

"THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS"

INTRODUCTION

Suppose, for a moment, that someone should come up to you on the street this morning as you were leaving the Church following this service, and say something like this to you: "I'm a stranger in this part of the world. Where I come from no one has ever heard of Christmas. Can you tell me what it means. Why - I've never seen anything like it. Everybody seems to be taking part in it - regardless of age, race, or religion. It's going on everywhere: in the shops - they're crowded with people buying presents; on the streets - they're trimmed with colored lights and beautiful trees; in the offices - people are stopping their work to have parties; celebrations are going on in hotels, in schools, and even the churches seem to be getting into it all. What's it all about? What does Christmas mean?"

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY?

What would you say? How would you answer? Where would you begin? Would you begin, perhaps, right here in New York City with the story of some Park Avenue Scrooge who thought Christmas was just a lot of humbug until one day his heart was melted by the spirit of Christmas? Would you say, "Ah.. that's what Christmas means....that's what the Christmas spirit does to a person!"

Or would you go back to Bethlehem, and tell him about the star and the stable, the shepherds and the angels and the baby that was born in a manger, and say "That's what Christmas means. It's the birthday of the Saviour of the world."

I think if you wanted to tell this person what Christmas really means, you would have to go back even beyond that. You would have to begin with God. Let me explain why. Christmas, you see, is the day on which God did something, and unless you start from that, all the things you see happening on the streets and in the schools, in the homes and in the churches will make very little sense. They are like trimmings without the tree. Christmas is the day on which we remember and celebrate something that God did. You must begin with nothing less than that.

You ask, what did He do? He performed a miracle. You look uneasy. You shy away from the word miracle. You say, I'm not sure that I believe in miracles any more. In this scientific world in which we live where everything seems to operate with such mechanical precision, there seems to be very little place for miracles, and I'm not at all sure that I can honestly believe in them or think in terms of them. And I would say to you - sympathetically but firmly - don't be too sure.

For instance, what do you call the antibiotic drugs that began to appear in the western world in 1929 when Sir Alexander Fleming developed penicillin? What do you call those drugs that saved so many lives in world war Two, the lives of men who would have died, not because of enemy guns, but because of infection and disease. You call these drugs the "miracle" drugs. You call them that because they did something that had never been done before, something that no one ever thought could be done, but once it was done opened up a whole new

field of possibility in the curing of disease. What they did was always within the realm of possibility, but when they did it, what happened was so unexpected that, for lack of a better word, it was called a "miracle".

Or what do you say when you see a person who is moving steadily towards his own destruction, making mistake after mistake. Nothing that anybody says to him seems to make any impression at all on him, and you watch him go merrily on his way, and you know that sooner or later it will end in disaster. You say to yourself, "Nothing but a miracle is going to save him". He's like a person drifting in a canoe down the Niagara River with no idea that the falls are ahead of him. He is carried along by the irresistible current and when he comes to the falls, he will go over them and nothing but a miracle can stop him. But something does stop him! He does turn back, he does take a new look at things. He does have a change of heart, and he is saved from disaster. You say, it must have been a miracle, because I never thought it would happen.

This, you see, is the kind of thing that God is doing all of the time. He is, at least from our point of view, always going out of bounds, not the bounds that He has set for himself (he never exceeds those bounds) but the bounds that we have set for him; the bounds of our expectations, the bounds of our past experiences of what is possible and what can happen, the bounds that we have arranged in patterns that sometimes become so fixed that even God himself must have some difficulty breaking them. He is always going out of bounds into brand new fields, opening up vistas that we have never dreamed of seeing. That is what God is always doing, that is what he did especially on Christmas. He performed a miracle.

And what was the miracle. He came into the world in person. Blunt as it sounds to the sophisticated and scientific ear, there really is no other way to put it. God came into the world in person. For generations people had wondered about God. For generations people had had messages from God. But they were not really sure what he was like, not really sure what all of these messages meant, because they had never seen him, never heard him, never met him face to face.

Never.....until one day he came to them in person - in a person, and in the most unlikely person you can possibly think of. God - the Lord of all being, the King of the universe - you might think that if he were coming in person, he would come as a Roman governor, with all of the pomp and power, the majesty and glory that to an earthly degree might match his own heavenly majesty and glory.

Not at all.....He came as a Jew.....as a son of one of the most unpopular and most misunderstood races on the face of the earth. He came as a poor working man, who, when he left his trade to start out on a preaching mission, didn't have a nickel to his name; as a young man, a young man who was killed before he was much over thirty, as a man who never (from our point of view at least) had the advantages of a higher education - no PhD, no classical training, or discipline in science or philosophy. He left nothing behind him that you could put your hands on - no books, no pictures, no buildings.

