

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


DO WE MAKE TOO MUCH OF CHRISTMAS?

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## DO WE MAKE TOO MUCH OF CHRISTMAS?

A few years ago a Unitarian minister in a town along the Hudson ventilated his belief that we make too much of Christmas. The birth of Christ, he said, is a legend, the celebration of which involves one-third of the world each year in monumental hypocrisy.

Within the month a community on Long Island concluded that the message of Christmas had best be left unstated and unsung in the public schools in the interest of conserving concord in a pluralistic society.

Just last week a television funnyman confessed that the much ringing of bells up and down Fifth Avenue was beginning to get to him. He found himself secretly wishing that their clappers would freeze.

If Christmas is a legend without historical foundation it ought to be curbed. The proliferation of an untruth cannot be defended. Zero times ten thousand is still zero. And surely it belongs to good manners not to subject others to convictions that are precious to us but something less to them. In addition, one is quite ready to concede that the Christmas buying season is too noisy and too long. Ringing cash registers seem a far piece removed from what happened on that starlit night in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

But such concessions, and others that might be made, should not blind us to the fact that, given what we believe about Jesus Christ, Christians cannot make too much of Christmas. It is timely and in order that we reflect calmly on what Jesus means to the Christian community. And that we do this not in the spirit of argumentation, but rather in the mood of grateful affirmation.

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In an introductory article to the Westminster Study Edition of the Bible John A. Machay, under whom I had the pleasure of studying at Princeton Seminary, writes about the importance of the Word made flesh for the church. His writing has about it the force of truth and the beauty of light. I want to read his statement and then go on to make this sermon an exposition of his major points. "Jesus Christ, the Word of God become flesh, revealed to the world what God is and what man should be. His life was not a casual appearance in history, for God had sent him. His character was not a solitary expression of ideal goodness, for God was like him. His life purpose, which led him to a cross, was not a vain beating against a meaningless or hostile universe, for God was in him." 1

"His life was not a casual appearance in history, for God had sent him." To discover Jesus of Nazareth as a fellow pilgrim on the road of life is joy enough. But our joy becomes well nigh uncontainable when we go on to learn that he was sent to us by God. His coming was a prepared visitation. Israel had been taught to watch and wait for one who was to come. This is the point of John the Baptist's question from prison: "Are you he who is to come, or look we for another?" (Mat 11:3) This helps us to understand the discussion Jesus had at the well-side in Samaria when the woman turned to him and said, "I know Messiah is coming and when he comes he will show us all things." Jesus replied, "I who speak to you am he." (John 4:25-26)

The furniture of history was readied for his coming. He came by God's design. He did not simply drift upon the scene or merely happen along. His life is not a passing incident in the world's ongoing history but rather a critical event.

Jesus was possessed of what might be called a "sense of sentness." This is why at the age of twelve he could astound his parents who went looking for him in Jerusalem: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49) He lived as one who was under command, one who was

responsive to a larger purpose than the purpose that claims other men. He had a unique awareness of a peculiar vocation. As one reads the gospels he is driven to conclude that Jesus felt that more was being done through him than by him. Hence, in the upper room, in his final discourse with his disciples, he could say, "The word which you heard is not mine but the Father's who sent me." (John 14:24)

We may not believe that this is so but we cannot doubt that Jesus believed it. This accounts for much of the excitement of the New Testament. The Psalmist in his day said, "The entrance of thy word giveth light." (Psalm 119:130) But when that word becomes the Word made flesh, what light! Why it's like a second creation! This is exactly how the infant church understood it. In this spirit Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians "For it is the God who said let light shine out of darkness; who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Christ." (II Cor. 4:6)

"His life was not a casual appearance in history. For God had sent him." Moreover, "his character was not a solitary expression of ideal goodness, for God was like him." Again, there would be cause for thanksgiving if his life merely stood alone. When we are tempted to underlive life we can point to him and take heart. He has lifted for us and for all men the level of the possible. In a world that is sorely hurting for models of creative living we can look to him and encourage our children to do the same.

We have heard more than once that anonymous tribute to Jesus that ends with the words: "I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as has that one solitary life." This is just the point: It was not a solitary life. Jesus is cherished in the Christian community and revered in the hearts of the faithful because we believe that in what he was and said and did he represented, or re-presented God!

Debates on the nature of Jesus Christ have racked the church in every century. Even had I the mind to sum them up for you this morning I doubt that you would have the heart to hear it. But this much you might find helpful: Jesus' major concern was not to show us that he was like God but rather that God was like him. This is why Johannes Herrman, the theologian, could say flatly, "But for Jesus I should be an atheist."

