

A CHRISTMAS SERMON.

By Phillips Brooks.

"And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds."—Luke ii. 18.

It is a wonder which has never died away. In all the ages which have come between, as year by year has brought back the story of the birth of Christ, the wonder has sprung up again as fresh as ever. And now, when, on another Christmas morning, the shepherds come again to tell their tale, there is no listening Christian who does not feel anew how wonderful it is. For it declares that, on a winter night, while everything was still and nothing seemed to promise any marvel, some sleepy shepherds, watching their sheep in the fields near the old Jewish town of Bethlehem, were startled and amazed by seeing the sky suddenly filled with angels, who, in words which were so rich and sweet that when one heard them he never again forgot them, told the shepherds that a Saviour for the world had been born that night in the City of David; and the shepherds, starting up, went to Bethlehem and found that what the angels had said to them was true, and that the Messiah whom the Jews had expected, and the Lord for whom the world was waiting, was even then lying in His mother's arms in a poor lodging of the town. This was the story which the shepherds told along the streets. They stopped the early traveller and made him listen. They opened their friends' doors and awakened them with the strange tidings. They spoke to men whom they met by chance, strangers and men to whom they commonly would not have dared to speak, and poured into their ears the tale of this wonderful night. And everywhere the men to whom they told it wondered.

Can we tell at all what the nature of their wonder was? Can we put ourselves back at all into that winter morning long ago at Bethlehem, and read the feeling that is in the people's faces?

We must remember that there are two kinds of wonder. There is the wonder which is perfectly amazed with that which was not in the least anticipated, that which could not have been foreseen. And there is the wonder whose surprise comes from the fact that what occurs meets some anticipation, or hope, or dream that your own mind has formed before. This second kind of wonder has recognition in it. The wonderfulness of the thing which happens is that it is not totally unanticipated, but in some unexpected way fulfils the anticipation which has been waiting half-acknowledged in your heart. You are walking in some foreign city, and in an instant, out from a dark corner starts some brilliant or grotesque figure which belongs to that city's peculiar life, and which you have never dreamed of from any experience which you have ever had. You start back, then, with the wonder of entire unpreparedness. But, as you walk on, your thoughts run on some friend whom you have left at home, and while his familiar picture is before your mind, lo! there he stands before you in the foreign street—there he comes in the midst of that stream of strange life which is pouring down to meet you. Your wonder, then, is the wonder of recognition. "How came you here?" you cry. It is the strange way in which he has met your thought of him, coming in answer to your dreams and wishes, that seems to you to be wonderful.

Which kind of wonder was it that the story of the shepherds excited? Can we tell? The Gospels leave us no doubt. The waiting Jewish race—the men and women—nay, the whole world which is seen peering into the darkness, sure that some light is coming—Zacharias, Mary, Simeon, Anna, Herod, Peter and Andrew—every man and woman of whom we read, is ready for the wonder of recognition, the wonder which comes of the fulfilment of their dreams and hopes and fears. We cannot doubt that this was the wonder which came into the faces of the men to whom the shepherds told their tidings. "Can it be that this which we have so long dreamed of has really taken place—that this which has seemed the one thing lacking in the world has really been supplied? Has God really come among men, and is it possible that now and here, this morning and in Bethlehem, it is all true?" Vastly more wonderful than if the shepherds came and told them that the skies had broken and the stars had fallen was this wonder of the long-imagined, long-expected, half-despaired-of manifestation of God in human life, at last come true.

I said that the wonder of that winter morning in Bethlehem had never died away. Men have always wondered at the birth of Jesus. They are wondering still. And it is true also that their wonder is of the same sort as the old wonder of that first day of Christendom. Indeed, it is so marvellous that we may be sure that the world would have dropped the story of the Nativity long ago out of its belief, and given it up to the company of mythologies and fairy tales, if it were not that something of recognition mingled in its perpetual wonder. It is because it finds man waiting for the thing it tells that the wonder which it excites is of the kind which makes the soul receive, and not of the kind which makes the soul reject, the marvellous event.

Of the two kinds of wonder of which I spoke, these are always the different tendencies. The wonder which has no recognition in it disposes the wondering man to disbelieve it he can; but the wonder which has recognition in it makes men inclined, if it is possible, to believe the strange event. It is because the story of the shepherds has seemed to men to answer to so much in their own hearts and hopes that they have clung to it most strongly, and refused to let it go for all its strangeness.

