

CHRISTMAS, PAST AND PRESENT

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THE FIRST NOEL, the angels did say. Men took up the refrain, and for nearly two thousand years the glad cry has resounded again and again; in one place with swelling chorus, in another with bated breath; sometimes with ardent intensity, sometimes with empty meaning. And now, once more, we harken back to that holy night and repeat the angelic song: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will."

It is not strange that we do this, because it has been the custom from time immemorial for men to set apart certain days as festival days or holy days. The Israelites were commanded to abstain from work on special days and to devote their time to prayer; the pagans appointed specific days in honour of their anthropomorphic gods and sported themselves in their own uninhibited fashion. We of the Christian era, following the ancient tradition, take particular events in the life of our divine Founder and set aside special days to commemorate these events. Now certainly one of the most important days in the life of any man is that of his birth; and when we consider that Christ was not only man but God and that He was born of a virgin undefiled, then we have much greater cause to set apart His birthday for His praise and glory. That we set apart His birthday is evident; that we do it for His praise and glory is, alas, doubtful.

The story of Christmas begins a long time ago; really when our first parents made it necessary for God to become man in order to fully atone for man's sin against God, which prompts us to cry out with the Church: "O happy fault." So God, out of His infinite goodness and mercy, promised a redeemer; and for many, many years the people of Israel waited for that blessed day to arrive when this Messiah should come and deliver them from their affliction. It was their hope in this promise that kept them the chosen people of God; a nation which formed its whole life around Him; a people who did penance for their sins. Their sacred writings make specific mention of that great, longed-for day. The prophet, Isaias, tells of the manner of His advent: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." The prophet Micheas reveals the place of His birth: "And thou Bethle-

hem, out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel." Surely, in view of this longing and knowledge, He will receive a royal welcome. But time dulled their fervor while pride rotted their hope, so that when He did come, they received Him not.

CHRISTMAS

Then on that night, so many years ago, it came to pass that the promises and prophecies of old were fulfilled, and the 'Son of God became the Son of man; the eternal Word of the Father was made incarnate. What an incomparable event is this first Christmas! A travel-stained man escorts his weary, pregnant spouse to Bethlehem's inn that she might have shelter in this the night of her delivery. But there is no room in the inn. How our hearts shout across the abyss of centuries: "Oh you fools, these are no mere travelers, but Joseph and Mary who is with child by the Holy Ghost! Would you turn the Messiah from your doors; will you deny shelter to your Redeemer?" But the inexorable words echo back: "There is no room in the inn." Sadly the holy pair turn from the habitation of men and take refuge in the abode of beasts. Then, in due time and shrouded in mystery, is born to us a Saviour; and this tiny mite of humanity, Who is yet wondrously God, lies in a box of straw. From the House of Gold and Tower of Ivory He is ushered into the crude and barren stable. Then the pace of the beautiful tale quickens as divine Providence summons visitors to the manger. Rough, unwashed shepherds leave their flocks on the hills and heed the celestial invitation to adore their Saviour at Bethlehem. The mystic star draws the rich and powerful Magi to kneel at His crib and leave precious gifts at His feet. The king of His own people sends sharp swords to taste His divine blood. The gifts He accepts; the blades He evades, for this child has much work to do before a lance thrust shall be His lot. Such is the story of the night that Christ was born, each detail of which is fraught with holy signification for us.

Now let us see how this holy day has come down to us through the years. Our commemoration of the event did not take solid form till about the fourth century. This might be the occasion for lifted eyebrows, were it not recalled that the Christians of the first three centuries were a little too preoccupied escaping the long arm of imperial Rome, to allow themselves the joy of external celebration. The pearl of Faith was too precious to be too freely displayed in the market-place, for one cannot be presumptuous about the grace of martyrdom. Then too, the exact date of Our Saviour's birth was un-

known, and it was only in the reign of Pope Julian I (337-352) that December the twenty-fifth was decided upon. The peculiar feature of the Christmas liturgy, the privilege of celebrating three Masses, was begun very early in the Roman Church and then spread to France and the western world, at first reserved to bishops and then gradually extended to priests. St. Thomas, in his beautiful mystical interpretation of this practice, says that these three Masses signify the three births of Christ; His eternal generation by the Father, His birth in time from the Virgin, and His birth in our souls by grace.

