

"WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT"

INTRODUCTION

A week ago yesterday I was in the vicinity of 60th Street and Lexington Avenue. It was between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. I had in mind going into Bloomingdale's and doing some Christmas shopping. However, the crowds were so thick, traffic in the streets so heavy, there was so much pushing and shoving that instead of going up the stairs into the store, I turned to the right and went down the steps to the subway station. There I caught the IRT uptown express back to 86th Street.

I felt very little of the Christmas spirit down there at 60th Street and Lexington Avenue. Even the Santa Claus and the people from the Salvation Army were finding the going difficult, very little room for them to maneuver. I couldn't help but wonder if some of those persons who were shoving and pushing and poking were in danger of losing the real meaning of Christmas. As a matter of fact, I think a great deal of our Christmas spirit in this country has been caught up in these lines:

"Christmas time is here by golly,
Deck the hall with hunks of holly
Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens,
Mix the punch, bring out the Dickens".

Have you ever been tempted to sit down and re-write some of the old Christmas carols in order to make them more suitable to present day observances. For instance, we might come up with something like this: "Hark the Herald Tribune sings, Advertising wondrous things", or "Angels we have heard on high, Tell us to go out and buy". There's always this danger of forgetting what Christmas is all about and this is what I want to talk to you about this morning. And I'm going to speak briefly and simply about three things that we are likely to forget or lose sight of in the Christmas rush. You know these three things already, but we need to hear them again and again. This is the Sunday to put them before you.

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 Jew named Jesus.

This person had nothing in the way of worldly possessions, and when he died he owned nothing but the clothes that we 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 minds of those who listened to him and have never been forgotten. Think of some of those words: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves....." "A certain man had two sons....." "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...." "Love your enemies and pray for them...."

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 best 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 countryside touching the lives of the people in a significant way. He didn't touch them physically, but touched their lives so that new life could emerge. Sometimes they were repulsive people. He touched a leper and when he touched him the leper was made well. He touched in a different way a rich man, and changed his entire point of view. He touched a tax-gatherer, hard as nails, and made him a disciple. He touched a fisherman, and made him a leader of men. He touched a prostitute, and made her clean.

He went about the countryside telling them about God and 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 many 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 he 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 of him most naturally 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 up and hold us back.

Christmas is the day we celebrate as his birthday.

THE INCARNATION The second thing I would remind you of 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 is the day when (to borrow a phrase from Paul 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. How awe struck they must have been as they heard him say "I and the Father are one". 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 Phillip, 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 loved 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, at its highest and at its best. This we call the Incarnation - God incarnate in human terms, in human life. This is what Christmas is all about.

Some of you may say: how do you know this, and can you prove it? I cannot prove it in black and white the way that a scientist or mathematician can prove a truth in his field. I know it, for instance, the way I know it is wrong to betray a friend. I know it the way I know that real love can do things, reach heights that nothing else can reach. Someone has said: "The heart has reasons the mind cannot understand". In the same way, using the faculty of imagination, intuition, 'ecstatic reason', I know and believe that in that incomparable human being the God of the planets stooped to our condition, spoke to us in language we can understand and deal with us as man to man.

It is incredible that such a thing could be, but so is a new born baby incredible. It's only because there are so many of them that we sometimes forget it.

DO NOT LOSE SIGHT OF HIM

This leads us then to the third things 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. For instance, let your Christmas cards have a religious message. For instance, if you have children, tell them something about Him so that they hear about Him outside of the Church and hear about Him from someone other than a minister. If you are still in the growing years, find out something about Him that you have not known before so that you will be intelligent in your understanding of Him. And 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 energy, your life, your money., your influence.

And remember this: the world into which he was born long ago was a world filled with darkness and cruelty, with shadows of 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 lives where shadows of discouragement and gloom and hopeless now exist. It may be the light of understanding, of love, of meaning, or of strength and new hope. No matter how or where it shines, ~~the~~ it bears the unmistakable image of Him as whose day of birth it is written: the angels sang:

"Glory to God in the highest and
on earth, peace and goodwill toward
men"

and the shepherds: "Returned, glorifying ~~and~~ praising God for
for they had heard and seen"

PRAYER: 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 it shine through us to
pierce the darkness of some place this Christmas.

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