

"THEY CAME HOME A DIFFERENT WAY"

### INTRODUCTION

It was the day after Christmas, and a little child playing with his new toys was heard to say, "Gee....now we have to wait a whole year for another Christmas!"

How true this is for most of us. The great pageant is now drawing to a close. The day after tomorrow we'll return to the pattern of normal living. Later this week we'll take down the tree, sort out and store away the lights and the lovely ornaments, and arrange to exchange the gifts that do not fit. Some will be tempted to say, "Thank God it's all over for another year - for Christmas can be so exhausting!" Others will feel like saying, "Oh, if only the spirit of Christmas could continue for a few weeks....what a difference it would make!"

I've always been fond of those lines that Carlyle wrote to a friend:

"I do not like to take down the Christmas tree. Not because it is a drudgery to wrap the ornaments or sweep the needles that blur into the carpet pattern. I can do all that needs doing in the course of all the other things a house requires. But the spot where the tree has stood seems empty as though it wanted something it had had and lost. No chair can fill the place where the tree was. No end table. No magazine rack. Trees are living things, and when adopted into the family at Christmas embrace so much more than colored lights and shining balls and tantalizing wrap of presents. Maybe what I mean to say is: Christmas was not made to be put away".

That's a lovely line - "Christmas was not made to be put away". How sad if we must now wait for a whole year for another Christmas, - for Christmas stirs our hearts as no other religious observance does. ~~Just what is it about Christmas that touches us so deeply? Let's think about it for a few moments.~~

### WONDER AND SURPRISE

In a way, Christmas has a magic all of its own. Year after year, it invades our lives.....overpowering us often against our will. It overcomes the crowds, lifts us above and beyond the "jingle bells" of commercialism, and touches something deep and sacred within us.

Christmas is the wonder, the surprise, the pure joy of childhood. It's the child-Jesus brought to mind each year in the pageantry of the poetry of the star, of the shepherds, of the wise men as they gathered around Mary and Joseph and the new born baby.

At Christmas we all for a brief time become like children - recalling again for a little while the joy and the excitement with our brothers and sisters and other children. It's recalling the laughter and the warmth and the memories symbolized by decorations, retrieving, for instance, that old bent star to be placed on top of the tree. For some here in the city, it's going back home for a few days and reliving happy times with parents and grandparents. For others, it is visiting with friends and sharing with others the incomparable joy of Christmas - for Christmas is the wonder, the surprise and the pure joy of childhood. It has a magic all of its own and it seems to bring out the best in us.

### BEAUTY

Then again, Christmas is beauty - the beauty of bright and shining decorations of red and green, silver and gold, the lovely greeting cards and the Christmas trees. It's the beauty of voices singing the familiar

carols, the beauty of a church choir carrying us across the centuries as we are lifted by melodies out of all low thoughts and are taken up to the higher lands of hope and faith and love.

GIVING Christmas is beauty, and it is also giving - thinking of others, plotting to surprise loved ones and friends. It is remembering someone else who has no one with an unexpected visit, or a letter or card, a special remembrance. At Christmas, for a few days, we lose our old selves and we discover that there is real joy to be found in helping others to a little happiness.

REMEMBERING Christmas is also a memory time. It is a time when we recall the best, and unfortunately, also the worst of life. The joyful and the not-so-joyful memories flow again in our minds as the past is transformed by time into a soft, radiant glow - like the shining of a church full of flickering candles on a Christmas Eve. Friendships from the past are renewed once again as cards and letters and greetings come from friends now living in distant places.

Yes, Christmas is the time when we pause and recall how many blessings we have had, and we are aware that at no time in all of our lives have we been alone, completely alone. We may have tuned ourselves out, but God has always been there. Christmas is a memory time.

LOVING And Christmas is a time of loving. It is a time for stopping to listen to others - not to just what they say, but to what they want to say, but don't know how to - listening to their feelings. It is caring enough to say thoughtful words. It is loving enough to be there and saying nothing. It is sensitivity. It is empathy. It is concern....openness...acceptance....positive interest.

ALL THIS AND MORE Christmas is all this and much more. And how sad it will be if we must wait a whole year to experience the wonder and surprise and joy of childhood, this incredible beauty, this warmth of giving and receiving, this time of memory, this opportunity for loving.

