

A GLANCE AT THE CHURCH CALENDAR FOR DECEMBER.

The first three Sundays in December of the present year are known as the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Sundays in Advent. Advent Sunday was celebrated by us as the last in November; and therefore we spoke so generally, and yet so especially, upon the history of the whole Advent season in our last number, that we shall have little to say now concerning these Sundays. Only this: we noticed that this sacred season was intended to bring our thoughts, and so to our hearts, both the First and Second Advents of our Lord, and that we must be prepared to receive a Christ who has been, before we can look forward with joy to a Christ that is to be. And this is wonderfully illustrated in the Epistles and Gospels of the three Sundays now before us. In the one we have the picture of the first, and in the other that of the second coming of our Lord, as thus brought before us in the services of these Advent Sundays.

The fourth Sunday in the month brings to us our "Christmas Day," by which our Prayer-book informs us, "The Nativity of our Lord," or "The birthday of Christ," is commonly called. The oldest commemoration of any of the festivals in the group of our present "Christmas Cycle," was undoubtedly the Epiphany, of which we shall especially speak in our next number. Only this, just here: that the most uniform day for the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord through the East was upon that festival which also commemorated His manifestation as the Son of God at His baptism. The Festival of the Nativity would appear to have been celebrated from the earliest times in the Christian Church, though not everywhere upon the same day. Clement, of Alexandria, says that some kept it on May 20th, while others kept it a whole month earlier; but the larger part of the Eastern Church kept it concurrently with "The Epiphany," on January 6th. We must, therefore, look to the Western Church for the origin of our Christmas Day as we now celebrate it, on December 25th. This might be realized by the name itself; for while the Western Church knows the festival of Epiphany, as also Easter and Pentecost by their Greek names, yet Christmas has a Latin name. *Natale Domini* points clearly to its origination in the West. But we have more definite evidence than this. In a sermon of St. Chrysostom, delivered on December 25th, 386, at Antioch, he tells his hearers that it was scarcely ten years since, following the usage of the Western Church, they had begun to observe Christmas as a separate festival, setting apart, as it were, that particular element in the general festival of the Manifestation. He adds, however, that a festival of the Nativity had been kept in the West "from the beginning." Now, the inference from all this is, that an early date, perhaps at the end of the third century, or even earlier, a general festival of the Manifestation was observed, including not only the ideas entering into the present festival of the Epiphany, but that of the Nativity also. At this time, we may suppose the general character of the Western Church still to have been, as in St. Paul's time, more Greek than Latin. At a later time, when this state of things had changed, and yet sufficiently early to allow Chrysostom to speak

as he did, of the Nativity having been kept from the beginning in the Western Church, the Nativity was detached from the main festival and assigned a separate commemoration on December 25th. Towards the end of the fourth century, the Eastern Churches gradually began to follow this plan; at Antioch, as we have seen, shortly before 386, and at Jerusalem and Alexandria, by the time of the Council of Ephesus, in 431. The change at Jerusalem seems to have been due to the action of Juvenal, Bishop of that place. The Armenian Church alone in Christendom has retained the old plan to the present day. The ancient Church of England welcomed Christmas Day with a special service on the Vigil, a celebration of Holy Communion soon after midnight, another at early dawn, and a third at the usual hour of the mid-day mass. The midnight celebration commemorated the actual birth of our Lord; the early morning one its revelation to mankind in the persons of the shepherds; that at midday, the eternal Sonship of the Holy Child Jesus. It is a day always celebrated with special services by all the Sunday schools of our Church, and coming this year on Sunday, many denominations of Christians will join in its observance. They love the great festivals of the Christian year, and will be glad to sing our Christmas carols as they celebrate their Saviour's birth.

