

Since I Heard of Bethlehem

CHRISTMAS HAS many layers of meaning. At the lowest level is the layer of nostalgia—we think back on our own childhood Christmases. We longingly review those distant days of family union and reunions, of music, gifts and feasting. Oh, that they might return! And, of course, at this level, we are somewhat self-deceived, for nothing in the past (or the future for that matter) possesses quite the perfection or the terror we, in imagination, ascribe to it—except when we contemplate the world to come.

Then there is the better level of association. Christmas bespeaks a God who wonderfully condescended to become a seed in the womb of a peasant woman that he might take what was ours and give us what was his. Marvelous humility of him who is all glorious! The inn rejected him, the sacrificial animals and the shepherds welcomed him, the soldiers of Herod threatened him, but the mills of God ground on slowly and salvation was sure.

The final level is when we ask ourselves: “What have I rendered unto the Lord for all his benefits towards me? What difference has the message of Christmas made to my life?” Let me share my own experience when I recently read an old Christmas card written by Dr. Sangster a little while before his death.

Being and Doing

One day while waiting for a church service to start, I opened one of my many old notebooks and began to read again some notes from books I had read over twenty years ago. Truths, which had impressed me decades back, sprang out from the scribbled ink lines. But further reflection on the poor progress in applying these insights to my daily life brought me sadness and humility.

Meditating upon this, today, as the result of rereading an old book, I realized afresh that my old nature was just as bad as it had ever been, and that the growth of the new was

by Desmond Ford

slow, tedious, and often halted. But let me share with you what impressed me in the early sixties. The words are those of preacher, administrator, and author, W. E. Sangster, one-time leader of Methodism in Britain:

It became clear to me that what we are is so much more important than what we do; that what we do is at its best only a reflex of what we are: that the big business of life is not to crowd more and more into our days (my own life-long error) but to be in our small way an incarnation of our Lord. No day is a failure in which Jesus has really indwelt us: no day is a success (however effective in the worldly sense) in which his reflection in us has been badly blurred.

The aim, then, is to so order one's thinking: so steadily to hold the mirror of one's life up to the Lord that all my life becomes a reflection of His. Then one preaches without words; love informs all one's doings, and the slightest contact with another is capable of imparting the Lord.

Life is not to be assessed by the amount done, but by the love offered and the width of the channel I offer God for His grace. Now read another statement from Sangster. Towards the end of his life he printed the following lines on a Christmas card which was sent to all his friends:

Slow me down, Lord. Give me, amidst the confusion of my day, the calmness of the everlasting hills. Break the tension of my nerves and muscles with the soothing music of the singing streams that live in my memory. Help me to know the magical restorative power of sleep. Teach me the art of taking minute vacations . . . of slowing down to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to pat a dog, to read a few lines from a good book. Slow me down, Lord, and inspire me to send my roots deep into the soil of Life's enduring values that I may grow towards the stars of my greater destiny. When his wife first saw the wording,

she exclaimed: "You can't send *that*, Will. Some of our friends need a squib to wake them up, not advice to slow them down.

Of course, she was partly right. "Man," as Luther said, "is like a drunken peasant who falls off his horse on one side or the other." None of us are quite balanced, we tend to err on either one side of an extreme or its opposite. Mrs. Sangster's protest that many err by extreme quiescence was the protest of good sense and is applicable to a large number who sit in Christian pews and to some behind the pulpit.

