound an impression on history that we gladly pivot our calendar on His birth, ought not loyalty to Him make some equally tremendous difference in the lives of those who profess it?

Questions like these are disturbing - so disturbing to some that we find ourselves in full agreement with one contemporary wise man who has suggested that Jesus Christ is best thought of as "a frightening alternative" to anyone who glimpses even from afar the one great reason why He made and will continue to make an all important difference in the life of anyone who takes seriously what began in Bethlehem long, long ago.

THE REASON THAT TRANSCENDS ALL OTHERS

This is the reason that transcends all others:
He discovered the meaning of love; He
revealed the truth of love; He exemplified the power of love.

He dared to believe love to be the true revelation of God's will for mankind! Therefore, He regarded it as both relevant to and of unequalled power in human life and affairs. To Him, it was the only proper approach to a person whose life was all tangled up in sin, frustration and despair. To Him, it was no "sentimental gesture"; it was the simple form of direct, responsible, ethical action. Remember the time the good people of Jerusalem brought the harlot to Him - they demanded action. They wanted Him to do something about it; they were all for stoning her at once and they had the law and the consensus of the opinion of the community on their side.

Agreeing that something must be done, Jesus suggested two otherskinds of immediate and responsible action - both born of love. First, He said, assuming she was to be stoned, "He that is without sin among you let him cast the first stone at her". That took care of the sinners who had been masquerading as saints, and they promptly left the place. But not the one confessed sinner; she remained awaiting judgment. And when it came, it was action incandescent with love!

"Hath no man condemned thee?" He asked. And she replied, "No man, Lord." "Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more".

Now this is no isolated instance of Jesus' understanding of and reliance on the power of love. This, He believed, to be the only proper approach to injury, injustice and indignity. His faith in it shines through every line of the Sermon on the Mount. The Parables of the Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, and half a dozen others are radiant not alone with the human meaning of the love of God, but with His confidence in the power of that love as a form of direct and responsible ethical action. It is not too much to say that all that He did and said adds up to one long effort to interpret the meaning of love in life.

And let us never forget that He was no irresponsible idealist living in seclusion. The love in which He believed did not detach Him from the world and consign Him to monastic isolation. It sent Him into temples, market places, and the homes of the world "to seek and to save that which was lost". His faith in love was so complete that He could face man at his worst and still love him for God's sake. And whenever we are tempted today to doubt the sheer power of love, we need to read again the record of His public ministry and especially His last days on earth.

HIS FOLLOWERS ARE TO LOVE It is equally clear to us that Jesus expected his followers to let love be the distinctive characteristic of their fellowship. Those who called Him "Lord" were to be no ordinary company; they were to be dedicated to and consecrated by the power of love in their common life. This, more than anything else, was to set them apart from the rest of the world, even as it was to send them into the world. This love which sought expression in their lives was more powerful than loyalty to family, property, traditions and country. It sat in judgment on all of these and subordinated them to the will of God.

This faith in love as the only ultimate power in the world is indeed a "frightening alternative" to this or any other generation. It points up a way of life and a course of action that is startlingly different from the way we usually do things. Judged mainly by our actions, we believe in many things, but love is seldom one of them. And sensing the enormous difference between life as we live it and life as it would be lived in love, we draw back. We rationalize - we delay - we dodge - and twist this way and that in our effort to avoid personal responsibility for the clear claim of love on life.

LOVE IS LESS SPECTACULAR THAN HATE Let it be admitted at once that love is far less spectacular than its opposite number, hate. Hate is the wall in Berlin. Hate is what is happening in South Africa, in the Near East, in South east Asia and in so many other places of our world. Hate is what has happened in places like Newark and Detroit this past year. Hate is the threat of nuclear war. Hate is not only the wars of yesterday and today, but it is the final war of tomorrow which is ready to wipe mankind off the face of this planet.

There is little or no spectacle about love. Love is as simple as taking a child on one's knee and seeing therein the kingdom of God. It is as simple as interrupting a journey to help someone in trouble, or meeting curses with prayers, or turning the other cheek. Such things seem almost inconsequential when placed along side intercontinental missiles, space probes, and the other headline makers of our time.

But Christian love, however simply it may be explained, is admittedly costly when it is taken seriously; it demands more of us than anything else we try to do. It is easier to do anything else than to take love seriously; it is easier to devise ways of landing men on the moon than it is to bring into being a system for distributing the goods which are essential to life in so equitable a fashion as to promote the spirit of community and fraternity in the human family. The former calls for skill; the latter for love. A nation can possess all of the "know how" in the world, but it is has not love, it is nothing - and a very dangerous form of nothing at that. It is much easier to carry out the dictates of hate than those of love. Far easier it is to get a world conflict going than to nurture a world community into a stage of usefulness in our relationships.

CLOSING Love will become an alternative for nations and international efforts when and after it becomes a driving power in the thought and the life of people like us - the eight hundred million of us all over the world who give at least nominal loyalty to Christ. The three large frescoes on the eastern entrance of Rockefeller Center post a warning and a promise to us. Two of them show labor in action and justly

celebrate its contribution to civilization. The third depicts the ceaseless upward climb of humanity and bears these provocative words:

"Man's ultimate destiny depends not on whether he can learn new lessons or make new discoveries and conquests, but on his acceptance of the lesson taught him close upon two thousand years ago".

Whether we are willing.....and able....to carry on what began in Bethlehem nearly 2000 years ago depends upon the personal.....and the collective decision and action of persons like ourselves and churches like our own.

The majic of these days and the warmth of these hours will serve us well if we treat them as an introduction - not a conclusion - to the duty and the privilege of Christian discipleship.

We come here to adore Him - and that is all to the good if we depart from here determined to serve him forever.

PRAYER We thank thee, O God, for the light that shines in the darkness, for the Christ who came into our world and who uses us to be instruments of his glory and love. As we rejoice at Christmas, without forgetting the sadness, the sorrow, the heartbreak that is all abroad in the world, we remember that light which the darkness cannot put out and which, if we will let it, will shine in us.

We ask these things in the name of Him who was born in a stable, Jesus Christ. Our Lord.