



The First Christmas

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## THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DAY

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ALL history finds its center in the crib of Bethlehem. Whatever does not converge to it radiates from it. Ages before the coming of Christ men looked forward to His birth as the beginning of a new era. Truly, Christ was called "the Expectation of Nations." After the birth of Christ, the principles and civilizing influences that accompanied the march of human achievement were influenced by the loftiness and nobility of Christ's teaching. Although it is a far cry from the World of the twentieth century back to the World of first century, yet the identical saving message first proclaimed from Bethlehem's hill-tops has reverberated down the ages with never-varying clarity, truth and benediction. "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace to men of good will." In his sixth sermon on the Nativity of Our Lord, Pope St. Leo tells us why no feast throughout the entire course of the year makes so strong an appeal to the mind and heart of man as does Christmas. "The generation of Christ," he writes, "is the origin of the Christian people; and the birthday of Him Who is our Head is the birthday of us who are His body."

From the story of the Incarnation, we learn that there is today just one name in the history of the world. "Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved." History reveals Christ as the model of perfection among men—a tribute it pays to no other. All who have studied the Gospels, believers as well as unbelievers, are agreed as to the sublime nobility of Christ's character. Amid the ever-changing times, the conditions of life, and the development of the peoples of the earth, the Incarnation of Christ has lost none of its original import. It

rings as clear, as true, as salutary today after a lapse of twenty centuries as it did in the very dawn of Christianity. The Child in the manger, the Saviour in the crib has always extended to those who come unto Him a peace and happiness which the world can never give. No wonder then, Christ's birth is celebrated as that of no other character in the world's history.

"God came to visit His people," says Zachary, "to enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to direct our feet in the way of peace." The history of the world before the coming of Christ is summed up by St. Paul. Speaking of the pagan Romans whose triumphant civilization had absorbed all the energies and vices of vanquished nations, the Apostle of the Gentiles tells us that they were hateful to God, contumacious, haughty; filled with all iniquity, malice, covetousness, wickedness; full of envy, murder, contention, malignity; without affection, without felicity, without mercy. St. Paul is the most reserved of the ancient writers. Plato, Aristotle, Livy, Tacitus, Juvenal, Seneca, all, in a word, tell us of the horrors of pagan society. Indeed, the great majority of mankind were hated, ill treated and crushed to earth. Many wallowed in the slime of every vice; the vices themselves were deified. Pagan civilization was at its apogee when "the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us"; when the Son of God humbled Himself and became the Son of man. Christ the great physician, knew what was in man, and He knew that it was not pleasure, it was not gold, it was not place that man really wanted. God was man's want; and because of this natural craving of man, God could not keep away. "If Jesus Christ had not appeared on earth," writes Laboulaye, "I cannot conceive how the world could have survived the depotism that was strangling it."

In spite of all this paganism and moral corruption, there was one nation that looked forward to a Redeemer, a Messiah, who would liberate them from the tyranny of vice and establish a reign of peace. Although it is true that the promise of a Saviour can be found in the writings and traditions of pagan nations; yet as the time of Christ's birth approached, these became so obscure that only a few knew of them. With the Jewish people, however, this hope was their cheer through ages of wretched misery. To Abraham this promise was repeated and sanctioned with an oath of the Eternal: "I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee, and in thee shall all the kindred

of the earth be blessed." The same promise is made to Isaac and Jacob and the field of realization is narrowed. Again Jacob addresses his son, Juda, from the bed of death: "The sceptre shall not pass from Juda, . . . till He come that is to be sent, and He shall be the expectation of nations." Brighter grows the light in the long list of prophecies until both the time and place of the birth of the Prince of Peace are fortold. Daniel is comforted by heaven's promise that seventy weeks of years will bring the Anointed of God. While, the Lord speaking by the mouth of His prophet Micheas says: "And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda; out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel: and His coming forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity." These prophecies were most accurately fulfilled in Christ's birth. Indeed the birth of Christ was the most longed-for event in the history of the Jewish nation. Yet in spite of this divine assurance, the true notion of the Messiah had become perverted. They wanted a strong temporal King. Hence, "He came unto His own and His own received Him not."

God had come to visit his people and He started with the poorest of the poor. On that still midnight the coming of the Prince of Peace was heralded by a host of angels to the shepherds keeping the nightwatch over their sheep. There, on the hillsides of the most backward of the Roman provinces, the message of peace broke through the silence of the midnight air: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people. For today is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord, in the city of David." Then the angelic choirs hovering over the rock-hewn cave lit up the darkness with splendor as they intoned the hymn; "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace to men of good will." Kings and prophets earnestly desired to see and did not see what it was given to these lowly shepherds to behold on that first Christmas night. They perceived their God wrapped in swaddling clothes. With Joseph and Mary they beheld the Incomprehensible, the Omnipotent, the Everlasting whom the heavens cannot contain, shrinking to the proportions of a Babe, lying altogether helpless on the straw of his manger-cradle. Aptly do we read in the revealed word, "His name shall be called Wonderful." The Martyrology announces the Birth of the Saviour in a manner as solemn as it is inspiring: "5199 years after the Creation of the world, when in

the beginning God created heaven and earth, 2957 years after the Flood, 2015 years after the birth of Abraham, 1510 years after Moses and the Exodus of the Israelite nation from Egypt, 1032 years after the anointing of David as king, in the 65th week of years according to the prophecy of Daniel, in the 194th Olympiad, 752 years after the building of the city of Rome, in the 42nd year of the reign of Octavianus Augustus, while the whole world was at peace, Jesus Christ, Eternal God and Son of the Eternal Father, wishing to sanctify the world by His gracious advent, having been born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem, nine months after His Conception, was made Man." Hence from the time and manner of Christ's birth we can see the abiding significance of Christmas.

Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, was born when the night of idolatry and crime was at its darkest; and the day of His birth, the twenty-fifth of December, is that on which the material sun begins to gain in its ascendancy over the reign of gloomy night. "On this, the Day which the Lord hath made," says St. Gregory of Nyssa, "darkness decreases, light increases, and Night is driven back again. Hast thou not seen the Night, that hath grown so long, suddenly checked. Learn hence, that the black night of sin, which had got to its height by the accumulation of every guilty device, is this day stopped in its course." St. Augustine in his sermon on the Nativity voices the same sentiments. He exhorts us to rejoice not so much because of the visible sun, but because of the birth of Him who is the invisible Creator of the sun. Further on, we read, "The day he chose was that on which the light begins to increase, and it typifies the work of Christ, who renews our interior man, day by day. For the eternal Creator having willed to be born in time, his Birth Day would necessarily be in harmony with the rest of his creation." Indeed, the birth of Christ marks the beginning of the regeneration of the world.

The world underwent a marvellous change after the coming of Christ. Not only Greeks and Romans but even the most barbarous peoples of the earth received the light of the Gospel. The unlettered and the poor, considered unworthy of instruction by the ancient philosophers, acquired a certainty concerning essential truths which the most celebrated philosophers never possessed. The preaching of the Gospel to the poor is a distinctive characteristic of Christ's mission. He is so human that the poor

and the ignorant and the little are at home with him. He is so divine that the highest and greatest minds who have lived since He was born have looked to Him as an unapproachable ideal. To Christ alone has it been given so to deliver the truths of divine life, as to thrill the hearts of His hearers and to make them lovers of all men and the doers of all good. This wonderful transformation was accomplished in all places where the story of the Incarnation was made known. All nations whether barbarians or enlightened, old or new have felt the effects of Christ's teaching and the graces which accompany it. His abiding influence has created a religion, a morality, a civilization, which mankind, by a common consent, have agreed to call by His name, and which believer and skeptic alike hold to be the highest, the purest, and the most beneficent.

It is impossible to conceive anything more perfect than the moral law inculcated by Christ. That unbelievers themselves have been compelled to admit this fact, we need but mention a few instances taken at random. Strauss unhesitatingly asserts that, "The morality of Jesus Christ is the foundation of human civilization," and that, "He is the highest object we can imagine, from the point of view of religion; the being without whose presence in the mind perfect piety is impossible." Spinoza calls Him the most perfect symbol of heavenly wisdom, and Hegel beholds in Him the union of the human and divine. "The Christ of the Gospels," writes Renan, "is the most perfect incarnation of God, in the fairest of forms. His beauty is eternal; His reign will never end." While Sabatier, after all his explanations and apostrophes for the fairest soul that ever existed, in his rationalistic manner, states that, "Jesus was a man in whose heart the fatherly heart of God was revealed with the most perfect completeness." From the testimony even of those who disparage the divinity of Christ, and from the wholesome influence of His moral law, we can see that He was what He claimed to be, "the Son of God." Hence, there is no name in the history of the world that can be compared with that of Jesus Christ. There is no event that has endured in the minds of men or claimed greater reverence.

The significance of the Nativity indeed is all-embracing. Its importance has ever been celebrated in the literature of every nation of the world. For the mystery of the Incarnation is the gate of all the other mysteries; it is the portal by which all man-

kind may enter. Although it is most heavenly, yet it touches earth. St. Augustine writing on this point beautifully remarks: "We are not yet ready for the banquet of our heavenly Father; let us, then, keep to the Crib of Jesus, our Master." The Crib of Bethlehem is the first high altar before which all the nations of the world adored Jesus Christ, corporally present. The shepherds of Bethlehem typify the first fruits of the Jewish nation; while the Magi, coming as they did from foreign lands, typify the first fruits of the Gentiles. How applicable are the words of Lacordaire: "Jesus Christ appears to us as the moving, controlling spirit of the past as well as of the future; the connecting link of the times that preceded Him, as well as of the times that followed Him. He appears to us holding in His left hand the Old Testament, the greatest book of the times that preceded Him; and in His right hand, the Gospel, the greatest book of the times that followed Him." Christ is the one absorbing bond of true civilization; the one sustaining hope of humanity; and the one forceful condition of true progress. Without Him we are nothing; with Him we are lifted up beyond the littleness of self. And so, just as the sublime personality of Jesus Christ towers majestically above all created beings; in like manner the day of His birth far surpasses all human events because it commemorates the birthday of the world's salvation. The abiding value of Christmas will ever claim the firm trust of men and make them cling to this day of joy when the world was redeemed, this greatest of all days, "When the goodness and kindness of God, Our Saviour, appeared."