

A CHRISTMAS SERMON.

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"And she brought forth her first-born son; and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn.—LUKE ii. 7.

This is a very unpretentious record of a very significant event. We are simply told that the child was born; that he was properly dressed; and that he was cradled in a manger for want of better conveniences. That is the whole story. But it is the story of one of the most momentous events in the history of the race. It will be profitable for us to briefly review the circumstances under which it took place, as well as to endeavor to realize its significance.

The place where the event transpired was the historic town of Bethlehem, about six miles south of Jerusalem. The name of the place is itself significant. "Bethlehem" means "the house of bread," or "the place of food." And on this memorable night, of which the record speaks, there was one born there who was to be the bread of life, and the food of heaven, to every one who believes on Him. Very tender memories clustered around this little town even at that time. It was very near this place where Rachel, the best loved wife of Jacob, had given up her life, and where she was buried. It was in this city where David had been born, and it was called "the city of David," in honor of the great king. In its neighboring fields he had, doubtless, kept his father's sheep, as other shepherds were doing on this memorable night; and its streets and buildings were familiar objects to him.

The time at which this event took place was a memorable one. It was unlike any age either before or since. The whole civilized world lay in quiet submission at the feet of one man, the Emperor of Rome. It has been called the Augustan Age, in honor of Augustus, the reigning Cæsar of the time. Through years of bloody warfare he had succeeded in quelling all rebellion and subduing all hostile tribes, until he was able to seat himself on the throne of Rome as master of the world. About seventy years prior to this Judea had been subjected to the Roman power. That power was now vested in Herod the Great, as king. Herod was an Idumean by birth—a descendant of Esau, and hence akin to the Jews by blood if not by birthright. He was a usurper in the throne of David. His is one of the blackest characters on the pages of history. Besides uncounted other murders during his reign, he repeatedly imbrued his hands in the blood of his own household. Two brothers-in-law, one the brother of his wife, the other the husband of his sister, died at his hands. Then followed his wife's grandfather, his wife's mother, his wife herself, a most beautiful woman, and three of his sons. How many more of his kin might have fallen a prey to his jealousy and hate we cannot tell, had not death cut short his brutal career. Can we wonder that such a monster, conscious of his usurpation of power, when he heard that a "King of the Jews" had been born at Bethlehem, and knowing that a rightful king could successfully dispute his claim, issued the decree for the slaughter of the innocents?

The occasion of the visit to Bethlehem by the parents of Jesus on this occasion is clear from Luke's narrative. Rome was mistress of the world. Judea must do her bidding. A decree had gone forth from Cæsar that all the world should be enrolled. This enrolment was practically the taking of a census, and was preliminary to a general taxation. Each Jewish family had the record of its pedigree kept, and the record was preserved in the ancestral city. Bethlehem was "the city of David." Joseph was "of the house and family of David." Hence the journey from his northern home with Mary his espoused wife. Many others would gather to Bethlehem for the same purpose. Joseph's journey being long and his progress naturally slow, his arrival found the places of public entertainment full. But one resort was left. The caravanserai for the beasts afforded a shelter from the wind and weather. Of this the

wayworn travellers availed themselves. And thus it came that Jesus was born in Bethlehem although the home of his parents was in Nazareth, and that he was cradled in a manger, though born in an inhabited town.

The significance of this birth, who can tell? It was the advent of God among men. Not that God had not manifested himself to man prior to this, or held any communication with him. But he now came to dwell among men in a higher and better sense than ever before. Jesus was the "Immanuel," the "God with us," and in him and through him God was to reveal himself to man in a far higher and more complete sense than he had ever before done. No wonder the heavens were moved, as never before, and the angels pealed forth the seraphic anthem, the first and last outburst of heaven's music the earth has ever heard.

This birth was also the advent of the ideal man. The world had long been looking for an ideal manhood. The world still chases after the same thing. The Greeks of old thought to produce it by their "wisdom." The scientists of to-day, many of them, expect it as the outcome of evolution. But as we stand by the manger-cradle in Bethlehem we see in embryo the ideal man of the ages. The manhood of Jesus was the offspring of no one age or nation. He was unlike all other men in this. Other men are moulded by their surroundings. They were at that time either Romans, or Greeks or Jews. They are now either Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans or Americans. Their minds reflect the country in which they were born, the institutions amid which they are reared, the age in which they live. Not so with Jesus. He was born of a Jewish mother, but Gentile blood flowed in His veins as well and He felt akin to the whole of men. His countrymen loved Jews and hated Greeks. He loved all men. His age pampered the rich and despised the poor, worshipped the great and trampled upon the weak; He showed to all an equal sympathy and justice. Amid institutions that were strictly national, His teaching and provisions were world-embracing. Many men in many ages have had many good qualities; He summed them all up in Himself. A few men have had but few faults; He alone had none. His was a perfect manhood, an ideal character and that alone is an ideal life which is in imitation of His.

