



The Real Meaning of Christmas

By a Chaplain
to the King



CHRISTMAS DAY is a commemoration rather than an anniversary, and like other commemorations may mean somewhat different things to different people. To some it is the festival of what might be called social charity; that is to say, an occasion for endeavoring to increase the world's capital of good-will which is not perhaps unduly large. This was the aspect which appealed to Charles Dickens and has been immortalized by him in the Christmas Carol, a work which certainly deserves to rank as an English classic. And as far as it goes, this view of Christmas is Christian.

It may not amount to very much, but it is at least worth something.

Others see in Christmas the festival of childhood. The Infant Jesus has inspired many pictures and some poetry. This sentiment is also Christian as far as it goes. One of the great difficulties which the Christian religion has made is that it has created a new attitude towards children. It has made parents the natural protectors instead of the owners of them. In the old world the exposure of infants was a very common thing (as it is said to be in China today) and was not regarded as in the least reprehensible.

But both these views are only superficial. Neither the idea of social charity nor the claim of helpless infancy exhausts the meaning of the day. Christmas is—it is almost a platitude to say so—the festival of the Incarnation. It commemorates the fact that "The word was made flesh"; that is to say, that God has really entered once for all into human life. For centuries before, man had been learning to think of God as acting in or upon the world. In heathen thought divine intervention in human affairs was fitful, capricious and arbitrary. It was sometimes inspired by motives which could not be defended. Possibly this was in part an outcome of polytheism; that is, of belief in a number of divine personages of approximately equal power whose wills were often in conflict. But whatever the limitations within which it took place, it was a real intervention. Except in the philosophy of Epicurus, which was next door to atheism, pagan divinities did not neglect this world, but they acted upon it from outside.

Hebrew teachers went deeper. If their speculative range was narrow their insight was more profound. They believed in one God only, whose intervention in human affairs was continuous and not arbitrary. It was guided and inspired by intelligible moral principles.



But the gulf between even this and the Christian standpoint is enormous. Neither Greek nor Jew nor anybody else had ever conceived the idea of God really entering into human life and sharing it, so that in a sense God and mankind are no longer two, but one.

Heathen mythology had many legends of gods who had assumed human form for some particular purpose, and had then laid it aside when that purpose—usually a discreditable one—had been achieved. The adventures of Krishna, who is sometimes termed "The Hindu Christ" (save the mark!) can be studied by the curious at the British Museum. But this article could never be printed if I were to describe some of them in detail here. Such stories have nothing in common with Christian belief.

The Christian religion holds that the Son of God has taken our nature upon Him; that is, has entered really, fully, once for all, into human life. It may fairly be argued that a conception so overwhelming, at first sight so profane could never have been entertained, had it not been forced upon men by the inexorable logic of historical facts which could not be explained away. But however the conclusion was reached, the Christian religion does say as much as that, and has steadily refused to accept any tamer substitute.

It is obvious that nothing can be beyond this compass of religion which dares as much as that at the outset. No intellectual adventure can be too bold for it, and no conventions, however deeply rooted, can hope to withstand a creed which adds to its astounding premise the assertion that the Saviour of the world was born in the stable of a village inn.

Christmas Day really means as much as that. It has given to the world an entirely new



"HE LOVES ME, HE LOVES ME NOT"

conception of the relations between God and man and of the methods which God employs to accomplish His purpose. It is right that we should keep the day as a great festival, and that the birth of Christ should come to be the beginning of a new era. For from the moment when God entered into human life the world could never be the same place again.



"BUBBLES"

Strange Christmas Customs

MANY thousands of people enjoying Christmas at home in Canada are thinking of relatives or friends abroad and wondering how they will spend the day.

But they can rest assured that, no matter where the absent ones are, they will celebrate the occasion in a fitting manner, for so strong are their memories of traditional customs that Christmas means as much to them on the Equator as it would were they in Canada.



Out in India the day is usually one of hot sunshine. Although holly is practically unobtainable, yet native mistletoe and bougainvillea make excellent substitutes for decorations. Where there is a garrison they hold a full-dress church parade. Curiously enough open-air picnics are held in the afternoon, while dinner parties and fancy dress balls are the more conventional means of spending the evening.

In regions like Baffin Land the men in the isolated posts of the Hudson's Bay Company, pass the loneliest Christmas in the world, for they are absolutely cut off from the world each winter until the following July, and in many cases the last letters or presents they have received will have been posted in England as far back as the previous July. Yet these hard-bitten, fur-clad men manage to enjoy themselves.

Others are more fortunate, for air mails and dog sleighs deliver their Christmas mails.

All over the seven seas ships great and small are away on the waves for Christmas, but that never causes the day to be forgotten, rather it is anticipated with even more relish—if that is possible, than at home. In little fishery protection sloops, trawlers, coasting steamers, and ordinary tramps, special dinners with plum puddings are made aboard, and "dog-watches"—short spells of duty—are worked to enable the seaman to enjoy his share of the good things.

On the great Atlantic liners immense preparations are taken to ensure that Christmas is a success. Huge quantities of special Christmas provisions and drinks are carried, and these combined with crackers, beautiful decorations and a dance, make everyone happy.

The kiddies too, are equally well-catered for, for Father Christmas "lands" on the ship and distributes presents among them. In addition pierrot concerts keep them roaring, huge well-laden Christmas trees and a wonderful feed make them all look forward to another Christmas afloat.

Our own Christmas foods are so well known that it is interesting to hear about the different dishes favored abroad. Thus roast goose following a rice pudding, is enjoyed in Norway, and Sweden. Germans also patronize roast goose followed by a pudding very similar to ours, and the whole is washed down with much beer. More unusual is the roast sucking-pig which delights the Serbians, and even stranger the sweet cakes of honey and almonds which tickle the palates of the Neapolitans.



Feast of Lights

THE oldest name for Christmas is "The Feast of Lights"—a reference to the glory in the heavens when angels sang their song announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds.

It is of interest to note that the Chinese, in their astronomical records, entered an account of a new and travelling star, which appeared a few months after Christ was born. Thus the Biblical story of the Wise Men being guided by a star has outside corroboration.



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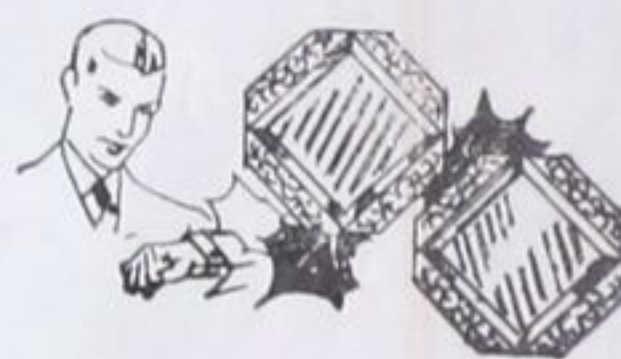


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