THE CHRISTMAS LESSON STORY.

By Cunningham Geikie, D.D., LL.D.

The great anniversary in the Roman Empire at the time of Christ's birth was that of the birth or accession of the Roman Emperor. In Asia Minor especially the fete was the great event of the year, grand public games, processions, feastings, and theatrical displays, with a proportion of bloody gladiatorial fights, expressing the slavish flattery of the population. But the supreme honour paid to the ruler of the world on the auspicious day was the burning incense before his statue, as to a god, and grand services to him at the temple of Jupiter, as to the great Jupiter himself. In Palestine, it was on the birthday of the fox Herod Antipas, that Salome danced before the King and his lords, and won from him the ghastly reward of the head of John the Baptist.

Contrast with such celebrations that of the birth of the Son of Mary, with its angel utterances of good-will to men and the sweet prayer of the heavenly ones that peace might reign on earth, the anthem finding its supreme rapture in the ascription of glory to the all-perfect, all-gracious God enthroned in highest heaven! The skies looking down, white with glory, on the lowly roof beneath which lay the new-born Saviour, was but a symbol of the transcendent superiority of His reign, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, then begun.

Augustus had gained universal earthly empire after proscriptions and frightful civil wars, which had laid waste provinces and filled all lands with mourning and wretchedness. Heathenism, with all its hideous impurity; slavery, with all its sufferings; political corruption, with all its crimes—were left untouched, as the normal state of things. In Palestine royal birthdays might be grand occasions of pomp and display; but the government was a ruthless tyranny, which regarded the people as made for the ruler, and rightly subject to his every caprice.

But the birthday of Jesus Christ is the anniversary of the incarnation of eternal love, before the beams of which the sorrows of earth are one day to melt away, as the dark vapours of night before the radiant splendours of the triumphant sun.

Bethlehem, when I saw it last, was a good deal changed. Many new houses and some hotels have been built, and the trade in little mementoes of the town fills it with petty commercial bustle, little in keeping with its holy associations. But the terraces on the steep hillsides are still as they were, one may suppose, in the days when Mary carried out her babe to look in the green valley beneath, and the track by which she may have gone down to the field where her ancestress Ruth met Boaz, is still that by which the peasant goes down to his daily toil.

The Messianic idea among the Jews was so opposed to that of Christianity that it is easy to see how offensive it would be to them. Their ancient kings had been called the "Anointed" of Jehovah; that is in Hebrew, "the Messiahs" of God. Hannah thus speaks of the king as Messiah (I. Sam. ii. 10), or "anointed;" Samuel calls Saul God's Messiah (I. Sam. xii. 3-5); Samuel fancies Eliab "the Messiah;" David calls Saul "the Messiah," and he calls himself God's Messiah once and again (I. Sam. xvi. 6; xxiv. 6, 10; xxvi. 9, 11, 23; II. Sam. i, 14-16; xix. 21; xxiii. 1.) Whenever you read in the Old Testament of God's "anointed," the word in the Hebrew is "Messiah." Hence this term really meant, to a Jew, simply an earthly king, and his idea of the mission committed to this leader, anointed by God to his office, was the restoration of the Jewish monarchy.

Herod knew this, and therefore, unpopular as he was, felt alarmed at hearing of a child being born who was to be the Jewish king. He knew that the Pharisees, who were all-powerful with the nation, hated him, and were always plotting to take his throne from him—though, indeed, they were powerless unless Rome supported them.

The same thought runs through all the opposition which Christ met. A suffering Messiah was beyond their conception. The "Anointed of Jehovah" was to be a victorious David, or Judas Maccabeus, leading them to triumph over the Roman, as David had led them to empire as far as the Euphrates, or as Judas Maccabeus had overthrown the rule of Antiochus the Syrian. But there were some with loftier thoughts, like the shepherds, and the magi from the East.

—Christmas is the preacher who emphasizes the fact that the religion which it celebrates is adapted to human nature. If we were to fancy a wholly Christianized world, it would be a world inspired by the spirit of Christmas—a bright, friendly, beneficent, generous, sympathetic, naturally helpful world. A man who is habitually mean and selfish is a man without Christmas in his soul.

—Christmas Day declares thou art His child; be not afraid to go unto thy Father; tell Him what thou wantest; say to Him, "Father, I am not moderate, reasonable, forbearing. I cannot keep Christmas Day aright, for I have not a peaceful Christmas spirit in me, and I know I shall never get it by thinking and reading, and understanding, for it passes all that, and lies far away beyond it—in God. Oh, Father, give me Thy peace, soothe this restless, greedy, fretful soul of mine as a mother soothes a sick child. I believe the message of Christmas Day, that Thou lovest the world; that Thy wil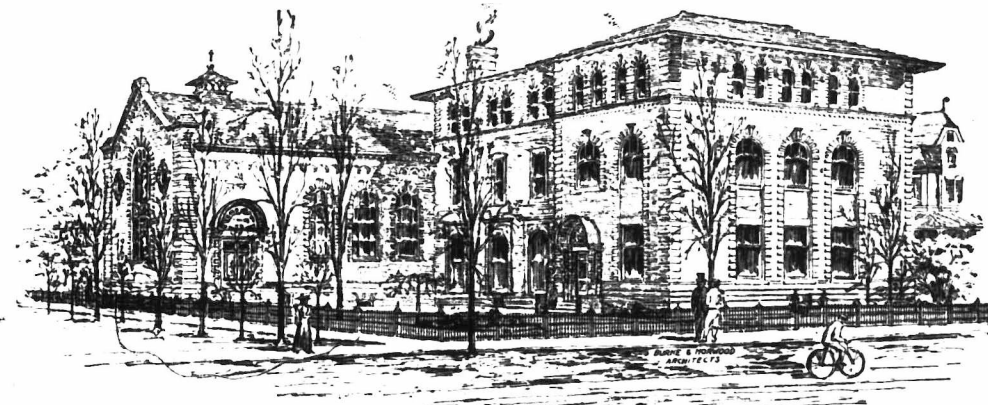l is peace on earth."—Canon Kingsley.