

CHRISTMAS AND THE HOME

By Paul S. Rees, D.D.

"And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him." (Matt. 2:11).

The central meaning of Christmas is that God has come to men, personally and historically, to redeem them from their sins. Of that paramount fact we must never lose sight.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that around this glowing core of evangelical truth there may be found many marginal values. They are secondary but still significant. And one of these, surely, is the eternal benediction that Christmas bestows upon the family and the home.

Do you want to see mother love at its purest and best? Then look at Mary. Do you want to see a husband who combines the sturdy strength of a peasant with the tender solicitude of a courtier? Then look at Joseph. Do you want to see childhood crowned with affection and honor, and the crown shining all the more brilliantly because of the pagan darkness and cruelty that surround it? Then look at the child Jesus held close to the virgin's heart. Do you want to see what unpredictable and amazing possibilities for good are concealed within a humble home? Then look at that family making its way back from Egypt to Nazareth, where for thirty years Jesus lived His life, ate his meals, slept away His weariness, toiled at His carpenter's trade, dreamed His dreams, and prayed His prayers.

Yes, Christmas is the festival of the home. Important as that fact has always been, it takes on even greater importance now, when family life in America is being restudied and reappraised as at no time in recent history. We have come to an hour of peril when it is not the clergy alone who are concerned about the American home, but the lawyers, the judges, the physicians, the social workers and the psychiatrists as well. I take it, therefore, that no one will doubt the timeliness of our theme—"Christmas and the Home."

I

Let's begin by facing the truth that this Christ of Christmas reflected the beauty of the home. Some time when you want to make a fresh approach to the Bible, sit down with the four Gospels and begin to search them for the places where Jesus did some significant thing that is connected with home.

It was at some unknown home at Bethabara beyond the Jordan that He was enjoying hospitality when He found Andrew, who became His apostle; and out from that home Andrew went forth to find Peter.

At Capernaum He entered a home and healed Peter's stricken mother-in-law.

At Jerusalem it was no doubt a home in which Nicodemus met Jesus by night to inquire how a man could be born again.

At Jericho it was the home of a disreputable tax-gatherer, Zacchaeus, that Jesus entered and brought to it the transforming grace of His salvation.

At Bethany it was the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary that provided him the privacy and peace His spirit and body so often craved—a home forever hallowed by His frequent visits to it.

So one might go on. Through all His life and service and death the music of home rings

like some lovely refrain. Was not His first miracle wrought in a home and at a wedding feast? Was not His dying message concerned in part with the home that the Apostle John should provide for His mother? Did not the most beautiful and haunting parable He ever uttered have as its theme a home in which there was a prodigal son? And was not the richest, simplest, tenderest name He had for God taken from the vocabulary of the home—"Our Father which art in heaven?"

In all of these events, if they are examined carefully, one comes to feel what the Master felt—the immeasurable power and the deathless importance of home. It was this feeling that shaped His teachings, sharpened His vision, colored His language, and kindled His heart.

Now if the music of home sang so beautifully in the life and ministry of our Lord, where was it born? The answer must be that it came to birth in that humble family life that nurtured Him in Nazareth. No wealth was there, but there was love. No glamor was there, but there was honor. No liveried servants were there, but there was industry. No radio was there, but there was prayer. No manuscripts of the Greek and Roman philosophers were there, but there was the Law of the Lord.

We have talked and sung about the breeze-freshed hills of Nazareth over which the boy Jesus must have roamed. I have no doubt they were fair to His boyish eyes and exciting to His boyish heart. But I venture to guess there was one thing even fairer, and that was the lowly home where He played and where there was etched upon His memory the picture of His mother sewing with nimble fingers, cooking with skillful hands, moving about with queenly grace; where, also, the father in the home, the manly Joseph, was not too busy with the clean toil of his carpenter's bench to instruct the family in the law of God and in the art of prayer.

"Give us twenty-five million more homes like that, and the beauty thereof, if you want to see America saved from her present disintegration and saved to a secure and splendid future. It is this sacred beauty of home life that we see so vividly reflected in our Lord Jesus Christ.

II

Jesus, however, did more than light up the beauty of the home: He also fought its battles.

Even in His infancy we see how He was involved in the battle with violence and cruelty. In one of our well known Christmas hymns we have a couplet which says,

"The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing."

Actually the world into which Jesus was born was not that quiet. Oh, the wolves and the jackals that prowled the Judean hills might have been hushed that night. But what about the blood-hounds of jealousy and cruelty that were growling viciously in the heart of King Herod? In order to spike the possibility that any rival might arise in his kingdom, he did not hesitate to massacre all the boy babies in Bethlehem. Think what that one black deed must have meant to the family life of the little city on the heights of Judah! Life was cheap in those days; and when life is cheap, the home inevitably suffers.

Come down to our own day. It is true that we do not give parents, as the Roman Empire did, the legal right to decide whether, when a

child is born, they should keep it and rear it, or not. We have built up the formalities of what we call civilization. Nevertheless, we have our own way of slaughtering the innocents. Right here in America we have permitted a situation to grow up so violently frightful that we can hardly bear the description of it which has been running in our daily news—an average of two juvenile murders a day.

We discover that in the overwhelming majority of cases these killer-youngsters come from homes that are broken, quarrelsome, profane, cruel, warped, spiritually sterile. Minor violence in the family life has bred major violence in the child's life.

All of which brings up a point of such crucial importance that one wishes he had the ear
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THE JOY OF BEING REMEMBERED

By J. B. Chapman

Forty years ago I allowed a young college friend to persuade me to invade the home of a famous preacher and meet the great man in his own living room. The great man was more than cordial, and without a moment's hesitation invited me to make his house my home for any length of time and without charge or obligation. Outside I remarked to my friend that there must be a mistake somewhere. This famous man could not be that much interested in me, a poor beginner as a preacher, and no doubt the great man would be nonplussed if I should decide to accept his proffered hospitality and move into his home. But my friend insisted that the invitation was genuine, and that others had found it so.

I later came to know that famous preacher well. I saw him surrounded with a crowd of people. Without discrimination he received them all, small and great, and with ease and joy he recalled former meetings with a large number of them. I watched the people—especially the humble and lowly who were the honored guests. It was remarkable how well this famous preacher remembered, and I observed that he usually remembered instances in which those before him played the leading role. Perhaps it was the time when this certain man looked after the tent, or it was the time when this humble woman baked the biscuits for breakfast. But no matter about the circumstances, the great man remembered them, and that was what counted. I saw the wrinkled faces of old women shine with inner glow, and the stooped shoulders of humble laborers straighten visibly. There was everywhere the evidence of a new sense of personal worth—the great man had remembered them. The great man was Bud Robinson, who has since entered the pearly white city. He was a man of marvelous memory, especially to those whom he did not forget.

There is another, also, who assured us that our names are engraved on the palms of His hands. Our names are not simply written, but engraved. That means they are there to stay. Time cannot erase them, and He who bears them will not forget. His time of recollection gives the humblest man a sense of worth that makes him glad to be alive. And that smile of remembrance makes the humble one feel that he shall always live, and be happy forever more. It is a joy just to be remembered, especially when it is Jesus Christ himself who remembers me.