A true story comes from the Post Office which hardly has opportunity to breathe at this time of year. Bennett Cerf tells of this incident in his book, The Sound of Laughter. An employee who handled the dead letter mail, had lost a small son and was unable to recover his emotional stability. He had become withdrawn and uncommunicative. Then, at Christmas time, there came to him a letter to Santa Claus from his little daughter. The letter read:

"Dear Santa: We are very sad at our house this year. My little brother went to Heaven last Spring. I don't want anything, but please take my brother some toys. If you can give my daddy something, make him like he used to be. Make him smoke his pipe and tell me stories again. I heard him say to Mummie that only Eternity could cure him. Santa: could you please bring my Daddy some Eternity?"

The last verse of today's scripture lesson reminds us that we need not wait a whole year. The Wise Men had followed the star. They had made their way to the manger, had left their gifts, and then in a dream, they sensed that they were not to go back to Herod, but to return home a different way.

For us this can mean that they went home different persons because something unique had happened to them. For them, "The word had become flesh and dwelt among them." They had been exposed to Eternal truth.

And before we go out from under the warm glow of this Holy Season, before we leave, perhaps we, too, can change and go home a "different way" - for it was the Christ Child who grew into manhood and went on to leave with us the faith, the hope, the wisdom - yes, something of Eternity - that has changed the lives of people and the life of mankind.

**HIS WORDS\***

HIS THOUGHTS

I would like to share with you some of his thoughts, some of his very own words, that each of us in our own way may begin to plot a new direction and to go home a different way because of His life. Listen again, as if you were hearing these words of His, for the very first time, these words that have touched the lives of countless numbers across the centuries.

"Blessed are those of you who mourn, for you shall experience a comforting Presence".

"Happy are you when men insult you and mistreat you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Be glad and leap for joy for your Heavenly Father will reward you greatly."

"Love your enemies. Do a kindness for those who hate you. Say a prayer for those who abuse you".

"Do not pass judgment on another, and then they will not pass judgement on you, for the measure you use in dealing with others will be the measure that will be used toward you".

"Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, and do not notice the beam in your own eye?"

"How often am I to forgive my brother? Seventy times seven!"

"Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you".

"Do not worry about your life....fretting as to what kind of food you are going to eat, or about your body as to what clothes you will wear. Your life is more important than what you wear."

"Will worry help anyone of you to add a single hour to his life?"

"The one who tries to preserve his own self will lose his soul, but he who loses himself in the cause of the Gospel will find the higher life".

"Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever desires to have a chief place among you must minister to everyone".

"What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul"

"If anyone forces you to go a mile with him, go two miles"

"Whatever you would like to have others do for you, do it for

them"

"One of the scribes came and asked him, 'What commandment is chief of all?' And Jesus replied, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself!'"

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mountain, 'Move away from here' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you".

"Come unto me all you who toil and bear heavy burdens, and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light".

"You are the salt of the earth.....but if the salt itself loses its flavor, wherewith can its strength be restored. It is good for nothing, but to be thrown away"

"You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine that men may see your good works"

#### THEY CAME HOME A DIFFERENT WAY

We read that the Wise Men went home a different way. And surely they also went home different persons, too, for they had had an encounter with a new force, a new life, a new power - the power of divine love. It had come their way and touched their lives. It was a love that nothing - not even death - can separate us from.

"Are you willing" asked Henry Van Dyke, " to believe that love is the strongest force in the world - stronger than hat, stronger than evil, stronger than death, and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem 1900 hundred years ago is the image and the brightness of Eternal Love? Than you can keep Christmas! And if you can keep it for a day, then why not always?"

Herein is the secret of a Happy New Year - keeping Christmas all year long. This is what makes for "peace on earth and goodwill toward men". ~~"Christmas was not made to be put away".~~ May we, too, go home a different way because like the Wise Men of old we have brushed up against Eternal truth this Christmas. A different way. Different persons.

#### LET US PRAY

As the Christmas Season passes once again, O God, may the light of it linger on in our lives. Help us to see the world and those in it in a new way and from a different perspective. Remind us that Christmas is not made to be put away in boxes, but lived out in faith and trust, with courage and concern in the coming days of a New Year. Amen