

The Church Guardian

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SPECIAL NOTICE.

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CALENDAR FOR DECEMBER.

Dec. 6th—Second Sunday in Advent.

" 13th—Third Sunday in Advent.

" 16th }

" 18th } EMBER DAYS.

" 19th }

" 20th—Fourth Sunday in Advent.

" 21st—St. Thomas A. & M.

" 25th—CHRISTMAS.

" 26th—St. Stephen's—First M.

" 27th—St. John—Ap. & E.

" 27th—First Sunday after Christmas.

" 28th—The Innocents' Day.

CHRISTMAS.

"GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY!" So did the angel messenger describe the wonderful announcement of the first Christmas Eve; and so from age to age have tens of thousands of human hearts felt it to be as each returning Christmas season has brought it vividly to their remembrance. The echoes of that angel's words have lingered on during these eighteen hundred years, and so far from losing any of their power, they seem only to wax louder and louder; for a greater company year by year upon earth have entered into the meaning of these words, and tasted of the gladness and the joy whereof they speak. And well may we join in the mighty chorus which now resounds throughout the length and breadth of Christendom. The day has dawned upon us for which the Patriarchs and Prophets of old gazed through the ages with longing eyes; the day on which the woman's Seed should remove the curse of Adam's fall; the day when the Lord should raise up a mighty salvation for His people in the house of David; the day for which the whole earth was blindly seeking; the day of which poets dreamt and philosophers mused, and for which the hearts of the people were ever longing, when the mystery of our existence should be revealed, and Truth should manifest herself to men, and the Kingdom of Righteousness should be established upon earth. Yes, in the glorious mystery of this blessed Feast all the aspirations and longings of the world find their consummation: earth is regenerated, and man is once more brought near to God.

This is the great, the overwhelming thought of this joyful season. The Word is made

flesh, and dwells among us. God becomes man.

"Wrapp'd in His swaddling bands,
And in a manger laid,
The Hope and Glory of all lands
Is come to the world's aid."

And now, what are one or two of the practical considerations which we may draw from this great fact which we again commemorate? For one thing, we may gather a fresh assurance of the Lord's faithfulness to all His promises. The promise of a Saviour stood for four thousand years, and when the fullness of time was come, lo! it was literally accomplished, and the fulfilment of *that* was the most wonderful event that ever took place on earth. If, then, He has accomplished the greater, how shall He not do the less, especially when in that *one* gift He included all besides?

And a second comforting thought there is in respect of *little children*. Why should Jesus have taken *their* state but for their *benefit*? The Child born speaks a word of rich consolation to fathers and mothers concerning the children whom God has given them; it tells of His love for the little ones, and gives the blessed assurance that if He is pleased to take them away, it is that He may take them to Himself. So there comes a precious message of comfort to *bereaved* parents from the Bethlehem stable;—the first ingathering into the Kingdom of Heaven after the Saviour's birth was that of a great company of little children. And where else is there any true consolation for any of us? The Child born is the great Day-spring from on high which alone can lighten up the heart of darkness and of sadness. He hath sent ME, He said, to bind up the broken-hearted, and to comfort all that mourn—and that mission He is ever fulfilling. Broken hearts and mourning hearts there ever must be in the world. Sin and death will ever be in the world, and anniversaries like those of Christmas bring with them to most of us *some* memories which call up the sigh or the tear. But yet its first and loudest sound is that of gladness. Its tidings help to dry the tear and raise the spirit above its sorrows, for that Child born has abolished death, and destroyed him that had the power of death, and takes away sin, and ever lives to intercede, until the great gathering together is accomplished of all His beloved ones in the Home above. There is a festive season coming when no regretful thought, or mournful memory, or anxious anticipation shall cross the mind or cloud its joy. And it is the prospect of that which the Christian is to bring down into the midst of those family gatherings which happily mark this special season, and that prospect, of course, traces back to that great event which, as at this time, transpired—the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. And if there is one lesson more which is sounded forth from that holy birthplace of the Saviour, it is this: "If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." "Wherefore, putting away all malice, and guile, and hypocrisy, and all evil-speaking, be ye kind one to another, forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any have a quarrel against any, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Another

year is just past, the time is short, let it not be filled up with what is hurtful, and painful, and profitless; but let those who bear the Christian name strive to show more of the mind that was in Christ Jesus, Who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich. And may it be granted to each and all of us to realize in our hearts those good tidings of great joy folded up in the truth, "UNTO YOU IS BORN A SAVIOUR WHICH IS CHRIST THE LORD."

CHRISTMAS AT BETHLEHEM.

Bethlehem and Christmas are linked inseparably in nearly every mind, yet there are few to whom Bethlehem is anything more than a vague name of a town in Palestine, supremely interesting, indeed, but only so from its sacred associations. It is, however, a thriving little town at the present day, of some five thousand inhabitants. Its solidly-built stone houses crown the summit of two knolls connected by a lower saddle on a white chalk ridge, with steep declivities to the north and south. At the east end the monastery and basilica, its principal buildings, overlook the northern valley; the Church of the Virgin stands inside the fortress-monastery, in which Latin, Greek and Armenian monks find a common retreat. The basilica was erected by order of Constantine, and this is the oldest church in Palestine, perhaps in the world. It has escaped destruction on every occasion when other churches in Palestine were overthrown, and is thus the only undisputed erection of the time of Constantine in the country. Two feasts are held yearly at Bethlehem on the Greek and Latin Christmas Eve. On these occasions the Church of the Virgin is attended by large numbers of visitors. Below the church is the "sacred grotto," which is supposed to contain the exact place of the Saviour's birth, in a recess beneath the altar. A manger is on the south. Both are cased in marble, but two old columns supporting the roof appear to be of rock. The Latin Chapel is a long vaulted room at the north of the basilica, hung with red silk. On the eve of Christmas Day, mass is performed with much ceremony, after which the service begins. The congregation usually fill the chapel almost to suffocation point. At midnight the long chorales suddenly cease, and in the stillness the clock ticks, candles on the high altar are lit, a curtain is drawn back, and above the altar a little glass-fronted ebony box is seen, from which a small wax image looks down, representing an infant swathed in cloth of gold. The great convent bell swings forth the news of Christmas morn, and the little red-socked choristers burst forth with the "Gloria in excelsis." The tones of the organ are blended with those of a pipe or reed, in memory of the shepherds; and for two more hours a musical service continues without intermission, after which, in long train, the mystic-robed patriarch leading, a procession reaches the grotto, which is soon filled with priests, and blazes with crimson silk, silver and gold, lit up by the rows of silver lamps above. The Gospel of the day is read in Latin, and at the words, "*Et peperit filium suum primogenitum,*" a wax figure of an infant is laid by the patri-