The Need for a Quiet Hour

But for today, I am looking at the opposite error—an error linked not only to temperament, blood sugar, hormones and the like, but also to our inborn legalism. When Herbert Spencer visited the USA in the nineteenth century, newspapers wrote up his speech with avid interest. Spencer warned his listeners that men in this country were too much involved in activity that seemed endless. He suggested that intemperance in labor would considerably shorten the lives of most American businessmen. Perhaps there is something in that. William James was a native-born American, hailed as one of the two greatest philosophers belonging to this continent, the other being John Dewey. His sentiments are identical with those of the Britisher. One of the most famous lectures of William James deals with the issue and is entitled "The Gospel of Relaxation." Allow me to quote some of its most significant words:

Your intense, convulsive worker breaks down and has bad moods so often that you never know where he may be when you most need his help—he may be having one of his "bad days." We say that so many of our fellow-countrymen collapse, and have to be sent abroad to rest their nerves, because they work so hard. I suspect that this

is an immense mistake. I suspect that neither the nature nor the amount of our work is accountable for the frequency and severity of our breakdowns, but that their cause lies rather in those absurd feelings of hurry and having no time, in that breathlessness and tension, that anxiety of feature and that solicitude for results, that lack of inner harmony and ease, in short, by which with us the work is so apt to be accompanied. (pp. 243-244)

I think William Sangster would have felt condemned by the last paragraph. I hope so. For too often it condemns me, just as does much of what James said prior to those lines.

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Earlier in his lecture, William James commended Hannah Whitall Smith's book *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* and towards the close he did the same for *The Practice of the Presence of God*, by the Carmelite friar, Brother Lawrence. Both these Christian classics urge their readers to look more at their choices than their feelings, and to practice continually the sense not only of God's presence, but of his overruling providence doing all things well. The trouble is—good advice is easier to read than to follow. The good habits recommended are just that—habits, *and habits take time and effort to form*. God, ever since he made the world, has been trying to get us into these very habits. How? *By the regular practice of worship*. Surely there is no more important question. The answer may seem platitudinous and trite, but it is *the* answer. In worship we become preoccupied not with ourselves but with God. We dwell upon him until the glory of



that vision is so strong, that some of its luminescence will transfigure all our secular pursuits. Only then can our daily frenzy lessen.

Stop a while and finish the sooner. Step back and jump further. These old proverbs tell us the principle inherent in worship. Worship is a tarrying, so that our work might be done not only better but often more quickly. Because what I am is so much more important than what I do, my chief business is identical with that of Mary of old who chose that better part which could not be taken from her. That's why from the beginning God gave us liberty to be as unwise as Martha for six days if we wished, but then at least on the seventh to emulate Mary until a better balance was ultimately achieved. "Be still and know that I am God" is the meaning of the fourth commandment and the heart of every experience of worship.

The Jews came to Christ with the characteristic inquiry: "What shall we do that we might work the works of God?" and received the reply, "This is the work of God that ye believe . . ." (Jn 6:28-29). What we believe in our heart of hearts is more important than what we do, for ultimately doing is the reflection of believing.

Wordsworth wrote:

. . . the world is too much with us,
Getting and spending we lay waste
our powers
We have given our hearts away, a
sordid boon . . .

Surely he had it right. In a previous article we spoke of the parable in Goethe's *Faust* where a tidal wave inundates the structures on the land which represent the church and its worship, and the family. These two are the pillars of life as God intended it to be. When they go, all goes. It's only a matter of time.

Lessons from Nature and Revelation

When will we learn? When will we cease our feverishness and rest more in the divine adequacy, and then proceed to labor in that confidence? The message is written in our bodies, though it has not reached our minds. Not only is the message in our bodies but in the universe itself and all its parts, as well as in divine revelation.

Consider the way in which cycles and rhythm characterize so much of nature—the seasons, day and night, the tides, etc. Think of bird migration, animal hibernation, human work and sleep. Did you know that many body cells work in relays? Some are working while others are resting. Only a proportion of kidney nephrons are operating at any moment of time. The time comes for them to rest while others go on shift. This is true also of the brain and of other organs. A nursing mother produces milk as the baby is at the breast, but when the infant rests so do the breasts. The case is similar with the digestive organs. Body temperature, blood pressure levels, etc., follow circadian rhythms.

Obviously, there is nothing odd about the worship and rest commandment. It reflects that reality present throughout the whole of humanity and the entire universe. We violate it at our peril. God IS much more concerned about our *being* than our *doing*, and it is by beholding that our being is shaped. "Looking unto Jesus" is the law for running the Christian race successfully. Looking thus takes time and quiet. Happy the person that forms the regular habit of adoration.