The God question is still our most persistent question. However rabidly we immerse ourselves in contemporary affairs, programs, drives and crusades, no pre-occupation with the present can permanently banish the God question from our minds or hearts. In a book that I have been enjoying of late Kenneth Cauthen says: "The situation of man before the ultimate realities is somewhat like that of a tribe of simple natives living deep in the jungle on the banks of a great river. They do not know where the river goes. It simply flows ceaselessly by while they watch it and wonder. However, it provides them water for their fields, fish for food and a place to swim for fun." 2 I suggest that man is not content to simply avail himself of the river as it passes by. He has a built-in curiosity to know what the source of the river is and the end to which it flows.

Saul Kane muses for every man when he says:

"I wondered, then, why life should be  
And what would be the end of me  
When Youth and health and strength were gone  
And cold old age came creeping on?" 3

Albert Camus, in The Myth of Sisyphus cries "The world itself, whose single meaning I do not understand, is but a vast irrational. If one could only say just once: 'This is clear,' all would be saved." 4

It is our belief that one has so spoken. For we see in Jesus the express image of the Father. We believe that he disclosed not only his own mind but the mind of God as

well. He referred to God as Father one hundred and seventy times. We dare to believe, therefore, that ultimate reality is neither abstract nor impersonal. Since God is Father, love is at the heart of things.

D. S. Cairns of Aberdeen put it this way: "The Christian confession of Jesus as Son of God is not only a confession of Christ. It is an affirmation about the Universe. It is an affirmation of faith that it is Christ's world, of belief in the Christ-likeness of Almighty God." 5 "His character was not a solitary expression of ideal goodness, for God was like him."

Finally, his life purpose which led him to a cross, was not a vain beating against a meaningless or hostile universe, for God was in him." It would be hard to find a man today who would flatly and outrightly repudiate Jesus. After all, to knock that kind of goodness is to say more about yourself than him. The masses do not repudiate Jesus, they simply dismiss him on the grounds that the truth he lived and shared is too frail and fragile for the kind of world in which we live. He is shelved as a sentimentalist. He talked about responding to hate with love. He spoke about turning the other cheek. He discouraged pride and encouraged humility. He rejected the idea of domination and replaced it with the concept of service. When we listen to that against the noises and abuses of the world in which we live we back away and say "This is impractical."

But what if his life was really not a vain beating against a meaningless hostile world, for God was in him? As politicians are prone to say, "Look at the record." Jesus is always on the offensive -- never on the defensive. There is no place in the gospels where one could gain the impression that Jesus ever doubted that the light would prevail. He always comes upon the scene whether it be Herod's scene, or Pilate's scene, or the Sanhedrin's scene, or whatever, as one who is sure that God will prevail. He never solicits our pity. His convictions were offered not as an experiment but as a certainty.

John in the prologue to his gospel catches the spirit of this light that comes and keeps on coming when he says, "The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out." (John 1:5 Phillips) The significance of the resurrection for the Christian community is that what began in the humble trappings of Bethlehem was vindicated in Joseph's garden when God raised Jesus from the dead.

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I've heard it said recently by church leaders, and I believe it, that the next generation will go to the faith that can enkindle hope. We stand within a tradition that at its best is hopeful. We are more than simply optimists -- for what we believe about today and tomorrow is grounded not in how we feel but in how we understand God. "Hope is not to be confused with optimism's assurance that all will be well in the end. Hope is the style of living which proclaims that all is well here and now despite alarms and dangers and anxieties." 6 We dare to hold that all is well on the strength of God's invincibility as we find it affirmed in Jesus Christ.

A little boy was given a part in his church's Nativity drama. He was cast, or should I say mis-cast, as an angel. Nevertheless, he learned his lines carefully. He didn't have much of a part but what he had to say was vital: "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all the people." He said it at breakfast. He said it at supper. He said it at night to his mother and father before he went to bed. But, as you might guess, on the night of the performance when he moved out on that stage and saw relatives in the audience whom he hadn't seen for years and realized the loftiness of the family's expectations, his mind went blank. When it came his time to speak he could only think to blurt out, "Say, have I got news for you!"

Is such excitement warranted? Can we make too much of Christmas? The answer is yes -- if His life was but a casual appearance in history; if His character was only a solitary expression of ideal goodness, if His life



purpose was a vain beating against a meaningless and hostile universe. But . . . if God sent Him -- if God is like Him -- if God was in Him -- what then?

### CLOSING PRAYER

O God, in a day when everything  
that was once nailed down has  
come loose, help us to hold  
fast to what we have learned  
of Thee through Christ.

Make us partners with the wisemen  
in their curiosity;  
partners with the shepherds  
in their wonder;  
and partners with the angels  
in their joy.

In our Saviour's blessed Name  
we pray. Amen.

## FOOTNOTES:

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3. Masfield, John, The Everlasting Mercy, p. 92, The Macmillan Company, N. Y. 1960
4. Camus, Albert, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 20, Vintage Books, 1955
5. Baillie, John, The Place of Jesus Christ in Modern Christianity, p. 143, Charles Scribner's Sons, N. Y. 1929
6. Browne, R. E. C., "Hope," Dictionary of Christian Ethics, John Marquarrie, Westminster Press