I want to bear a part in this morning as the story comes back to us again. Here we are, all wrapped up in our cares and pleasures, some of us committed to sorts of life and ways of thinking which would seem to leave no place for any such events as those of Christmas Day. Why is it that those events hold the world, hold all of us, and will not let us go? A thousand pretty pictures die and are forgotten; a thousand legends are dissected into their historic elements and laid away, dry and dead, labelled and catalogued, among the curiosities of the myth-seeker and the antiquarian. But this record remains the possession of the deepest faith and the most

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earnest thought of man. The shepherd part of us, the simple soul of our race, repeats it to the intellect, and the intellect receives it and wonders what it means, but wonders with a sure and certain sense that it means something, that in it there is some clue and key to the deepest desires and profoundest guesses of the heart and brain of man.

Here is the real phenomenon of Christianity. The record of Christ has held the world's faith, because it answered the world's soul. Remember, that does not abolish the necessity for the historic truth of the story of the Nativity. The world's soul must not dream its dreams and then write its stories to match them. That is mere mythology, and sooner or later the historic sense of men finds that out, and sends the unbeliever to dwell in the shadowy realm of parables and myths. But when the story is first true, the power of it and the permanency of it come with its acceptance by the human soul as the fulfilment of its wishes and the interpretation of its dreams. Without such acceptance, the proved truth of the story could never rescue it from death and burial among the exhausted facts of the history of mankind.

What are the dreams and hopes, then, in the heart of man which the Incarnation satisfies? I think that we can easily group them into two classes, and speak, first, about the meaning of the world, and then about the character of man.

1. Think, first, about the meaning of the world. I do not know how clearly any two men think alike about this puzzling, fascinating mystery of human life; but it does seem as if there must be some most general convictions which will be common, in their most general statement, to very many sensitive and thinking men who live under the same conditions. And one of these convictions, one that the whole history of man has always seemed to play around and illustrate, is the conviction that this world, to conceive of the world as a mere lifeless thing, which had no intention underneath its moving processes—men have always found it impossible on any large scale. A few men here and there, sometimes, in some places, have believed it, but the mass of men have always found it impossible, and they always will. On the other hand, the effort to persuade themselves that the world was all right; that every plan was moving just as it was meant to move; that all the appearance of disorder and hindrance had its source and explanation in our feebleness and comprehension—men, however they have struggled to believe that, have always found that, too, impossible. Back and forth between these two efforts at belief men's faith has practically swung: sometimes trying to think that the world was all a hopeless snarl of chance; sometimes trying to think that the world was all an orderly and recognizable success—but, on the whole, practically thinking that the world had a purpose, which was really struggling to its result, but which was being hindered and hampered and oppressed by countless circumstances which were, for the moment, too strong for it—so men have actually lived.

This is not only a conviction about the world at large, got from great views of history. The little worlds in which we live give us the same idea. Look at the various interests for which we care. Forever trembling on the borders of a richness which it never reaches, and yet which we are sure that it will reach some day; just ready, always, to open into a luxuriant blossom from which something forever holds it back, and yet of which it never can despair—tell me, is not that the record of your social life? Learning, always just going to put a sceptre into man's hands to rule the earth, yet always just withholding it! Government, always just going to glorify the world with peace and happiness, but always stopping its chariot wheels at some unseen obstacle! Everywhere, in the little and the greater view of it, this is the world; the scene of hindered intentions—of intentions certainly, and no less certainly of hindrance.

And now, suppose that through that world there runs the story of the Incarnation. Think what it is. The God who made the world is there; the very divine

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mind and soul which, with intentions that were the echo of its own character, shaped all this earth and filled it with the life of man. It is all here, but it is here in a poor, weak, little, human child. The will which lies behind all action, the wisdom of which all thought is but an echo—it is all here; but see how it is all held in restraint by our humanity. The unmistakable divinity is here. Our humanity is evidently capable of receiving it and being filled with it. And yet the divine life in the human conditions is hindered and restrained.

In such a sight—the sight of the Incarnation—does not our human experience leap up and recognize itself? Does it not see at once its glory and its misery? Is it not filled at once with exultation and with shame? These two truths are manifest there at Bethlehem. The Human Nature is capable of closest union with Divinity; and Divinity, living in our human nature, is cabin and imprisoned and confined. Do not these two truths together tell exactly the story of our human condition which we have just described? Will not the world, in which both of these truths are true, be just the world we pictured—a world of vast hopes, possibilities, and powers, and yet a world that moves but very slowly to the great results of which it never ceases to feel sure; a world always pausing on the brink of its greatest achievement, and just missing what it seems just ready to attain; a world into which God can come, but a world which, receiving Him, must hold Him in restraint and feebleness?

