

## CHRISTMAS AND THE CROSS.

"And she shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins."

Matthew 1:21

We do not commonly connect Christmas and the cross in our practical thinking. In fact, while we are under the magic spell of the gay and happy holiday season, we can readily sense a reluctance on the part of many to associate so bright a thing as Xmas with so grim a fact as Calvary. However this may be, as students of the complete Xmas message we should be willing to know the whole truth and eager to learn all the lessons God has set for us to learn in the Gospel of his infant Son.

We do not need to force the issue in connecting Bethlehem with Jerusalem, the manger with the cross, His birth with His death. It is not necessary to take the record of our Lord's public ministry and read it into the record of his birth in order to discover the cross. The cross is already there. When we read the record aright, we perceive that the Cross occupies a central place in the Nativity story as well as in the accounts of his later life and ministry. I was once saw a picture which showed Jesus as a little boy running out of the house to meet Joseph coming from the carpenter shop.

With characteristic childish joy and vivacity he ran toward the good man with his little arms outstretched. The bright sun shining down upon him threw the shadow of a cross upon his pathway. The picture was drawn from the artist's imagination, but it suggests a spiritual truth. It coincides with the Xmas Gospel in making plain to us that from his earliest childhood the cross lay athwart the pathway of Jesus.

#### I. THE CROSS IS SEEN IN THE DESIGNATIONS APPLIED TO MARY'S CHILD:

The NAMES applied to our Lord in the Xmas story and the various references to his mission in the world clearly reveal the cross. The angel of the Lord said to Joseph: "And she shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." The name and the explanation are one. The name JESUS means "Jehovah is salvation." The interpretation given is that "He shall save his people from their sins." Of course the messenger of God knew how Jesus should save his people from their sins. In bestowing the name JESUS upon Mary's son, the Most High God indicated the redemptive mission of the Son, which was to be accomplished in his atoning death for sinners upon the cross.

The angel-herald gave the same message to the shepherds: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, was born a Savior to all people. Again, the title of Savior implies the manner in which he would perform his saving work; it implies the cross.

Zacharias held this conception of the Messiah's mission and so defined it in his prediction concerning the prophetic office of his son who was to be the Forerunner of the Messiah:

"Yea and thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High: For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to make ready his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people in the remission of their sins." The remission of the sins of the people of God implies the sacrifice for sins made by the Son of God when he offered up himself on Calvary's Cross.

The cross stands for the fact of humiliation as well as for the remission of sins. Hence this other word, which Matthew connects with the fulfilment of prophecy likewise carries its implication of the cross: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, And they shall call his name

Immanuel, which is, being interpreted, God with us."

The birth of Jesus Christ marked the Incarnation of the Son of God. The little baby lying in the Bethlehem manger is "God with us." As the meaning of the lowly manger scene becomes clear to us, we have an understanding of the humiliation of God. How many of earth's royal children are born amidst such lowly and shameful surroundings? And yet God's Son, the Lord of Glory, was born into the world of a humble peasant woman, in a rude cattle shed, amidst circumstances of poverty, suffering and neglect. Surely the manger was fashioned from the same kind of wood as the cross.

Matthew in telling the story of the return of the holy family from Egypt says that they "withdrew in parts of Galilee, and came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken thru the prophets that he should be called a Nazarene."

We know of no specific prophecy in the Old Testament which designates the Messiah as the "Nazarene", but the general ideas associated with the term are readily found. Isaiah's great prophecy concerning the Suffering Servant contains the root ideas of the term. "He was despised and rejected of men;

a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised; and we esteemed him not." The designation "Nazarene" carried with it the stigma of reproach; it suggested the idea of rejection, even as Jesus was later rejected by his own people of Nazareth. Thus another outstanding fact connected with the cross is suggested here. Christ was crucified by a nation which rejected him as the divinely appointed Messiah. He was regarded as a Nazarene, treated with contempt, and compelled to bear the reproach of the cross.

## II. THE CROSS IS SEEN IN THE EVENTS CONNECTED WITH HIS BIRTH:

The manger cradle represents the same kind of humiliation as the cross. The Christian Church has learned to sing, "In the Cross of Christ I Glory," and the Church has learned to glory in the lowly manger birth of her Lord, but the glory of the manger is one with the glory of the cross. Luke tells us that Mary "brought forth her first-born son; and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." Humanly speaking, the manger birth was a necessity because the mother was crowded out of a more comfortable place.

Of course the purposes of God were being fulfilled, but even so the human agencies were at work. It is not our thought that Joseph and Mary were maliciously kept out of the inn; they were not forcibly ejected; they were not turned away because they were not wanted. It was the result of a combination of unusual yet perfectly natural circumstances. The little town was full of people who had come to register for purposes of taxation. The inn was quickly filled, and Joseph and Mary were not the only ones turned away. The sad fact is that the people did not know of his coming; they were not ready to receive him; the world was so completely absorbed in its own affairs that there was no general preparation for the greatest event of all time.

In the same way, Christ is crowded out today. One Pastor of a large city church wrote this message for his Xmas bulletin entitled: "The Christmas Paradox": "Too many Christians allow their absorption in the 'by-products' of Christmas - business, social fellowship, and gayety - to crowd from their lives the worship of the Holy Child, without whom we would have no Xmas. One manifestation of this absorption is depleted congregations during the very season when the churches ought to be most crowded. This is the paradox of Christmas."

Let us not become so wearied by the endless round of material interests that we have neither strength nor inclination to worship during the Christmas season at the altar of the Church of Christ." Multitudes of people who are more thoughtful, kind and charitable to their friends and neighbors during the Christmas season than at any other time of the year are yet so busy and preoccupied with their own plans and activities that Christ is crowded out. The besetting sin of our generation is that of indifference, neglect and unbelief intensified and broadened by the passion of preoccupation and absorption with worldly things. The inn in a better day, not packed with people brought there because a heathen emperor wanted more money, would have had room for Mary and Joseph and the Savior of the world.