THE PAST

Christmas, as it was passed on from generation to generation and from country to country, gradually acquired new and beautiful customs. Especially during the ages of faith did these accrue to the Infant, fostered by the fervent devotion of His followers. People in those days were more sharply divided into the two classes of rich and poor; but king and peasant, lord and serf, knelt in equality at the feet of the Saviour as did the Magi and the shepherds at Bethlehem. The crib, certainly the most popular symbol of Christ's birth, can be traced back to the loving contemplation of His poor man from Assisi. The proximity to Christmas of the feast of that kindly old saint, Nicholas of Myra, resulted in his being elected the dispenser of the Infant's material blessings. As his name was a bit too intricate for young lips, Santa Claus was christened for posterity. From this period come many of the carols or joyous songs, commemorating the holy night, which so enchant us at this season. The name *Christmas* came into use then among the Germanic peoples. It is the combination of Christ and His Mass, which even the rudest peasant knew to be the greatest of all His gifts. Each country had its own special traditions to be observed on this holy night. Deserving of mention is the manner in which the Irish, even to this day, have always welcomed the new-born King. On Christmas eve every house, whether stately manor or thatched hut, has a candle burning in its window. From the rocky fastnesses of Donegal, through the fair fields of Cavan and Meath, to the very tip of the island, the country is illumined with tiny pin points of yellow flame. Hugh de Blacam in *Gentle Ireland*, tells us, "These lights have been lit from generation to generation since the Christian Faith first came to Ireland; they are kindled (as the fancy goes) to guide the Angels who on Christmas night direct the Newborn from the heavens; and you will see, too, that in most of the clean-swept, brightly garnished houses, the door stands open—a mute invitation to those travelers who

once found all doors closed before them."

However, times change and our medieval idyll was rudely shattered by the advent of Protestantism. Stern men broke away from the Church, averring as their reason the profligacy of the hierarchy. That some members of the Church at this time needed reforming is granted; that the Church itself ever needs reforming is firmly denied. Ah, if only those erring members had some of the purity of Mary or if those prideful innovators had some of the humility of Joseph, then a great number of men today would be playing the role of the Magi and not that of Herod. But such is the Providence of God that men be endowed with free will; and such is the will of men that they repudiate the poverty and love of the stable for the comfort and apathy of the inn. At this time, then, the Christmas celebration fared badly. In England as early as 1644, we find legislation condemning the foolishness of Christmas and making it a market-day. Typical of the current trend is the story told of one Thomas Massey who arose in Parliament against the very name of Christmas. He held that such a papistical term should be abolished and moved that in its place the more English word, Christ-tide, be substituted. Thereupon Daniel O'Connell stood and approved the idea, even amending that the practice should become universal. Then he addressed the preceding speaker as "Mr. To-tide Tide-y," thus pricking the bubble of bigotry with the rapier of his wit. But no manner of force could chill the hearts of the faithful, and Christmas remained with us. Perhaps, indeed, the Irish on the hills, the English in caves, and the Bretons on rocky coasts, came the nearest to the real imitation of the first Christmas. The dour and austere Puritans settled on our shores but brought no memories of the tender Christ-child with them. They adored the impersonal Jehovah of Justice but could not bring themselves to revere the Infant of Love. However, with the coming of immigrants from other countries bringing with them the warmth of their Christmas traditions, this bleak and forbidding atmosphere was, for the most part, dispelled.

THE PRESENT

The historic view of Christmas fades as we return to our own times and are faced with the reality of the present. It is a confused scene that we survey because we live in a world that bears a marked resemblance to the unsettled age in which Christ Himself was born. As then, it is a time of peace but a peace that is destined not to last because it is a worldly peace, built not on love and trust but on fear and might. And yet, despite the general unrest, there are many who

rejoice in that inner serenity which the Prince of Peace brought to our troubled sphere. These are the people who could sincerely wish others a "merry Christmas" during the misery and sordidness of a global conflict. Such tranquility of soul is ever a mystery to those who savor not the things of the spirit but live under the relentless law of matter. The difference lies in this, that while Christ's peace is diffused from the soul and is independent of exterior things, the world's peace arises from the stability of external forces which are seldom at rest. For this reason those who sit in darkness are as uncomprehending of this Christmas peace as they are of the truth for which Mary's Son was born. And yet, they are called to see the light as were the Greeks and Romans of old. But as pride, sophism and power kept the heathen away on the first Christmas, so now these same vices bar the modern pagan's way to the crib. As a result, Christmas is celebrated in theaters and night clubs; it is hailed with unctious sentimentality in the press and on the radio; even in the sanctity of the home it is an occasion for bibulous festivities. Oh yes, the modern pagan has attached himself to the Christmas star but inside, withal, the old pagan.

We Catholics, however, are blessed with the realization of the true Christmas spirit and the traditions that symbolize it. We can adorn the fragrant evergreen and reflect that it signifies the eternity of our Saviour. We can enthral our little ones (and ourselves) with the warm story of Santa Claus, while teaching of the Infant Whose gifts he distributes. We can sing our carols and know that our brothers in Christ have sung these very words for ages past. Most of all, we can give and receive gifts with our loved ones and know that we give and are given with Christ. St. Thomas has given us a very excellent Christmas shopping list for our present to the Child. In order not to be outdone by the Magi, he has listed similar goods. So we give the gold of heavenly wisdom, whereby we recognize Jesus as the Giver of all good gifts; we offer frankincense in the form of devout prayer and we present Him with myrrh by the mortification of the senses. On the other hand, the holy Doctor violates the "Do not open till" sign and tells us what the Christ-child is giving us. He says that: "A Child is born to us that we might imitate His *purity* and *humility*, that we might be attracted by His *lovableness* and that we might have *confidence* in His mercy."

This then is our heritage, whereby we sing with the angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will."