



BETHLEHEM HAD NO CHRISTMAS TREE, ONLY THE SHADOWS OF A CROSS

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You have certainly got to hand it to him. The devil is very smart. He does not force us against our wills to do evil. Instead, he makes evil look good. After all he is not called "the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev 12:9) for nothing. How else could he persuade the majority of men and women to sell eternity for time, heaven for hell and God's smile for his wrath?

Yes, the devil makes good look ill and evil good. He turns everything upside down. Take Christmas. Does not the very

thought of it make you nostalgic for the happy times of childhood and youth? Does not the word conjure up feelings of comfort, love, satisfaction and memories of friends, family and feasts? It is so for most of us.

The Original Christmas

But the realities associated with the coming of the Christ child were far different. Poverty and want, ignominy and rejection, pain and exile, shadows and fears characterize the earliest childhood of this the most perfect being of

Adam's race. Maybe you are listening to "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," or "O Come All Ye Faithful," in the background, but the reality back there included the sound of thundering hooves as soldiers poured into Bethlehem to kill babies under the age of two. We think of throwing our homes open to scattered family members and friends, but at Bethlehem there was a closed door and "no room at the inn." We link with Christmas, abundance of food, drink, warmth and love, but the original Christmas was otherwise. In Joseph's offering of a pair of turtledoves we have the evidence that they could not even afford a lamb for a burnt offering. They slept on straw by the animals, and probably laid there feeling the pangs of hunger.

In our Lord's first earthly resting place, the place of sacrificial animals, we have the hint of the purpose of his coming. His chief purpose in taking a body was that he might die. He came in the darkness that he might be the light of the world, he came as poor that he might make many rich. He came as one rejected by kings and rulers that he might make us kings who would rule forever and ever. He lived as a man that he might ultimately die, in order that we might die to the world, the flesh and the devil, and thereby live.

Mary sensed that her child would be the One to implement heaven's reversal of earth's status quo. She sang of God's future accomplishments as though they were already achieved.

And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.

(Lk 2:51,52)

Do not the words warn us against measuring the future by the present? Do they not warn us against the acceptance of contemporary values?

The Shadow of a Cross

As we think of the rejection of the Son of God by the leaders of Israel from the moment of the rumor of his birth, as we

contemplate the poverty of his nativity, the hasty exile to Egypt and the subsequent slaughter, is it not apparent that the cross was the pattern of his whole life and not just its last day? But further, is it not just as apparent when one reads his teachings that the same cross is meant to be the pattern of our lives too? For it is written: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mk 8:34,35). Indeed, it is frankly stated by Christ that no man can be his follower unless he "hate" (i.e., love less) "his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life" (Lk 14:26). And Christ knowing that his demands are overwhelming warns us to count the cost before we pretend to lift his cross.

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Lk 14:28-33)

This sort of talk cannot be accepted easily. We prefer Christmas carols, feasting, holidaying and altogether having "a jolly good time." You remember that Peter just could not take it and therefore besought the Lord to reconsider. But the stinging rejoinder was that Peter had become a Satan in his attempt to dodge the cross (Mt 16:22-26). Picture the Lord saying in effect to the big fisherman: "Listen, Peter, not only is the cross inevitable for me, but it is so for you also, if

you are truly going to be my disciple."

No, it is not human nature to like the cross. When our Lord on another occasion spoke about the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, multitudes who followed him rapidly thinned out leaving chiefly the twelve (Jn 6:66,67). The crowd had just eaten the loaves and fishes and these were more to their liking than the flesh and blood of the Son of Man.

We are told from the television and radio pulpit that to become a Christian will guarantee economic prosperity and deliverance from sickness and pain.

So it remains true in 1985, that Christ has many lovers of his heavenly kingdom but few bearers of his cross. Many are desirous of consolation but few can stand tribulation. There are many companions at Christ's table when it is freighted with good things, but few of those feasting are prepared to fast with him in the wilderness of temptation. Oh yes, they will sing with him as the disciples did at the end of the Last Supper, but who wants to suffer with him along the path to Calvary? "Then all the disciples forsook him and fled" (Mt 26:56). It is so easy to follow the Master in the breaking of bread, but who wants to drink the cup of his passion?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as a Christian, died to family, fame, success and patriotism. Then at 40 he died for the last time. A little time before he was hung by the Nazis he wrote: "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die."

But did not Jesus talk about the life more abundant, the gift of heaven's peace, the assurance of a kingdom joyously given by the Father, the forgiveness of all manner of sin and blasphemy, the joy that no one could take from us, the gift of the Comforter that we might never be lonely, or useless, or powerless or without direction? Did he not offer us rest? Yes, yes, yes. All of these and more. But notice the conjunction of contrasts in Mark 10:29,30:

Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.'

A hundredfold of houses and brothers and sisters and mothers, etc., etc., WITH PERSECUTIONS. Hmm...And there are, as we have seen, many of his proclamations that spell out the sacrificial life so clearly that even we pharisees should be able to see it. (Consider also Jn 12:24 and 15:2. More talk about dying and the unceasing minideaths of pruning).

