

MEDITATION FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

INTRODUCTION

My better judgment always tells me that few words should be spoken at this service. For this service of carols and candles is a service in which things are sung that cannot be said - a service in which the warm light of the candles speaks far more eloquently of the meaning of Christmas than words ever can. ~~But my better judgment is over-ruled,~~ and I shall speak to you simply and briefly for a few moments and tell you three things about Christmas (all of which you know), but which you are likely to forget or lose sight of in the rush of Christmas.

CELEBRATION OF A BIRTHDAY

First, I would remind you that Christmas is the celebration of a birthday. It is the birthday of an incomparable human being - a man whose name was Jesus.

This person had nothing in the way of worldly possessions, and when he died he owned nothing but the clothes that he wore. He held no position of any kind at any time during his life. During his brief life, there is nothing we can point to by way of specific accomplishment. He wrote nothing. He discovered nothing. And in the usual sense, he left nothing behind that we would call a monument.

This person did have a way with words, a way that was like magic. His words were never put down on paper during his lifetime, but they worked their way into the hearts of those who listened to him and those words have never been forgotten. Think, for a moment, of some of those words: "A certain man had two sons...." "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves...." "He that loseth his life shall find it...." "Blessed are the pure in heart....for they shall see God". "If any one forces you to go one mile...."

And not only did he have a way with words, but he also had a wonderful way with people. He had the power to draw them to himself, and he had the power to bring out the very best that was in them. He had the power to arouse their consciences long after they had fallen to sleep. He could give them courage to keep on going when the going was difficult.

He went about the country-side telling people about God and about themselves, telling them what happiness really is. Most people think they know. He told them over and over again what happiness really is : that it is never found in having things, but in being something. He told them what love is. Here again people think they know what love is. He told them that love in its deepest sense is losing yourself in someone else. He told them what God is like and what he does. He told them how much they mean to him, how much God cares - that he cares the way a real father cares, the way a shepherd cares when one of his sheep gets lost. He leaves the 99 and goes off in search of the one that is lost.

Jesus had a life with God that was unparalleled in its intimacy. When he spoke of God, he spoke most naturally of him as his Father. He did nothing without reference to him. And as a result of this closeness, he had a freedom and simplicity to his life that was unique. None of us have it. We're so tied up, so interested in so many things, so often diverted into channels which have dead ends. Here was an incomparable human being possessing a freedom from all of the things that tie us and hold us back.

Christmas is the day we celebrate as his birthday.

THE INCARNATION

The second thing I would remind you of on this Christmas Eve is that Christians believe that Christmas is not only the birthday of an incomparable human being, but it is - if you can imagine it - the day when the creator of the universe became a Creature. It marks the day when (to borrow a phrase from Tillich) "the ground of all existence" took upon himself the risks, the opportunities, the agonies of human life.

It's little wonder that as the days went by the conviction dawned and grew upon those early disciples that in seeing Jesus they were seeing more than just a man; they were glimpsing God himself. We can only imagine how they must have felt as this realization came to them and became steadily stronger. How their eyes must have stared at him as they saw him in this new light! How their minds must have stretched to take in the words he spoke to them. Here in this carpenter's Son from Nazareth was the mighty God - walking up and down the dusty roads of Palestine by their sides. This was what God was like - loving, tender, strong, merciful, caring for people, suffering and dying with them.

Sooner or later they had to find words to catch up this world changing event. And they found them. They called him "Emmanuel" which means "God with us". They went further. They called him "The Son of God". And whatever else those words meant to Peter who first uttered them at Caesarea Phillipi, or the millions of people who have repeated them since that day - they surely carried the conviction that Jesus was as much like God in spirit and in nature as a son can possibly be like his father - that: (as one of the modern scholars of our time has put it) - as much of God was in Jesus as can possibly ever be in a human being.

If people had not found God in him, and continued to find God through him, he would probably have been forgotten long ago. He would be just another prophet, another teacher, another good man - and the world has known many of these. But the Christian faith has seen more in him. It has been unable to imagine anyone better, more noble, or more Godlike than Jesus of Nazareth. And so it was written: "God so love the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life". God - in Christ. This is the heart of our faith. God, incarnate in human terms, in human life. This is what Christmas is all about.

DO NOT LOSE SIGHT OF HIM This lead us then to the third thing: we would not for the world cut out the celebration of Christmas - the cards, the carols, the decorations, the parties, the presents, the family reunions. I for one, should not dream of leaving these things out of Christmas. I only hope and pray that the celebration does not hide him whose birthday we celebrate.

Whoever you are, whatever you believe about him, try not to forget Him in your celebration of Christmas. If you have children, tell them something about Him so that they will know him outside of church and hear about him from someone other than a minister. If you can, do something for him - some deed of kindness. And look for his spirit at work in the world, and when you find it - support it with your life, your energy, your influence, your money.

And remember this: the world into which he was born was a world filled with darkness, with shadows of cruelty, discouragement and gloom. And He came into that world like a spot of light, and that light soon began to spread in every direction. The light of his spirit comes into our darkened world, into the lives where shadows of discouragement and gloom, hopelessness now exist. It may be the light of understanding, of love, of meaning, of strength, of new hope. No matter how or where it shines, it bears the unmistakable image of him at whose day of birth it is written:

The angels sang: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, goodwill to men".

LET US PRAY We thank thee, O God, for the light that came into our world in the life of Jesus. Help us as we try to catch that light in our own lives. Let is shine through us to pierce the darkness of some place this Christmas Season. We ask these things in the name of Him who long ago was born on this night. Amen

This statement, attributed to Phillips Brooks, reminds us of the impact of that life upon our world:

"Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, 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 powerfully as that one solitary life"

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