

The Peace of Christmas

One of the Christmas-cards we received last year had this little verse:

As Christmas comes, soft and still,
May the spirit of peace gently fill
Your heart and home with love and goodwill.

This verse equates Christmas with peace, softness, gentleness, and goodwill. The Christmas card pictures often show Joseph and Mary wearing halos. And the Christ, the very reason for Christmas, is painted as a harmless and sweet baby in a manger.

But this sentimental Christmas scene is far from reality. It contradicts the events surrounding Christ's birth. There were no halos. Nothing was soft, gentle, and peaceful. The world into which Christ came was rotten. King Herod used the occasion of His coming for the slaughter of innocents: all kinds of babies were killed and mothers pierced to the heart. Government leaders were corrupt and power hungry. There was debauchery and crime in the cities of the Roman world. The poor were oppressed. There was slavery and social injustice. The world then was not any different from today. Nevertheless the Lord did come. There was no welcome party thrown for Him by the town folk of Bethlehem. He had to be born in a stable like a child of refugees or homeless squatters. This baby Jesus didn't come in style. He was raised by a working class family. He became a carpenter by trade. He didn't attend a prestigious university. He lived and worked in Nazareth, a small country town. He was not well received by His country's leaders. Eventually He was nailed to a cross. It is a strange story, but it is the story that changed the course of history.

The central message of the story is the miracle of the Incarnation - God became man. Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. The child in the manger is God's Son. The apostle Paul described Him as "the (visible) image of the invisible God." (Col. 1:15) Christ is the heart of Christmas and the Christian faith. Sadhu Sundar Singh, the Indian Christian mystic and evangelist, was brought up in a Sikh home. He was converted to Christ as a teenager, and later became a sadhu, an itinerant holy man. Visiting a Hindu college one day, he was asked by an agnostic professor what he had found in Christianity which he had not found in his old religion. "I have Christ," he replied. "Yes, I know," said the professor a little impatiently. "But what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before?" "The particular thing I have found," he replied, "is Christ." Christianity is Christ. The child born in Bethlehem cannot be compared to one of the great leaders of the world, comparable to Alexander the Great or the Napoleon the Great. He is more than "the Great"; He is the one and only Son of God, who though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor. (2 Cor. 8:9) He has been given many titles. One of them was "the Prince of Peace." It is a strange title for one who lived and died as He did. He prophesied that the course of history would be marked by wars and rumours of wars. He brought conflict wherever He went. He brought divisions in families. He said, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does

not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matt. 10:37) And where do we see peace in our time? Peace is the longing of every sensitive heart, but the hope of peace seems farther and farther away than ever. This is not a soft, still world filled with love and goodwill. Sri Lanka has suffered the agonies of war. If only the warring factions would "not learn war any more"! If only the conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, and a host of other hotspots could be resolved, perhaps then we could have some peace. What did go wrong? Do we truly understand the message of the Prince of Peace?

Our trouble is that we want a peaceful world without the Prince of Peace. The first Christmas destroyed the illusion that men are basically good and morally on the way to perfection. Christ's birth shattered the dreams of all who believe that they can save themselves and create their own brave new world.

The ancient prophecy is crystal clear: "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given... Of the increase of his government there will be no end." (Isaiah 9:6f.) Neither men nor nations want to have Christ rule over them. Ever since Adam and Eve were shut out of paradise because of their rebellion against God, we have been shut out. Doing God's will is our peace, but we are at war with God and suffer the consequences. The apostle James asks: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (Jam. 4:1) Where does the problem lie? Do I contribute to the cause of war? Am I prone to hatred? Do I flare up? Do I harbour resentment and nourish anger? War begins within the heart of men and moves from there to nations. We cry for peace and there is no peace.

Yet there is hope ! The angel of the Lord told Joseph that he had to give the son of Mary the name Jesus," because he will save his people from their sins." (Matth.1:21) And the shepherds heard the angels say: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2: 1 ff.) The promise of God becoming man was that of the coming of One to remove the burden of sin.

The Christmas story is the story of God's rescue mission. As the churches have recited for centuries in the Nicene Creed," for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven..." Over the manger was the shadow of the cross. The Jesus who was born a baby in Bethlehem's stable traveled to Calvary. Through Christ's death on the cross sinners, who trust Christ for their salvation, become God's forgiven, reconciled children and they know Him as Father. On the cross Christ took our place, assumed our guilt, paid our penalty, and died our death in order that we may have peace with God. Christ made peace with God for us through shedding His blood on the cross. (Col. 1:20) This is the wonder and glory of Christmas!

If you believe the glorious Christmas story and submit to the rule of the Prince of Peace you will have lasting peace. And even in the midst of all the trials in life you can sing the angels' song:

Glory to God! Glory to God in the highest!

Peace be on earth, to the people whom God delights in. When you believe the Christ of the Scriptures, you'll have a ,joyous, blessed and peace filled Christmas.

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