He left behind only a few people who had been made over by Him, and who kept his memory alive in their minds. He was someone they could never forget. They were convinced beyond any measure of doubt that he was still alive in the world, and that in Him was the source of life and energy and love that could make over other people. These few people were his only visible legacy to the world.

GOD CAME TO US AND SHOWED
US WHAT LOVE CAN DO.....

In that unlikely person God came to us and showed us what love can do. And think for a moment or two with me of

what love can do. Isn't it true that love can reach people who can be reached by nothing else. For instance, people who cannot be stirred by exhortation, or forced by law, can be reached by love and drawn homeward. Love can change people. People whom we describe as "confirmed" sinners, rebellious against life, determined to lead a life that goes against the grain - such people can be changed by someone's love. It can take hold of people and turn them in another direction. It can give people a new lease on life, people who think that life has come to an end when one of their loved ones dies, or people who can see nothing but emptiness in the future. Love can come into their lives and can give them a brand new lease on life, so that they look forward to the next day and lift up their hearts and thank God for the fact that they are alive.

It was in this person that God showed us not only what love can do, but what it does. It never gives up, never lets a person go, no matter how far he goes, no matter how hopeless he seems to be, no matter what mistakes he may have made, no matter what the record may be, this love of God keeps pursuing us. Love is ready to suffer and die, if necessary for the sake of those who are loved.

There is a true story that Wallace Hamilton tells, and to my way of thinking it is one of the most beautiful parables to be found anywhere outside of the Bible. It seems that a boy in his late teens was riding on a train, and fell into conversation with a man who was sitting next to him. The man happened to be a minister. The boy didn't know this. This teen-age boy seems upset and seemed eager to talk to someone. Turning to the minister, he said to him, "Are you acquainted with this next town that we're going to be going through - the town of Springvale?"

"Well not exactly. I know of it. It's the next stop, you say".

"Yes...it's the next stop" "We'll soon be there. I use to live there. My mother and father still live there, just a mile or so this side of town. Three years ago I had a terrible quarrel with my father. I walked out of the house, and told him that I would never step into it again. That he'd never see me again. That was three years, and these past three years have been tough ones. Occasionally I have written to my mother. I wrote her last week and told her that I would be passing through the town on this train. I told her I would like to come home just once, for a little while, and asked her if it would be all right for me to stop to hang something white outside the house so that I would know that dad had agreed to let me stop. I told her not to do it unless he wanted it".

The boy looked out the window and turned quickly back to the

minister. "Look sir" he said "My house is just around the next bend....beyond the hill. Will you please look for me to see if there is anything white. I can't stand to look"

And as the train made the slow curve, the minister kept his eye on the hill, and then suddenly he turned around to the boy and fiarly shouted "Look son, look"for there was a little farm-house all but obscured under a blanket of white. The parents must have taken every sheet they possessed....every white pillow case they could find.....all the white tablecoths, towels and handkerchiefs and hung them out on every bush and tree within 200 feet of the house. The boy was out of the car and up the hill before the train had really stopped.

This, my friends, is all part of the miracle of Christmas. We Christians believe in a God and worship a God who long ago did the unbelievable and incredible and miraculous. He came to us in person. The person was Jesus. The life of Jesus, showed us the power of love. In the beautiful words of Christina Rossetti:

"Love came down at Christmas.
Love all lovely, Love divine.
Love was born at Christmas.
Star and angels gave the sign"

THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Suppose, for a moment, that someone....."I'm a stranger.....what does it all mean....."

II. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY....

- A. NYC - Park Avenue Scrooge.....
- B. Back to Bethelhem - birthday of a little child. "Saviour of mankind"
- C. Begin with God - the day he did something.
- D. What did he do? Performed a miracle.....
- E. Miracles -
 - 1. Antibiotic drugs - "miracle drugs"
 - 2. Person saved - what do you say - only a miracle can save him.....he is saved...

III. GOD PERFORMING MIRACLES ALL THE TIME....

- A. Doing it all the time.....from our point of view... Going out of bounds....
- B. What was the miracle - came into world in a person.
- C. He came in the most unlikely person of all.....

IV. IN THIS PERSON SHOWED US WHAT LOVE CAN DO.

- A. What love can do....
- B. What love does.....
- C. Illustration -
- D. Poem - closing portion.....