Think how, again and again, during the life of Jesus, His Incarnation set His disciples to asking questions which are just the questions which we are always asking of the world. They believed in His power, and yet His power always lingered and disappointed them. "Art thou He that should come?" "Wilt thou at this time restore the Kingdom?" So they questioned Him. Gradually they learned the lesson of His life. It is divine in spite of every hindrance. It may be hindered even though it is divine. These two truths both became clear to them about their Master's nature. Out of the first truth came triumphant certainty, out of the second truth came endless patience; and these two together—certainty about the final issue, and patience with the lingering means—these two together, which were written upon all the life of Jesus, have made the power of the Faith which has overcome the world.

He who looks abroad upon the world through the light of the Incarnation must always see it thus; and is not this what we need? Both to be sure and to be patient; to know that God is in the world, that His omnipotence is pledged to the destruction of all evil and the success of every good, and yet to see evil rampant and to see good trampled under foot—we know how hard that is! We grow used to it; we struggle on in spite of the perplexity and discouragement into which it casts us. But yet how hard it is! By and by Christmas comes! God is going to enter into this world! "Now," we say, "everything will be set right. Now the right arm of the Lord will be displayed. The King is coming, and this moral confusion and anarchy will cease." And then the news arrives that He has come. The shepherds tell their story, and what a new surprise their story is! "He is a little child," they say. "There is no active strength in hand or foot or voice. We know He is the Saviour, but His power is shut up in an infant's feebleness. He is a little child." What can we do but wonder at the things they tell us? But, certainly, it is the wonder of recognition. The tale they tell fits the world we know—a world which has God in it, and yet in which even God works under the limitations of humanity, and where the power which is divine yet lingers and must slowly grow. Surely this is our world in which the Incarnation perfectly corresponds.

Sureness and patience—sureness, because it is God; patience, because it is a child. Sureness and patience! Oh, my friends, if you and I should catch them both in the shepherd's story upon Christmas Day, how clear this world would grow to us, and with what calm and faithful energy we should work away at it in these few years in which God has appointed us to work; not despairing at anything, and yet not expecting great results to come at once; glad simply for the chance to do our little share in that long labor which was going on ages upon ages before we came, which will be going on and on ages upon ages after we have done our little work and gone our way; welcoming most cordially the younger men whom we see coming up to take the work which we feel growing too heavy for our hands even while they are yet in their prime of strength; scanning the young men's faces as they come, in genuine and eager hope that they will be stronger for the work of their day than we have been for the work of ours; satisfied, perfectly satisfied, if we can help the new Incarnation of Christ (which is the gradual embodiment of His divine soul in the life of a regenerated world) toward its completion, as Mary and Joseph tended and taught the Divine Child who was in their humble house. Can we picture a life more soberly enthusiastic, more patiently devoted—a life more truly without haste and without rest? than that life must be?

O that we today may mount to the full heights of the truth of the Incarnation, and from thence look out upon the world! Men say the world, or this or that good cause in it, is hopeless. I know that they are wrong, because God is in the world. Men say: "The good must conquer instantly." The end of all things is at hand. They, too, are wrong, for God in the world fulfils Himself by human ways, and that means hindrance and delay. O that on Christmas day each of us might take up his own task, and work at it at once in new, inspiring assurance of its ultimate success, and yet in new and strengthening patience with its long delay, both caught from the Christmas truth, the truth of God manifest in the world in Christ the little child.

2. Turn to the other of the two great regions in which we were to look for the light of the Incarnation; namely, the region of human character. There, too, man's best dreams and suspicions about himself are taken up and clarified and certified by the coming of God in Christ. Let me try to show you briefly how this is. What is the best that man has ever dared to dream of his own life? Never contented to live in simple slavery to the earth on which he walked, and to follow man and to himself, he has always lifted up himself and claimed that he belonged to God. That is what all religion means. All the

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great religious conceptions—all the views of life which are distinctively religious—bear witness to man's irresistible conviction that he belongs to God. The conception of sin is steeped in that conviction. It is man's unescapable assurance that wrongdoing is something more than unwise—something more than mischief and mistake—that it is ingratitude and offence to One whom we are bound to serve. The idea of forgiveness could never have been born except in the heart of a humanity which seemed to itself to need a personal discharge from that which had been personal disobedience. The idea of goodness has always tended to transform itself into the other idea of duty, which is debt or obligation to a benefactor and a friend. And, noblest proof of all, at the height of man's outreach after happiness, when, starting from the mere delights of animal appetite, he has gone up and up from spiritual to more spiritual, always, at the top, as the supremest happiness which the humanity most capable of being happy ever could attain, there has stood, in the imagination of intimate communion with the God to whom he so entirely belonged; that not merely in obedience but only in communion could he claim God as he had a right to do. This is the great religious consciousness of man. It belongs to no one race, to no one age. It is the soul of all religions, of every altar's sacrifice, of every ceremonialist's ritual, of every dogmatist's creed, of every mystic's dream—that unquenchable, unanswerable guess that man belonged to God, that struggle of man to realize and assert his high belonging.

