

SOME LESSONS FROM BETHLEHEM  
A CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

Rev. W. Edmund Smith.

Text: Luke 11:15. "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem".

This is Christmas Eve and the eyes of all the world are focused on that little town in the far-off Holy Land. If each person could be given his choice as to the town or city he might by some magic power be carried to, tonight, the choices would vary according to tastes and nationality of the individual. Some would like to see the glare and blare of old New York with its great White Way. Some would say "let me see London and the Strand". Others would say: "Let me mingle with the merry crowds of gay Paree". But I think a multitude would say: "My choice is to see Bethlehem at this Christmas-time, where Jesus first saw the light of day.

There are different ways of going to Bethlehem. To go by ocean liner would take quite a few days; to go by aeroplane would require a few hours; to go by radio or telegraph, only a few seconds would suffice, but faith and imagination are just as swift as wireless, and so I invite you to go with me in imagination to Bethlehem.

Yes! Bethlehem of today is somewhat changed to what it was when Jesus was born, but it still retains a good deal of its old-time simplicity and Oriental color. Outside on the hills, the shepherds still watch their sheep and within the town are to be seen many buildings hoary with age and made sacred with their ancient story. But we want to think of the scene the night that Jesus was born.

Obedying the decree of Caesar Augustus, the people were on the move to the various appointed places to have their names enrolled. It was only another lash on the backs of the people from the whip of a tyrannical power that was bent on grinding from the enslaved subjects as much money as possible. I can imagine there was much inward protest and perhaps outward expression of displeasure on the part of the oppressed ones.

Joseph and Mary are with the crowd. She in a condition that mere prudence would say, "It is no place for her here". They have come into Bethlehem and make application with high hope of rest and comfort at the door of the inn, only to be told that the place is full.

I do not think for a moment that the innkeeper turned away that blessed pair through any malice or prejudice. It was all according to the ordering of divine Providence; that Jesus might be born in the humblest place and amid circumstances that did violence to all the proud ideas of men as to propriety. It does pour contempt on all human pride that Jesus was born in a manger among the cattle and the sheep; no one to soothe the anguish and comfort the heart of that mother whose condition had caused suspicion even in the heart of her prospective husband, and who in spite of all her ignorance as to its fullest meaning had bowed meekly and joyously triumphant to the will of God.

There are some lessons I learn at Bethlehem. Let me note a few.

First. Here we see the exaltation and sanctification of the humble place. Proud imagination would say that a King ought to be born in a palace or a castle—in a place that would prophesy his regal splendor and kingly power. This would be a harmonious blending of all conditions and circumstances. Earthly potentates plan to observe the eternal fitness of things.

But how God pours contempt on all such pride; Jesus was born in a manger and thus sanctified the lowliest place. Here we see the

prophecy of the place his pure gospel must take. There was no room for them in the inn. And never in the history of Christ's Kingdom had there been room for Him in the highest place.

Jesus himself was only a tramp preacher in the eyes of the proud ecclesiastics of his day. He was an insurrectionist—an iconoclast bent on disrupting peaceful conditions and bringing into contempt officials and customs that had a marvelous background, and the sanction of high heaven.

Jesus often visited Jerusalem and his going there always made a commotion by his controversy with the ecclesiastical authorities or his militant one-man army methods of driving out of the Temple all that was unclean. He told of the destruction of the Temple and the eclipse of all the ritualistic pomp and glory by the in-coming of glorious spiritual life and power.

When the plan of salvation was consummated by the death, the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Ghost the meeting place of the disciples was a humble place. In a room, in a hall, in any place where devout souls met in faith in the risen Christ, there was the true temple of God. In apostolic Christianity it was not the architecture or the appointments of the place that amounted to anything but the spiritual presence of Jesus.

When Christianity lost its vital power or began to lose it, there was larger ambition to worship carnal self by building splendid edifices that finally developed into the most gorgeous temples that satisfied the aesthetic sensibilities of the most cultured and refined, and who imagined the stirring of their emotions by grand displays of marble and granite and ritual with its colorful priestly manouevrings was the working of the Holy Spirit on their hearts.

