

The Quiet Hour.

The Birth of Christ.

S. S. LESSON—Matthew 2: 1-12. December 20.

GOLDEN TEXT—Thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.—Matt. 1: 21.

BY ALEXANDER MCLAREN, D.D.

The ecclesiastical calendar commemorates the visit of the wise men under the name of the Epiphany, or manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. It would have been more correctly called the coming of the Gentiles to Christ, for the emphasis of the story is laid rather on the Magi's obedience to the heavenly vision than on the vision itself. And that obedience is thrown into brilliant light by the contrast with the murderous hatred of Herod and the indifference of the priests and scribes.

1. The pilgrims from afar following the light that led them to the King. If any one wishes to see the difference between the Gospels and myths, he has only to contrast the veracious simplicity of Matthew with the mendacious particularity of the legendary accretions his narrative. The Gospel does not say whence they came, who they were, how they connected the starry appearance with the birth of a King of the Jews, nor give any other petty detail. The two broad facts that they learned, by some application of their starry science, that a King of the Jews was born, and that they left their distant homes and undertook the long journey to do him homage, are the essentials, and all else is left in shadow. We have no data either for determining the nature of the "star." Clearly, it had shone on them in their homes, but had not guided them on their journey, but only reappeared when they came near Bethlehem, and then pointed them to the humble house,—which no ordinary "star" could do. Most probably, then, it was some peculiar light, perhaps visible, but not intelligible, to other eyes. The guiding luster and the understanding gaze were both given by God. If we believe that the birth of Jesus was the incarnation of the eternal Word, we shall not stumble at that light which came down close to earth, and witnessed to the descent still lower of the true Light.

But more important than speculations about the star is the blessed fact that, to these men, "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," a gleam from heaven came, and came through their daily pursuits. Surely, the very dimness of their personality is part of the preciousness of the incident. For does it not teach us that, far beyond the circle of "revelation," rays of God-given light were speeding into the darkness, and that any kind of "wisdom" has affinities with the highest, and that devotion to any truth may lead up to the truth of truths, the incarnation of the Word? These Magi were led to the cradle by their astronomy. A centurion was helped to apprehend Christ's power by the discipline of the legion. Seeking souls everywhere do find. The Magi have "in their hands a glass which showeth many more" sons of light in lands of darkness, "He hath not left himself without witness."

They acted on the light they had. They trusted it, they obeyed it, they broke off their customary round of life because of it, they forsook their student leisure and quiet, they faced a long, toilsome journey with very

little knowledge of what was to be done at the end of it. No doubt some of their fellow students laughed at them, and, no doubt, they sometimes asked themselves, as they lay down weary at night, and saw no guiding star amidst the myriads, if they had been wrong, after all. Their march was a venture of faith, and, like all such ventures, sometimes seemed folly, but, like all such ventures, thank God! was richly repaid at last. We may well learn a lesson from them, and ask ourselves if we are ready to let our clearer knowledge dominate and shape our conduct as these strangers did. They were led by a star shining in the dark night; we have the Light of Life to guide us. Do we follow it?

2. The impression of the Magi's devotion is deepened by its contrast with the conduct of Herod and the Jews. They must have wondered that the news that had drawn them so many weary miles seemed unknown in Jerusalem. They must have wondered still more at the "trouble" it caused in the city, which they had hoped to find all rejoicing greatly that its king had come. Herod's alarm is easily accounted for, since he knew that his throne was unsteady, and might be easily pushed over by a popular rising. But that Jerusalem should be troubled showed too plainly how dead the Messianic hope had fallen. Matthew contrasts the usurping with the true king by twice naming him "Herod the king," in close juxtaposition with the Magi's use of the title, "King of the Jews." He and the people were equally perturbed at the possibility which should have kindled joyful expectations. So early did Jesus begin to be "set for the fall and rising of many in Israel," and the touchstone of men's spiritual and moral condition. The same gospel, even in its undeveloped form, was a stone of stumbling and a foundation stone. It parted men, even so early, into two halves. The Magi leaped up at the word, and journeyed far to crown him. Herod and "his own" shrank from the thought of his coming. So it has always been. So it is to-day.

The wily tyrant scented danger, and his cruel mind quickly resolved on his course. His first step, consulting the proper authorities as to where the Christ was to be born, was nominally to enable him to direct the Magi, and so to pose as helping them, and thus to keep hold of them. The rulers' answer shows how, at that time, the prophecy was clearly regarded as Messianic. But it shows something more sad,—namely, how little the priests and scribes cared for Messiah's coming. The Magi had traveled many weary leagues, but the priests were not sufficiently interested to go out six miles to ascertain if the Christ was indeed born. They should have said, like the shepherds, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this great sight." But they contented themselves with giving their answer, and thought no more of the matter. Are there not many of us in Christian lands who know the gospel so well that it has ceased to interest us, and we never dream of letting it influence our actions? Might not the wondering zeal of heathen converts shame our apathy?

Herod was quick to utilize his information. He "privily sent for" the Magi, for the less said about such dangerous subjects the better. He saw that they were more likely to find out the facts than he was, for if there

was really a project of setting up some infant in Bethlehem as king, he was the one person from whom it would be kept. So he sends the unsuspecting Magi as his spies, and one can fancy the sardonic smile with which he professed that he was eager to go too, to pay homage. "To worship him" meant to kill him.

3. The discovery and the homage. The star again appeared. The Magi had been left to learn from men what men could tell them, but at the end, as at the beginning, of their quest, God himself guided their steps. Heavenly visions are not granted when human counsel avails, nor withheld when it is useless. A strange king, they must have thought, this,—in a lowly cottage, and with a peasant mother, unrecognized by any. They had been led by a star,—and to this! But their faith did not stumble, and they began to learn the secret of his royalty—holiness and gentleness, and got some glimmerings of the kind of kingdom he sets up. Their expectations must have been shocked, as some of ours may be, by being called upon to recognize the king in his cradle, as some of ours are by being called upon to recognize him on his cross. But they accepted the strange discovery, and opened their treasures and spread them at his unconscious feet. They brought what they had, the precious things of their own land. We have to bring what we have, and to lay it all down before Him who has stooped to be born and to die for us, and who is glad to receive whatever we bring, if it is our best, and rendered from loving hearts.

The Magi departed into their own land another way. So they glide out of our ken, but we may hope that they carried away some glimpses of the King, and some loyalty to him, which shone, a better guiding star, on what remained of their life's journey, and lighted them at last, not to the cradled infant, but to the enthroned Christ.—S. S. Times.

Especially Favored.

BY G. H. WETTERBE.

Throughout the whole Bible the truth appears that God's own people have been especially favored by him in various ways, in contrast with God's attitude towards other people. While it is true that the Bible shows that God grants certain blessings to all people in common, such as sunlight, rain and land harvests, yet such providences do not, by any means, disprove the fact that God does especially favor his own people in preference to all other classes. The difference is so striking as to be apparent to every one who studies the Bible with honesty of purpose.

Among the many illustrations of this truth is one in connection with the plagues which God visited upon Pharaoh and his people. There was the plague of murrain. Note these words: "And all the cattle of Egypt died, but of the cattle of the children of Israel died not one." This difference was not accidental; it was distinctly owing to God's special favor to his own people. We may call it elective grace. The Egyptians, under the lead of their king, were in rebellion against God, while the Israelites were maintaining a trustful allegiance to God. Pharaoh was told, even before the plague appeared, that none of the cattle of the Israelites would die. He seems to have doubted that it would be so, for after the plague had done its work he instituted a search, and this is the record: "Behold, there was not so much as one of the cattle of the Israelites dead." That ought to have