

## KINGS

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URING WORLD WAR I, the memory of which has almost been entirely blotted out by the debacle from which the world has just emerged, a young soldier-poet summed up his antidote for war in a few simple lines :

*"The kings of earth are men of might,  
And cities are burned for their delight,  
And the skies rain death in the silent night,  
And the hills belch death all day!*

*"But the King of heaven, Who made them all,  
Is fair and gentle, and very small;  
He lies in the straw by the oxen's stall—  
Let them think of Him today."<sup>1</sup>*

The name of the poem is "Kings" and its author was Joyce Kilmer. As he wrote, his thoughts were probably of Christmas in the past, of Christmas present, and surely of Christmas in the future when this war to end all wars would be at an end; Christmas when the whole world would be united in perfect harmony and unbroken agreement, mutual respect and love. Joyce Kilmer was never to see another Christmas in this world, for, before the next year had run its course, he was to lay down his life for a noble ideal, "so that there would never again be another war!"

"Let them think of Him today." That was his simple antidote to the horrors of total world war—an antidote which the world has always wilfully ignored in making the success and perishable happiness of this life the total end of its whole existence, and in confusing humility and submission with weakness and cowardice.

Through pride men have become gods; God became man through love. He became man to raise up poor, weak, insignificant man, who for untold centuries had been groaning under the wretched thralldom of sin. Think of it! Almighty God, Who is in everyone and everything in the world, Who causes all things, Who knows all things,

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<sup>1</sup> Main Street and other Poems, by Joyce Kilmer.

upon Whom everything depends for its very existence, to Whom everything is subservient, took upon Himself human flesh and became subject to Mary and Joseph, became surely the most humble of all mankind. For the things of the world He showed a thorough contempt, to let us know how best to spend our time till eternity when we shall see Him face to face.

To the eyes of the worldling the poverty of the first Christmas is unthinkable. He cannot see the deep and lasting happiness that lies underneath the bleak exterior. The Jews, themselves—the chosen ones of God—looked for a king whose riches, honor, glory and power would far surpass that of the most lordly Gentile rulers, a king who would communicate to them some little of his regal splendor and who would lift them from the humiliating depths to which they had fallen under the Roman Emperors. They refused to believe that their looked-for Messiah would be born in a rude and dirty stable, of a humble and unknown maiden, and that He would be satisfied with the very least this world could give. And yet all Christians know that this is exactly what happened. The Jews in their blindness still look for a worldly Messiah, one to raise them far above the prestige they enjoyed in the Old Law. It is of them that the Church sings in the sequence of the third Mass on Christmas with heart-felt solicitude:

*"No longer then delay;  
Doubt not what the legends say  
Why be cast away  
A race forlorn?  
Turn and this Child behold—  
That very Son of Old  
In God's writ foretold,  
A maid hath borne."<sup>2</sup>*

Modern man, no less than the Jews of old, refuses to accept a Saviour Who in this world will bring him only the simple, pious joys of Bethlehem and also, paradoxical as it may sound, some of its joyful sorrow, for such any sorrow becomes when borne out of love. He prefers to seek his happiness in striving vainly after the will-o'-the-wisps of wealth, of honor, of power or in the satisfaction of his lower appetites, only to find that when these elusive ends have been in some degree attained, they do not bring true and lasting happiness. Something is lacking, something that has its place amidst the most dire pov-

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<sup>2</sup> Hymns of Dominican Missal and Breviary, Aquinas Byrnes, O.P. Herder, 1943, p. 73.

erty as well as in the courts of kings. In his feverish striving for things so unworthy of his dignity, man forgets such fundamental laws as love of God and of neighbor, and enthrones in his heart the god of self, a truly loathsome creature from whom, unaided by divine grace, can come only enmities, contentions, dissensions, envies, murders and the rest of that shocking litany enumerated so vividly in the Epistle to the Galatians.

One of the most impelling Gospel parables is that related by Jesus of the self-centered man who said to himself: "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years. Take thy rest: eat, drink, make good cheer. But God said to him: Thou fool, this night they shall require thy soul of thee. And whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?"<sup>3</sup> Thou fool! These are strong words meant to impress upon the wealthy the vanity of superabundance of worldly possessions, and upon the poor the blessedness of their state which is so Christlike. We are indeed kings in our own right, for God has set us over the works of His hands to use them in working out our salvation. Let us not abuse so exalted a position by forgetting our humanity and our eternal destiny, by making ends of mere means to attain the everlasting happiness of heaven.

