

The Life of Christ.

BY REV. W. B. HINSON, MONCTON, N. B.

A fact of Roman history is mentioned by Luke when he says, "There went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus that all the world should be taxed." The country of the Jews being a part of that Roman world, it was necessary that Joseph and Mary should be registered; and Jewish custom demanding that all Jews should be registered in the district to which as members of the tribes of Israel they belonged, it required that they should go out from the city of Nazareth unto the city of Bethlehem to be taxed. Thus did God cause Cæsar Augustus to fulfil a prophecy which was spoken by Micah the Hebrew prophet, at a time when the Roman power was not. Verily that God's path is in the deep waters is evidenced, when in his palace a heathen king unwittingly brings to pass a census which helped to prove that the child thus accidentally born in Bethlehem was none other than the Christ of God.

It had also been asserted that this child should be found "wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Here again the whim of an idolator does homage to the will of God. For the number which thronged Bethlehem, as belonging to the house and lineage of David was so great that there was no room for Joseph and Mary in the inn. The only available shelter was that which necessitated a literal fulfilment of the angel's utterance to the shepherd, and which Luke has recorded in such simple majesty: "She brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger."

"Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining,
Low lies his head with the beasts of the stall;
Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
Maker and Monarch and Saviour of all."

Beautiful is the idyll of those shepherds. Watching their sheep in fields, where, as Farrar says, "Ruth had gleaned sick at heart amid the alien corn, and where David the despised and youngest son of a numerous family had followed the ewes great with young," they saw the glory of the Lord shining about them, and heard an angel proclaim the birth of Jesus Christ, while they adoringly listened as a multitude of the heavenly host sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will towards men." Thus to these me of humble spirit and lowly avocation came the beatific vision when the heavenly music rippled o'er the confines of glory, to fall upon the ravished ears, not of the stately and the rich, but the humble poor.

"The lowly spirit God hath consecrated
As his abiding rest;
And angels by a patriarch's tent have waited,
When kings had no such guest."

Anna and Simeon also, aged ones, whose life-energy had been given to God's service, saw the young child, and with rejoicing gratitude praised God that at last the Messiah had appeared; while Matthew has given us a picture of other visitors to the court of the child-king in such exquisite style as should forever prevent the alteration of the copyist. He says, "There came wise men from the East to Jerusalem saying, Where is the King of the Jews, for we have seen His star in the East, and are come to worship Him." Duped by King Herod, but disillusioned by God, they journeyed on; "and lo, the star which they saw in the East went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was." And with exceeding joy they worshipped Him while presenting their gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Thus, as Dr. Stalker finely says, "The group which gathered to gaze on Jesus represented in miniature the whole of His future history—for there were the shepherds from the neighboring fields to represent the peasant people with the honest and good heart who afterwards formed the bulk of His disciples; Simeon and Anna also representing the devout students of Scripture who expected the appearance of the Messiah, and who contributed some of His most faithful followers; while the coming of the wise men from the East was prophetic of how in future the Gentile world would place its wealth and talents and science and philosophy at the feet of the Lord. Thus surrounding His cradle were the shepherds with their simple wonder, Simeon and Anna with a reverence enriched by the piety of centuries, and the Magi with the lavish gifts of the Orient, and the open brow of Gentile knowledge."

On one occasion Christ reminded the Jews of their proverb concerning the morning sky as being prophetic of the coming day. He said, "In the morning ye say, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and lowering.'" This proverb, which was descriptive to such an extent as to have survived the centuries and be in common use today, may be applied to the life of our Lord, for surely His life-bark encountered foul weather, and without controversy His morning sky was crimsoned with blood. For Herod, fearful, as evil doers necessarily are, trembled for his throne. And at mention of another King of the Jews being born, his swarthy cheek paled with fear. After God translated Herod's phrase, "That I may worship Him," into "Herod will seek the young child to slay Him," the wise men, instead of communicating their knowledge of Christ's whereabouts, departed

into their own country another way. As so often before this wicked, evil-mooded and doomed king resorted, to blood. As Matthew graphically puts it, "Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men." But before this wild storm broke, Joseph, warned by God, had taken the young child and his mother into the land of Egypt. As illustrative of the doom of evil of the manner in which the wrath of men praises God, and of the way God's purposes march forward to their accomplishment, hear Matthew tell of another prophecy unwittingly helped to its fulfilment by an evil man: "He was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, 'Out of Egypt have I called my Son.'"

