

The Riddle of Christmas

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Riddles usually belong to fun, but some belong to issues of life and death. You will remember that Samson set forth a riddle which had very serious consequences (read the story in Judges 14). The Greeks often told the old story of the monster which guarded Thebes. He demanded of all who approached the city either their life or an answer to the puzzle: What is it that has four feet, two feet, and is weakest when it has three feet?

You have probably heard the answer to that riddle. Man — who first crawls on all fours, later walks on two feet, but who is weakest when ultimately he is reduced to using a walking stick.

I think Samson's riddle was better, for a Christian can find the gospel there. "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness." Honey had been found by Samson in the carcass of the lion he slew, and he had strengthened himself on his journey by eating it. Similarly, after our Samson overcame the Tempter in the wilderness, that Adversary who is like a roaring lion, he fed on heavenly food according to Matthew 4:11 (see also Mk 1:13).

By the grace of God all the church's conflicts with the world and the devil yield ultimate sweetness. How appropriate for those who follow him who plucked life from death, and gained a crown from the cross making us partakers of his victory.

Also, it has often been pointed out that the ancient creeds of the church were the result of the assaults of false teachers ultimately overthrown by the church. Truth can be the honey from the carcass of heresy. Rejoice, for it is also true that there is no Christian who cannot derive spiritual food from those things which test his faith and courage, and threaten to destroy him. So you see, Samson's riddle was a truly great one and rich in rewards for him who solves it.

But Christmas brings yet another riddle: Why did **Bethlehem** become the birthplace of Jesus and not the great capital of **Jerusalem**? Why did the **manger** of the lowly animals of the field shelter him and not the inn? And why did the angels sing to poor **shepherds** and not the religious **leaders** of Jewry? Why? This riddle also is related to issues of life and death.

Do not spoil the parallels of the riddle by asking whether the wise men from the East were not exceptions to the rule proposed. For they too were poor as far as the riches of revelation were concerned. They belonged to the heathen and not the chosen people.

Of course, it is not hard to see some partial answers to the riddle. Though Jerusalem was called the city of David, actually Bethlehem had been his birthplace. And now the son of David was come, who was to be the great Shepherd of his people — how appropriate he should be born where the shepherd David first found

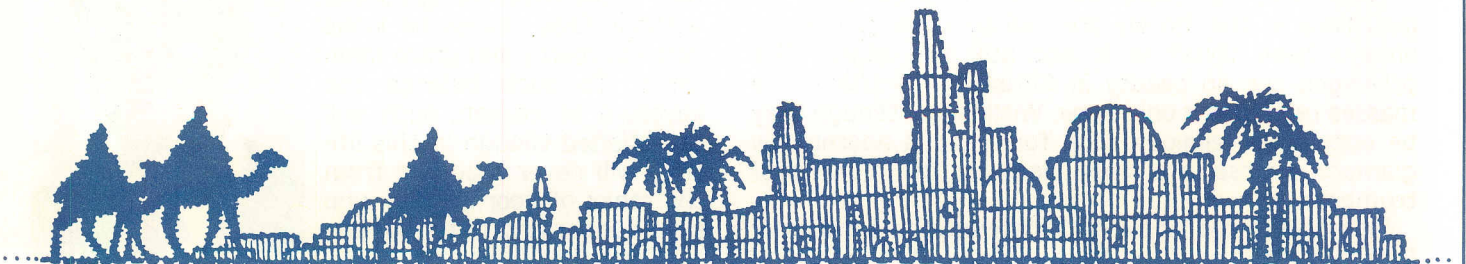
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life. Again, Bethlehem means "house of bread." What better name for the original home of the real Bread for starving sinners? Then also we can say about the manger that it was the place where the sacrificial animals were kept and now the true Sacrifice for the sins of the world had come. Furthermore, the shepherds abiding in the fields outside the shelter of the town remind us of the patriarchs who were all shepherds. From among such, Moses and David were called, while keeping sheep, to care for God's flock.

But the best answer to the riddle transcends all the above. Observe first that he who is called the Everlasting Father in Isaiah 9:6, became a child of time in Bethlehem. And the One pictured as the Ancient of Days in Revelation 1:14 is but an infant a span in length that first Christmas. What infinite condescension! What humility!

Thou camest a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

Our God contracted to a span
Incomprehensibly made man.



The humility of God! He asks nothing of us that he has not performed. Mary saw the answer to the riddle clearly and put it to music. Listen to it:

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,

He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree:

He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away. (Lk 1:51-53)

Jesus was ever presenting the same glorious message. When the disciples of John the Baptist came to enquire whether he was the true Messiah, his answer was:

Go and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me. (Mt 11:4-6)

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before the halo of light, the valley
before the mountaintop.**

Had John the Baptist forgotten the words of Christ's ordination sermon? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled" (Mt 5:3,6).

Had John forgotten the message of the book of Judges? Every deliverer in that record glorified God either by his or her own inadequacy or by the inadequacy of the weapons used. Remember? Deborah — the woman general, Ehud, the left-handed captain, Jephthah — son of a harlot, and Gideon, the least in his father's house. (Actually, Gideon was the smallest man in the world, for he belonged to a divided tribe which was the smallest in Israel, and Israel was the smallest people in the world. Thus Gideon was the least important child of the least important family in the tiniest tribe of the smallest race in the world). Consider the weapons used, instruments such as trumpets and pitchers by Gideon, an oxgoad by Shamgar, the jawbone of an ass by Samson, a tent pin by Jael, etc.

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There was no room for the Christ-child or his guardians at the inn we are told by Luke. Has it not always been thus? Is it not still the same? The privileged see no beauty in Christ or his truth. The masses reject their only hope. Worldlings, though they be outwardly religious, look for what is adorned by glamorous tinsel and announced by the blowing of trumpets.

Insight into the riddle of Christmas, the paradox of Eternity entering time, light entering darkness, God

becoming man — such insight lightens the other mysteries of life. We learn to see mercy in misery, life in death, gain in the loss of all things. We perceive that there must first be the bruised before the glorified body, the cross before the crown, the ringlet of thorns before the halo of light, the valley before the mountain-top.

Paul understood the riddle and wrote thus about the servants of Christ:

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. . . . Therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord." (1 Cor 1:26-31)

But most of all, the answer to the riddle of Christmas is exemplified in the way of personal salvation. The lowly creatures see God in the flesh, the shepherds hear and see the angels. Those who know themselves sinners, who know they deserve death and hell, who bow low in humble contrition and adoring love — these are elevated to glory — even the glory of righteousness and everlasting life.

But be careful! Too many become drunk at Christmas. Some are drunk who never drink. An unwise believer can become spiritually drunk. Remember the man who at last achieved humility? He became happy at his humility. But then he was sorry that he was happy about his humility. Lastly he became happy that he was sorry about his happiness at his humility. What a vicious circle, and one impossible

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to escape from if one focuses upon oneself instead of Christ, one's own gifts or achievements instead of his. True humility is only the possession of those who know their own poverty.

Even Old Testament saints were reminded that "in the Lord" alone they had righteousness and strength. Paul tells us in this era that Christ is made unto us righteousness and therefore with Isaiah he bids us constantly to ever rejoice in the Lord and in him alone.

And now you have the answer to the riddle of Christmas — God gives himself to the poor, the needy, to those who know they are dying and without hope unless he looks down in mercy and grace upon them. To such belongs the kingdom of heaven, such will be satisfied though in this life they will never graduate from the ranks of poor sinners who ever hunger and thirst for the continued blessings of God. □