For the constant worshiper, life will gradually lose its feverish qualities, its threat of panic, its senseless demand for hectic haste. For it is written "He that believeth shall not make haste" for "in quietness and in confidence shall be thy strength."

That most energetic of New Testament theologians—James—was not one who believed in frenetic activity. He was not like those moderns who think of God as an anxious coach walking the sidelines, chewing his fingernails, while the boys act out there as though they were human counterparts to hyperthyroid squirrels. Listen to James and note how right his priorities are. Observe that the works he advocates are really "fruits" and spring from a mind-set that is peaceable:

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace. (Jas 3:17-18)

All of which fits in with that ancient law: "In earing and harvest times thou shalt rest." Even in the busiest periods the laws of our being are not to be violated. Why? Because as mentioned earlier, being is more important than doing.

In worship we become preoccupied not with ourselves but with God. We dwell upon him until the glory of that vision is so strong, that some of its luminescence will transfigure all our secular pursuits. Only then can our daily frenzy lessen.

But there are other reasons, and one of them has only very gradually dawned on this slow mind over recent years. The flurried, exhausted soul is a poor witness for Christ. Such a person repels rather than attracts. It is virtually impossible to bear a good testimony while jaded. Times without

number, I have known the experience of avoiding folk I knew very well, just because, at that particular moment, I felt too tired to expend the further vitality drawn on for effective personal interchange. Tragic and stupid.

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Some years back scientists experimented with a flock of sheep. The sheep were given regular electric shocks until they manifested the symptoms of nervous breakdown. Then, on a later occasion, the same sheep were given the same shocks but with significant rest periods between each series of shocks. Now there were no breakdowns.

Luther said legalism is like an oil in our bones. We think our frantic activity will bring in the kingdom of God. And it is true that God has no voice but ours, and no hands but ours, that he usually chooses to use. There is no such thing as a lazy Christian. But on the other hand, is it not true that our part in the harvest, though essential, is not the major part? Seed-sowing is easy. What if

turning on the heat and the rain was also up to us? Have not the most important events in our life been those that have come out of the blue, untriggered by us, recognizably the fruitage of divine providence?

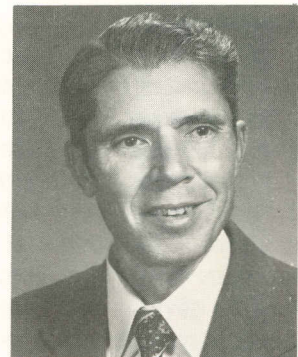
The Needed Strategy

Napoleon affirmed that many victories were gained by the way of indirection rather than frontal attacks, by strategy rather than by strength. The battle of life is won the same way. It's natural to attack with all there is of us all the time. But that method leads to ultimate defeat. To live by faith means more than the solution to guilt—it means obeying God's strategy, however repugnant its demands may be to our legalistic instincts. Only by faith alone can we "cast our deadly doing down, all down at Jesus' feet" and rest awhile in order to behold him in worship. But that has been the way of patriarchs, prophets, and apostles.

There was a time when Dwight L. Moody was making two hundred pastoral calls a day. But the world never heard of him then. When parishioners told him that quality was more important than quantity, and that they were praying for him to receive the Holy Spirit, his life changed. Now every day began with hours of worship before God with the

Word. He kept every seventh day strictly as a rest day. And he changed the world.

Some of us will do more when we do less. That is the strategy of faith, and it was never more needed and appropriate than in 1986 when many are so bent on imitating a whirlwind, that they almost have a nervous breakdown upon missing a section in a revolving door. The better way is to heed the invitation "Come unto me and I will give you rest." Then he remakes us, activates us, enables us as we choose aright—and then we will have a life redolent with the fragrance of that first Christmas in ancient Bethlehem.



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