Then this birth was the perfect union of God with man. Ever since the breach was made in Eden, God had been drawing nearer to man, a man was able to bear it. At first in the promises to the fathers of the race; then in the angelic messengers sent to the patriarchs, then in the pillar of fire and cloud at the Exodus; then in the abiding presence of God—the shekinah in the tabernacle. But now the union is made complete. The Son of God becomes the Son of man. He takes on Him the form of a servant and is made in the likeness of men. The babe in Bethlehem is a divine human babe, and the man, sprung from that infancy, is a God-man. How stupendous, then, the significance of that birth in Bethlehem's stable!

And how weighty have the consequences of this birth been to the world! With it opened a new era of God's dealing with men. Hitherto He had spoken to men through His prophets, now He would speak to them through His Son; and His revelation would be correspondingly more glorious, tender and complete. It opened up a new life for the race. Womanhood is forever exalted by the motherhood of Jesus. Infancy was brightened once for all by His birth and childhood. Manhood was honored beyond computation by His assumption of man's nature and with this God-man as leader the way is opened to a new life for all classes of the race.

May we linger by that rustic cradle, till our hearts open to receive the infant stranger! And once admitted to our affections, may He become the sovereign of our hearts. Then will the angelic song heard at His birth become a reality in our lives; His life, our life; His home, our eternal resting place.

One in a faint should be laid flat on his back, then loosen his clothes, give him air, and let him alone.

DISUNION.

The folly of it: Nothing whatever is accomplished by it. If each of the churches is built upon the truth, they might all be contained under a comprehensive system, bearing fruit and preserving the truth as it is in Jesus.

The weakness of it: While nothing is gained, much is lost. Talent is used in controversy, one church with another, which might be directed in converting sinners to God's ways. Money is wasted, which is divided between churches and sects, in separate missions, and publishing houses; in ten thousand church buildings, when a fraction would suffice; in current expenses for a vast number of separate, rivalling congregations, societies, etc.

The evil of it, —In what it fails to do and in what it does. It fails to let us do with our might whatever our hands find to do, in conquering the world to Christ. "Our might" is frittered away, parcelled out, and scattered, both as a physical and a moral force, in behalf of Christ; and we are but the shadow of what we might be. But it is also evil in what it does, and enough if we mention nothing more than the sorry plight in which it presents us to heathen people and unbelievers—a plight to make them laugh and sneer at us in a way that it must make it infinitely harder to accomplish God's gracious purpose towards them through His Church.

The crime of it, —The Body of Christ is torn limb from limb, until some of the members even deny Him as Christ. Is not this a crime against God, that His own children rise up against each other to waste His substance, to strive over the Messenger of His covenant whom He sent, and make war upon each other, as if for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake? It is surely a crime to plant hatred where love ought grow; to scatter strife where peace should prevail; to make divisions where all should be at one, and to delay the Master's coming while martyrs, who die for His reign, are crying, How long, Oh Lord, how long!

And the folly, the weakness, the evil, and the crime of disunion, are all magnified in the shame and humiliation they should bring us, when we know that there is no need and no excuse for the divisions which exist among Christians.—*Church Messenger.*

THE CRY OF THE PERISHING.

The No-Church is the largest on earth. It numbers three-fourths of the human race. It is marching on, while I write, a thousand millions strong. A thousand millions! Imagination staggers under such a figure. Suppose this unspeakable army were to file before you at the rate of one a minute; it would be 5884 A. D. when the last man drew up, walking twelve hours a day; in a year, a quarter of a million, and in forty years, ten millions would have passed you, leaving 990 millions yet to come. You would have to stand on that spot 3,960 years to see the rear of that prodigious host. All these are now living, and in a few years will be dead, having never heard so much as there was a Jesus. This, after eighteen centuries of the Cross! Each of these is a human being, I suppose? Yes. According to your creed, damned at death? Yes. Are you a Christian? Yes. And not giving even a passing thought to those poor, fate-crushed pilgrims, Christless and weary, trudging out into the great night? What! grudging the coin to your mission collector; spent all on your own, dear, precious, darling self; God help you, brother. You shall awake yet, like Jonah, and go down to God's school in the belly of hell, to learn by misery what mercy means. Oh, sleek, comfortable, well-bolstered Christians, go weep and howl. Your gold and silver are rusted, and the rust of it shall eat your flesh as fire. Ye soft-cushioned, self-loving, select souls, your purgatory comes. In heaven's name fling off your lethargy, and hear the cry of the perishing! In the name of this Niagara of humanity, plunging over to the abyss, awake! We are our brother's keeper, or his killer.—*G. Gordon McLeod.*