After Herod's decease Joseph returned from Egypt, and might have visited Bethlehem, only being told by God, Archelaus, Herod's son, was heir to his father's evilheartedness as well as throne, he departed into Galilee, and dwelt at Nazareth. And once again God is seen over-ruling the evil of men's hatred and crime for the evidencing of the prophet's accuracy. For to escape the Herodian hatred of good which characterized Archelaus, Joseph tarried in Nazareth, and thus was fulfilled the utterance of the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

With one very noteworthy exception the Scripture is silent concerning the childhood, boyhood and early manhood of Jesus Christ. When he was twelve years old we are told by Luke He went up with His parents to Jerusalem. He tarried behind, and being sought by them He was found after three days in the Temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions. When His mother said, "Son, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing," he replied, "Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business." Then He returned to Nazareth, and for nearly twenty years attended to God's business among the tools and shavings of a carpenter's shop. And so ends as far as scriptural record is available, the story of the life of our Lord until the commencement of His public ministry at the age of thirty years. Tradition has loved to let its fancy play about the form and personality of Jesus. For instance, we are told in the Gospel of St. James, how at the moment of the Nativity, the pole of the heaven stood motionless, and the birds were still, and everything that was being propelled forward was intercepted in its course. But, as Farrar remarks, "Of this sudden hush and awe of Nature, as well as of the ox and ass kneeling to worship Him in the stable, and of the voice with which He told His mother immediately after His birth that He was the Son of God, there is no trace in the New Testament." But rather, as another has said, "when the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the healing of the nations was issuing forth, there was nothing seen upon the surface of human society save this slight rippling of the water," human things went on as usual, each being engaged about little projects of his own.

About the Magi, too, we are told, their names, country and personal appearance, Melchior was an old man with long hair and white beard; Caspar a ruddy and beardless youth; Balthasar swarthy and in the prime of life. They are thus made representative of the three periods of life, while the three divisions of the human race are illustrated, by their belonging, Melchior to Shem; Caspar to Ham, and Balthasar to Japhet. And, according to Romanist fable, their skulls circled with golden crowns, are among the relics in the cathedral of Cologne.

Of the child Jesus it is affirmed that the flowers blossomed wherever he appeared; that palm trees bent down to give him dates; that lions and leopards adored him; and that robbers were overawed by His majesty. That as a boy He could carry spilt water in His robe; pull boards of wood to the required length; make sparrows of clay and cause them to fly; and draw out clothes from a common dyer's vat, each stained the requisite color.

But among the many legends pertaining to the Lord, there is one, and that referring to His public life, which seems most worthy of notice as being Christ-like, even though it be fictitious. Jesus, says the story, arriving late one evening at the gates of a city, walked through the streets into the market-place. And he saw at the corner of the market some people gathered together looking at an object on the ground. It was a dead dog, with a halter round its neck, by which it had been dragged through the dirt; and a viler thing never met the eyes of man. And those who stood by looked on with abhorrence. Said one, "It pollutes the air." "How long," said another, "shall this foul beast offend our sight." "Look at his torn hide," said a third, "One could not even cut a shoe out of it." "And his ears," said a fourth, "all dragged and bleeding." "No doubt," said a fifth, "he has been hanged for stealing." And Jesus hearing them, looked compassionately upon the dead creature, as He said: "But pearls could not equal his teeth for whiteness." And the people said, "Surely this is Jesus of Nazareth, for no one else could find anything to approve in a dead dog." We say this fabled recognition of the beauty of a dog's teeth on the part of Jesus, is akin to the kindness which detected the son of Abraham under the rough guise of the tax-gathering Zachæus; and which compassionated all the lost children of men. Still we must bear in mind as we turn away from all this tradition, that as the exit of Moses from this world was accomplished,

"Noiselessly as the daylight
Comes back when the night is done,
Or the crimson streak on ocean's cheek
Grows into the great sun."

even so was it with the coming of the Son of man; whose entrance into the limitations of humanity was welcomed but by the few; while the great world stayed sunken in

apathy and sin. For He came unto His own, but His own received Him not. The angels sang, and the shepherds rejoiced, and the wise men worshipped; but the world knew Him not.