And now once more comes Christmas Day. Once more, borne abroad on the words of simple-minded shepherds, runs the story. God and man have met, in visible, actual union, in a life which is both human and divine. God has been able to come down to man. Humanity has been able to take in the entering God. How shall that tidings be received by men full of this old, inspiring, ineradicable guess? With wonder, certainly! Thrilling the soul that hears it through and through, wonder must fill it when it hears the story. But what kind of wonder? Surely not simply the wonder of surprise; surely the other higher wonder—the wonder of recognition. Surely not the mere wonder which says: "I never could have dreamed of anything like this!" but rather the wonder which cries out: "This is what my soul has dreamed of a thousand times. Behold, here is just the fulfilment of my dreams. How wonderful it is!"

It seems to me that that is the noblest welcome that the soul of man can give to any truth of God; not blank amazement that a thing could happen which contradicts all human expectations—but satisfied delight at such complete and undreamed of fulfilment of man's highest dreams. Men say: "How strange that Christ should be willing to die for human sin." Yes, it is strange; and yet the innocent has been willing to die for the guilty, and the loving for the beloved, everywhere and always. The wonder of the sacrifice of Christ is not that it contradicts, but that it overtops and finishes all man's idea of sacrifice for man. If I were privileged to stand and preach

the Gospel to a crowd of savages, the wonder that I should most of all love to see growing in their faces as they listened would be the wonder of recognizing, in their glorious perfectness, in Him whom I preached to them, the same divine impulse which they had felt dimly moving in their own savage hearts. "Ah, so I gave myself for my children." "So my father gave himself for me." "Ah, so I once tried to love the enemy who lay beneath my club." That, I am sure, would be the heathen's noblest tribute to the Gospel—the perception of how wonderful in its perfection was that same condition which, in its imperfect showing of it, had seemed so insignificant and mean, and yet had always hinted at a glory far beyond itself.

Is not this the relation which the Incarnation of Christ holds to human character? It is the great authoritative declaration that man belongs to God, and that God can come infinitely near to man. It announces that in his wildest dreams of self-conceit man has not overestimated, however he may have misconceived, his own humanity. What degenerate Roman Emperor, perching himself upon the paltry throne, and, with a crown upon his head and a sceptre in his hand, making believe that he was a god, has begun to get any such conception of the true glory which a human being may attain as is set forth here, where, in a manger, without the least change of the circumstances from the lowest and most sordid, the Divine Spirit joins itself to human flesh, and the Son of God and Son of Man is born?

If a man so understands that miracle, then, my dear friends, and only then, has he reached the real wonder of the Christmas story. It is a wonder which does not offend, but tempts his faith. All his best dreams about himself make him more ready to believe it. It draws him onward into belief as the infinite sky draws on the eagle. It is to him the light by which he understands his brethren and understands himself, this possibility which the Incarnation has revealed to him—that his life and the life of God should come close together, this assurance issuing from the birth of the Godman, that his Humanity and God's Divinity belong to one another.

There must be in the man who thus understands the Incarnation a lofty charity; no supercilious pity of fellow-man, no cold and hard duty-care, no fastidious choosing of the poor men who most please our fancy, but an honor for the human nature of the least and lowest, and a thankful acceptance of the privilege of setting any burdened and hindered nature free. This must come to any man who sees the Divinity of which Humanity is capable in Jesus Christ.

And then, a humble independence—a quiet, calm insistence on our right to live our own life, to think our own thought, to choose our own way of working out our work. Oh, believe me, my dear friends, there is no way so sure and permanent in which all this can be made ours as through the faith in, the honor for, our human nature which the Incarnation brings. And then a hope which never flags, a quiet and settled certainty, lasting right on through every disappointment and mistake, that we can come to something, that we

must come to something, if we only persevere. The assurance of complete humanity, the brave, happy, earnest spirit of work and trust—that, too, belongs to him who hears with all his heart the things which are told him by the shepherds of the birth of Christ.

Charity, Independence, Hope—these are the true fruits of a true faith in the Incarnation. I must not keep you longer. Those of you who will, are to come now and at His table are to celebrate the love of Him who gave Himself for you. Do it by giving yourself anew to Him. Lift up yourselves to the great meaning of the Day, and dare to think of your Humanity as something so sublimely precious that it is worthy of being made an offering to God. Count it a privilege to make that offering as complete as possible, keeping nothing back, and then go out to the pleasures and duties of your life, having been truly born anew into His Divinity, as He was born into our Humanity, on Christmas Day.



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