The prediction of Simeon in the temple at Jerusalem certainly throws the cross into clear focus. His prophetic words are: "Behold, this child is set for the falling and rising of many in Israel; and for a sign which is spoken against; yea and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul; that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." The offense of the cross is here; likewise the suffering of the cross, the rejection of the cross, and the judgment of the cross. Christ was spoken against.

He was called a glutinous man and a wine-bibber, a blasphemer, an ally of Beelzebub, the prince of devils, by the religious leaders of the nation. He was mocked and bullied and reviled, even when he hung upon the cross, by the leaders and by the people. Simeon's words anticipated what came to pass, and later events themselves served to unfold the meaning of his prophetic utterances.

The gifts offered to the Christ Child in the house of Bethlehem are suggestive of his sufferings to come. This is especially true of the gift of myrrh. The Church has long held this gift to be emblematic of the true Humanity of Jesus, referring particularly to his death and burial. So we are told that another good man, one Nicodemus by name, came bringing "a mixture of myrrh and aloes" with which to inter the dead body of Jesus.

The cross of Christ also stands for the wicked envy, cruel hatred and murderous sin which goads some men in their opposition to the Son of God. King Herod's attempt to destroy Mary's Son vividly reveals this dark picture of the cross.

The evil-hearted man trembled on his throne at Jerusalem when he first heard tidings of the birth of the "King of the Jews." He feared a rival claimant for his blood-stained throne. His crafty mind immediately

formed a plan whereby his rival  
would be destroyed. When this plan  
was thwarted by the higher obedience  
of the Wisemen, he put into execution  
the bloody attempt to catch Mary's  
child in the general slaughter of  
Bethlehem babies. This is a black-  
hearted vilness, this awful corruption  
of sin which poisoned the soul of  
Herod later, hounded to death the  
Doer of Good and nailed him to the  
cross. Christ is being crucified  
afresh in many lands to day where  
rulers and people still wield the  
bloody weapons of cruel hatred against  
innocent, helpless victims of  
atrocious warfare. The light and  
love of Christmas still show the depths  
of man's degradation and sin; and the  
awful crimes committed by those who  
do not know Christ as Savior and  
Lord.

### III. THE CROSS IS SEEN IN THE SUFFER- INGS OF THE PARENTS AND OTHERS:

The cross of Christ also  
stands for suffering, innocent suffer-  
ing, spiritual suffering, vicarious  
suffering. We find that the Infancy  
Gospel is not lacking in these elements  
of crucial suffering. For the cross  
is seen in the sufferings of Mary,  
Joseph, and others. Mary's suffer-  
ings began with the annunciation.  
The record is that "she was greatly  
troubled at the saying, and cast in

her mind what manner of salutation this might be." She suffered the anguish of a deeply troubled spirit, the acutest form of suffering known to pure, sensitive souls. The mystery of the miraculous conception, the promised greatness of the Child, the strange position she was placed in her relationship to Joseph would naturally cause a high-souled woman like Mary to suffer acute anguish of spirit. The singular blessing conferred upon her inevitably carried with it an unusual accompaniment of suffering. The greatest blessings always entail the greatest sufferings.

Joseph likewise suffered an exquisite torture of soul. We need only allow our minds to dwell upon the human elements of the story to perceive the delicate and difficult situation in which Joseph was placed. Naturally he would be sorely distressed and dismayed when he learned of Mary's strange secret. He would not believe his ears; he did not understand; he was greatly troubled. His first thought was to do all that could be done to save the family from disgrace and shame. But even while his tortured mind thought upon these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and made plain the painful mystery. "Fear not," the angel said, "to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is

conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." His suffering spirit was soothed by the revealing dream and he arose from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. But this did not mark the end of his sufferings. The arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem which brought such discomfort and distress to his young wife naturally lay heavily upon his sympathetic spirit. How would the noble man feel when he could find no refuge for his suffering wife in the inn, and was compelled to take her for the birth of her first-born child into a common stable! Soon after followed the troublesome days and fearful nights when they must be cautious and vigilant in order to save the child's life from the wicked Herod. The hazardous and trying journey to Egypt brought its share of anguish; likewise the sojourn in a strange land, and the return journey to Nazareth. Not unlike some modern parents whose minds are haunted with fears and forebodings of the evil threatenings and villainous depredations of kidnappers, the parents of the infant Savior were robbed of the sweet joy of peaceful, happy, home-centered experiences with their first little baby. Surely the parents of Jesus had their daily cross to bear in cherishing and protecting the little life of Him who was to be the Life of the World.

Let this traditional Folksong of the  
Mountain Whites entitled "And the  
Trees do Moan," enable us to perceive  
more clearly the glorious shame of  
the place of the cross in Christmas.

In the valley of Judea,  
Cold and wintry blown,  
Christ was born one frosty morning,  
And the trees do moan.

Darkened skies, and men a-stumbling -  
High above there shown  
One bright star a-moving Eastward,  
Where the trees do moan.

Herod and ruling Romans  
Stately sat upon the throne,  
Sent the soldiers out a-looking,  
And the trees do moan.

Mary took her little baby,  
Set out all alone;  
Down in Egyptland they tarried,  
Where the trees do moan.

Jesus then became a carpenter,  
Worked with wood and stone,  
Nails he drove and cross-arms fashioned  
And the trees do moan.

There one day while in the forest black  
One tree he picked for his own,  
A Christmas tree, an ever-green one,  
And the trees do moan."

*Christmas - 1944*

*Good!*