It has been said, and said quite truthfully, that "the heart of a lover is never more happy than when he is suffering for the object of his affection." The love of a good mother and father for their children, of a faithful husband and wife, of the young couple about to enter the sacred state of Matrimony—each knows no sacrifice too great. All bring out the truth of this statement. To be Christlike, however, our love must break out beyond the narrow confines of family, friends and even of race and nation. To be Christlike our love must be catholic, universal. We must be willing to suffer for Christ's sake and for our fellow man. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."<sup>4</sup> How happily this fact is borne out in the lives of the saints is expressed by St. Catherine of Siena: "For God's glory and for the salvation of my neighbor I am ready to give my life a thousand times every day, with greater and greater suffering if it were possible."<sup>5</sup> If every country, every family, and what is more important, every individual could truly make such a statement, the world would not be in so turbulent a state as it is this Christmas 1946.

"Let them think of him today." Sin is the greatest evil in the

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<sup>3</sup> Luke XII, 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Luke IX, 23.

<sup>5</sup> St. Catherine of Siena, by Johannes Jorgensen. Longman's, N. Y. 1938.

world, for it is a deliberate turning away from God, an insult to Him Who holds supreme sway over life and death, salvation or damnation. We are told that rather than commit the slightest venial sin we should prefer to see disaster and ruin come upon the whole world. By it we crucify Christ, the most monstrous crime ever perpetrated by man. Yet we are always assured of the forgiveness of Christ because of His boundless love for us, a love that made Him endure the ignominy and privation of Bethlehem and that was to know no bounds short of the death on the cross. Can we in our pride truthfully say that we are as forgiving as the God-Man? Do we mean it when we say: "Forgive us this day our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?" Take the Gospel story of the woman taken in adultery. Nowhere in the Bible is there more poignantly expressed the willingness of Christ to forgive one who had offended and pained Him seriously through mortal sin. And yet in spite of such an example the world, like the proud and hypocritical Pharisees of old, refuses to forgive. It seeks revenge.

There was physical privation at Bethlehem, and without doubt Mary and Joseph were pained that they could not provide a more comfortable shelter for the Christchild. This no one can deny. But there was no unhappiness at Bethlehem for Christ was there—and angels, shepherds and kings bowed down in joyful adoration. If we could always remember that whatever befalls us is God's will, and that the will of God is always that we may be saved, we should never have cause for sadness. "Let us think of Him today." In doing so we shall always be able to smile through tears though the whole world be ranged against us.

Having cast off attachment to worldly goods and having dispersed the selfish sadness that makes us flee and even despise God-sent crosses, our hearts have left but one alternative—to turn to the things of heaven. No sadder picture can be imagined than the death-bed of an atheist or one who does not in some way know and love God. How black must be the despair that envelops such a person at the thought that the end of all accomplishment has come, that nothing awaits beyond the pale of death. On the other hand how happy is the death of him who all his life has waited for this precious moment, the very reason for life itself. "The eye hath not seen, O God, besides thee what things thou hast prepared for them that wait for thee."<sup>6</sup>

No peace conferences will be successful while our minds are mired down by a self-love that blinds us to these true values, while we hold the egocentric "peace on earth, good will to men" which

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<sup>6</sup> *Isaias* LXIV, 4.



leaves God out of the picture. Rather we must sing out, as did the angels on that first Christmas day, that glorious hymn of praise: "Glory to God in the highest: and on earth peace to men of good will"<sup>7</sup>—to men whose will is centered upon God, especially in the Person of their Redeemer—to men who have accepted Christ's invitation: "Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart, and you shall find rest for your souls."<sup>8</sup>

Thus far, however, man has chosen to ignore this invitation. He has blotted out of his heart and mind all thought of a King who is "fair and gentle and very small." As a result of this choice the world has just emerged from the most destructive war in its history, and it is unerringly aiming towards another even more cruel and inhuman. So long as the world thus chooses to ignore its Infant Saviour, the terrifying promise of the righteously indignant Son of God must eventuate: "Do not think that I am come to send peace upon the earth: I am come not to send peace but the sword."<sup>9</sup>

When every man is brought to his knees in wonder at the divine goodness displayed in the Incarnation, when the whole world looks to Bethlehem for its model and ruler, then and only then will the peace of Christ descend upon the earth and remain forever. Then shall each one be able to pray with the faithful of Christ's Church: "O God, who has illumined this most sacred night with the brightness of the true light; grant, we beseech thee, that we who have known the mysteries of that light on earth, may enjoy also its happiness in heaven." (Collect of First Mass on Christmas)

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<sup>7</sup> Luke II, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Matt. XI, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Matt. XI, 34.