In addition to Christmas we celebrate four other holy days this month. That of St. Thomas on the 21st, and others dedicated to St. Stephen, St. John and the Innocents, following in succession after Christmas Day. The festival of St. Thomas is first mentioned in the fifth century. It seems to have been generally observed in the time of Gregory, and in the Eastern Church it is kept on October 6th. We know little of his scriptural history, as only four sayings of his are recorded in the Gospels. Two were uttered just before the death of Christ, and two just after His resurrection. It may be well to recall them here: (1) "Lord, we know not whither Thou goest, and how can we know the way?" (2) "Let us also go that we may die with him." (3) "Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe." (4) "My Lord and my God." We see in them a remarkable combination of an entire want of faith with a warm, zealous and faithful love. He is said to have preached in Parthia, and to have been buried at Edessa. Later traditions ascribe to him the foundation of the Christian Church in Malabar, which goes by the name of "The Christians of St. Thomas." He is also said to have suffered martyrdom by the Brahmins at Taprobane, now Sumatra, being first assailed with stones, and finally killed by the thrust of a spear.

The three Saint's Days, which immediately follow Christmas Day, are mentioned by St. Bernard as forming one connected festival. Various reasons have been assigned for the place they occupy in the ecclesiastical year. L'Estrange supposes that St. Stephen was commemorated first, as being the first Christian martyr; that St. John holds the second place, as being the disciple whom Jesus loved, and that the Innocents are commemorated next, because their massacre followed immediately upon Christ's nativity. The same author remarks, "that martyrdom, love and innocence are first to be mag-

nified, as wherein Christ is most to be honored." Wheatly has observed, "That as there are three kinds of martyrdom—the first both in will and deed, which is the highest—the second in will, but not in deed; the third in deed but not in will—so the Church commemorates these martyrs in the same order: St. Stephen first, who suffered death both in will and deed; St. John next, who suffered martyrdom in will, but not in deed, being miraculously delivered out of the cauldron of boiling oil into which he was thrown; the Holy Innocents last, who suffered martyrdom in deed, but not in will." The explanation, however beautiful, is certainly somewhat fanciful; and may there not have been an intention on the part of the early Church, merely to set forth the trials by which the blessings of the Gospels are accompanied? "Prosperity," says Lord Bacon, "is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New." And in the midst of our Christmas joys we are reminded that the life of suffering into which our Saviour was introduced, must be shared by his people. Our remarks upon them must be brief. Upon St. Stephen and the Innocents, because so little is known; and upon St. John because his life picture is so familiar to us all. Nothing is known of St. Stephen before his martyrdom except that he was one of the seven deacons first ordained by the Apostles, but the picture of his heroic martyrdom would raise him in our imagination to the very highest pinnacle of true human greatness. His dying words also are of a most saint-like character. The last words of his Master's passion, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do," have a parallel in the servant's, "Lord lay not this sin to their charge," and the commendatory prayer, "Lord Jesus receive my spirit," is the saint's version of the Son's cry, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

St. John though not mentioned very often in the "Gospels," is still placed before us much more frequently than the rest of the chosen Twelve, and as he is made conspicuous in the early part of "the Acts of the Apostles," we feel that we are pretty well acquainted with the story of his early Apostolic life. Besides this he himself has given us the most precious of the Gospels, which enables us to enter into his life-communion with the Master; he has given to the Church three Epistles which brings him to us as a teacher and a friend; and then by remarkable heavenly vision we have been brought to think of him as the only one who has been allowed to pass within the veil and come forth to describe some of its wonders to those awaiting the glorious coming of the son of Man. He probably tarried in Jerusalem until the siege began, in the year 66, as this was only a year before the martyrdom of St. Peter and Paul, he continued for about a third of a century to be the sole remaining Apostolic centre of Church. Most of this time was spent at Ephesus, the metropolis of Asia. He was summoned to Rome to suffer martyrdom, to be cast into a cauldron of boiling oil. Miraculously delivered from death, he was banished to Patmos where the Apostolic Visions were remarkable to him; and returning to his dear old Ephesus, he continued to speak and write loving words about the love God, and finally departed in the midst of his "little children," at the age of one hundred. Of the Holy Innocents we need say nothing; all that is known of them is set before us in one verse of St. Matthew's Gospel. The black-letter days during this month scarce deserve a mention, and of the purport and significance of the Ember Days, on the 14th, 16th and 17th, we have spoken before.—*American Ch. S. S. Magazine.*