Nevertheless we must not lose sight of the significance of the Apostle's statement, that in due time Christ came. For it has been repeatedly shown how at that time Palestine was at the centre of the world's civilization, and actually lay in the very middle of the highway trodden by the nations. An almost universal means of communication existed in the Greek language; while Roman roads lay ready for the willing feet of Christ's ambassadors, and the wearing out of forms of faith, and the evidencing of the old god's infutility, had prepared men for the appearing of the World's Light. Even secular and heathen authors tell how the world was groaning and travelling, in pain, awaiting with feverish expectation the coming of some one who would bring mercy and truth, and impart righteousness and peace. God had been silent for four centuries; no prophet had spoken, or seer proclaimed a vision; the stillness had been unusual and pathetic even to distress; when suddenly by the rushing Jordan, the heroic Baptist declared the coming of the Holder of the purging Fan and of the purifying Flame.

"This Year Also"

A NEW YEARS SERMONETTE.

When Jesus spoke the parable in which these words occur, He was no doubt intending to convey a solemn lesson to the Jewish people and their leaders. It is known as the parable of "the barren fig tree," Luke 13, and it tells in a few words the long, sad story of the ingratitude and unfruitfulness of that ancient people for whom God had done so much. Many long years before Christ came, one of God's servants had been inspired with a like theme, and sung out a plaintive song of the Lord's tender care, His husbandry of His people and the empty heartless return which they gave Him. "What could have been done more to my vineyard that I have not done in it?"

Such were the plaintive pleadings of the Lord, of Hosts with "the house of Israel and the men of Judah" in Isaiah's day and here is the beloved Son of God in His day preferring the same charge against these highly favored people, who in their generation were rapidly filling up the measure of their iniquity.

Alas, friends, this parable if spoken to the Jews, has surely been recorded for us Gentiles—recorded "for our admonition on whom the ends of the world have come." How true a story it is of our heavenly Father's constant, patient, watchful care over us—not only as nations but as individuals. For after all it is a personal lesson that is taught here. "It was not an unusual thing to plant 'a fig tree in a vineyard,' but the fig tree would always be an object by itself, and by this very individuality Christ would teach men to apply to their own selves, the truth represented in the parable.

Let us try to do this as we contemplate the dawning upon us of another new year. To each one of us this year has come as truly as though to each alone, just as the beautiful sun above us shines upon each when it shines upon all.

Past years of "goodness and mercy" have been numbered among the blessings we have each enjoyed, and now God has given us—"This year also."

Let each one raise a song of praise, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name." How many years, indeed, may not this expression of added love and continued faithfulness have been applicable to some of us! Year after year it has been "this year also"—another year of bountiful providences, another year of timely guidance, another year of gracious dealing—the same old story of goodness and mercy following us all the days of our life. And now a new stage in the journey opens before us—a new token of Divine mercy—"This year also."

But we must not forget, friends, that the lesson is one of rebuke even of judgment; and as Paul says, if we would not be chastened of the Lord, let us judge ourselves. Is it not true that almost every line of God's faithfulness tell also of our failure? We confess that He has "daily loaded us with benefits," yet where is the record of our gratitude? And when we speak of His "benefits," we mean not only daily bread and those things which tend to promote our temporal welfare. We have, many of us, received at the Lord's hand pardon for our sins, a blessed interest in Christ and Salvation, abundant and repeated ministries of the Holy Spirit, numberless actual bestowments of spiritual blessings, all intended to enrich our souls and make them fruitful to our Redeemer's glory. Where is the fruit?

"Behold these three years"—ah, it may be more than that saith some of us—"I come, seeking fruit and finding none." Shame to us Christian brother, sister, if this is true in our case. And if it is may the good Lord cause us to breathe this prayer, "Lord Jesus if it has been so in the past, give me strength to overcome, in order that it may not be 'this year also.'"

But neither do we forget how the very lesson of judgment brings out the advocacy of the Holy Spirit, who "maketh intercessions for us according to the will of God." And so our hearts are cheered. "This year also, Lord," says the pleading voice, "let Thy work go on. Let them have still Thy tender care, Thy Divine husbandry 'this year also,'—let the ministry of Thy word be given, and the dews of Thy heavenly grace fall upon dry hearts. Still let the blessed influences of the gospel