So the old illustration is true. There is a cross and a throne in every life. Either Christ is on the cross and our own ego is on the throne; or else he is enthroned as Lord and our selfish nature is crucified (observe: crucified, not executed. Crucifixion is a slow, lingering death, not sudden and momentary). Was not my baptism a symbol of it all? Bonhoeffer, seeing this clearly, wrote:

By baptism we were made partakers in the death of Christ. Through our baptismal death we have been condemned to death and have died just as Christ died once for all. There can be no repetition of his sacrifice. Therefore the baptised person dies in Christ once and for all. Now he is dead. The daily dying of the Christian life is merely the consequence of the one baptismal death, just as the tree dies after its roots have been cut away... From now on the baptised can know themselves only as dead men, in whom everything necessary for salvation has already been accomplished. The baptised live, not by a literal repetition of this death, but by a constant renewal of their faith in the death of Christ as his act of grace in us. The source of their faith lies in the once-for-allness of Christ's death, which they have experienced in their baptism. (The Cost of Discipleship, p. 210)

Paul spelled it out:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication,

impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once walked, when you lived in them. But now put them all away; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col 3:5-10)

Popular Christianity

Now this is not the emphasis of popular Christianity. Rather, we are told from the television and radio pulpit that to become a Christian will guarantee economic prosperity and deliverance from sickness and pain. The crown of success, wealth, painless existence is snatched at without the willingness to shoulder the cross (daily). Paul condemned such religion in his day (see 1 Cor 4:8 and contrast verses 9-13 of the same chapter and also 2 Cor 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23-12:10).

The writer of the following verses had a theology more in accord with Jesus and Paul than with our contemporary popularists of a cut-rate gospel.

Am I a soldier of the cross, A
follower of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause?
Or blush to speak His name?
Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
Whilst others fought to win the
prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?
Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend of grace,
To help me on to God?
Sure I must fight if I would reign;
Increase my courage, Lord;
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy word.

True Christianity

Did you know that in this century more Christians have been martyred for their Lord than in all the other centuries combined? In South America, USSR, Africa and elsewhere the blood of Christians has been the seed of Christian harvests. And in all ages many of the most saintly followers of Christ have suffered most from the ravages of disease. William Carey's sister did more for the conversion

of India than her famous brother, but she did it all by prayer from her sickroom where she was confined for decades. Calvin wrote endless letters to kings and governors and church leaders, as well as commentaries on every book of the Bible except Revelation, but he also was riddled with disease which made his life a martyrdom. Joni Eareckson Tada represents a countless host of sufferers who learned from Romans 8:18-25 that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to be revealed when the curse is lifted at the end-time.

Please observe: the work of the Lord and the life of the true disciple always carry the Lord's own mark — the mark of the cross. God's work is never done under ideal circumstances, never done as we would choose for it to be done. And similarly the Christian life is not what most anticipate — it is not the removal of pain and trouble and care, it is something better, even the bestowing of the loving presence of Christ in every furnace fire or every swelling flood. In this life, not even the believer sees his ideals fully satisfied. Brokenness is our state till we receive a glorified body. There is no unthreatened peace down here, no crown without thorns. But it will not be so forever. As the Negro preacher repeated again and again: Today's Friday, (meaning crucifixion day) but Sunday's a-coming."

All this is wrapped up in the Christmas story of Bethlehem. We see the blood of the Christ child shed in circumcision. We hear the cries of the martyred infants in that quiet village. We smell the odors of the Judean stable and we touch the poverty-stamped swaddling clothes. But in and through it all, we see the glory of him who delights to work by paradox, who plants eternity in time, righteousness in the midst of sin, a Savior among beasts, that we who now suffer might one day reign.

Be Encouraged

If this Christmas you look about you and sigh for the smallness of the success of the gospel, if you look within and sigh again — this time over the smallness of your Christian growth, will you not remember that the Creator of the universe began the transformation

of the universe by planting a seed in the womb of a poor peasant girl, a seed so small that it could not be seen though it contained God himself? Will you not meditate on the fact that the decisive birthday of the world took place in a small inn of a small village of a small province of the world's smallest nation? Limitation and pain are not the signs that Satan is winning, they are often the signs that God is irresistibly at work trampling Satan under his feet. Was it not that way on the cross itself, even that cross imaged by the confines of the tiny manger of Bethlehem?

Recently I heard Dr. A. Campoli address a ministerial group with these words:

Here's the problem. Tell me about this Jesus that you propagate. Does He really incarnate Yahweh? Is He really the Jesus of the New Testament? Or do you preach a Jesus that in a sense incarnates the values of this democratic capitalist society? Tell me about this Jesus you preach. As I listen to the radio and to the television I'm scared. For the Jesus that is propagated in the world today has nothing to do with the Jesus of Scripture...one of the real problems that you are going to have is that if you start preaching the Jesus of Scripture you are going to run contrary to the value system of your congregation. My only response to this problem... — Well what's the point of spending your life preaching any other Jesus than the one of Scripture? Do you want to spend your life preaching about a Jesus who never existed? We could ask another question.

Do you want to live by a version of the gospel that has no reality? Or will you respond to the greatest adventure of all with the same eagerness that men and women have always responded with to ventures that challenged them with the possible loss of all things including life itself? Christmas and New Year run into each other. Therefore behold the Bethlehem event without the fashionable squint and resolve accordingly how to live in 1986.

We wish you, not a merry Christmas, but a blessed Christmas as the Spirit of God whispers to you the real truths of the gospel way to glory.