Those who retained the true spirit of worship were generally out in the stable. The great temple had a splendid place for sanctimonious displays of will-worship but no place for the joyous triumphant testimony of those who through the merits of Jesus came into vital fellowship with God, and thus were made free from the domination of an ostentatious clergy and the bondage of place and things.

Martin Luther, as it were, was driven out of the temple into the stable; Wesley was driven from the proud churches into the highways and byways; his was a stable religion. William Booth started a movement of blood and fire. It worshipped in the lowly place. But as the heavenly glory came down upon that manger where Christ was born, so the glory of God has ever filled the place where true sincere Holy Ghost worshippers have met, and has attested his power by granting salvation to the lost and dying.

When you hear of a so-called spiritual movement gaining the approval and co-operation of great ecclesiastics who throw open the doors of their cathedrals to the devotees, then you have seen something new under the sun, if that movement be a truly apostolic one. If it be true it will be driven to the stable—the humble place, and be tabooed by those who count themselves the upholders of orthodoxy and the truth of God.

Again; I see at Bethlehem the sanctification of humble persons. Look at the virgin mother. Not a princess of royal blood and famous lineage but a humble, lowly Hebrew maid.

There is something so noble and winsome about Mary. Mere birth and culture could not have given it to her. When the angel announced to her the high honor God was going to bestow upon her, she meekly bowed to the will of God and then in the power of the spirit she broke forth in that matchless expression of praise and adoration called the Magnificat. I can't see how

any sanctified soul could read her words with tears and shouts of praise. Mary seemed to reach the climax of her jubilation when she cried, "He hath cast down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away."

Yea! God passed by all the so-called noble women of the land and exalted a sweet, pure humble peasant maid to be the mother of our Lord. Surely in this he chose the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, and the things that were not to bring to naught the things that were.

Then look at the shepherds! What honor was bestowed upon them! In those days there were in Israel two noted schools of what we might call theology; the school of Hillel and that of Shammai. In these schools were enrolled the most promising religious young men of the time. They were taught by learned rabbis who knew the old Scriptures and all the traditions to the last letter. But they were passed by and the glorious revelation on that eventful night came to the quiet shepherds watching their flocks on the Judean hills. The angel came with the message and the light shone round about filling them with terror. The angel quieted their fears and told them of the manger child. And after a heavenly choir came to serenade them and had gone away again into heaven, the shepherds left their flocks and came to find Jesus. They did not scoff at the sight and say "Our Messiah must bring better credentials than these to convince us". No there was a glory in that stable that brought those shepherds in devout adoration to the feet of Jesus. Those humble men believed and went out to tell the story.

And the wisemen came from the East. They were the old astronomers. They had followed the star and it led them eventually to the place where Jesus lay. And we see the humility of those wisemen when they fell down and worshipped Jesus and presented their gifts, that were appropriate to the three-fold mission he was to accomplish, that of prophet, priest and king.

True scholarship is always humble and looks the noblest and the wisest when giving adoration to Jesus, as did Newton, and Herschel, Gladstone and a host of others.

But again, when Herod at the birth of Jesus, had been outwitted by the wisemen he unleashed the sword and slew all the little children in Bethlehem. In this we have the prophecy of the tremendous hostility Jesus was to arouse in the hearts of some men.

He was called the Prince of Peace and yet declared "I came not to bring peace but a sword. Christ's kingdom has made real progress only in the face of great hostility due to the carnal heart of man that has ever been enmity to God. He said he would be the cause of unleashing the sword in the home, and making division there; He has made division in communities and in the nation. Let a Jew get truly saved today and persevere in the new way and the more his people have loved him in the flesh the worse will they hate him in the spirit. They will bury him in effigy and reckon him as dead. Here is the sword of Herod. Let a person get truly sanctified and sometimes the church they love will turn against them to kill them with their tongues of reproach as they did Wesley and his followers: Here was the sword of Herod. Herod is still alive seeking the young child's life. Not all the Herods are dead.

We are to have fellowship with the sufferings of Christ and fill up that which is behind in his sufferings. Not that we can make atonement