

# A Christmas Message

By Rev. Howard V. Lane.

Nothing is so delightful as childhood. Children are the brightness of the home, the givers of joy, the makers of mirth, the dispensers of happiness. They are the gladness of a world that were dreary without them. They are bird-song, and flowers, and God's golden sunshine, and unspeakably more than all this to millions of human hearts. How good then that God should take the form of a helpless babe; that the Omnipotent Himself should be wrapped for us in swaddling bands and laid in a manger! "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

This was He for whom all the generations had been singing. Beautifully the church has summed up their longings in the inspired words of the poet-prophet Isaiah: "Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above; and let the clouds rain the just; let the earth be opened and bud forth a saviour."

Pure as the dew that descends from heaven, and silently falls into the silver fleece, did He come to the Virgin Mother fair as the first rose-bud of the year, did He lie on the soft white corporal Mary's virgin hands and spread over the straw of the lowly crib. Tenderly, with outstretched arms, He received from her the sweet embrace of love and adoration. In the skies without were angel choirs, that brought the glad tidings to the shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks on Bethlehem's hills, while at the manger stood the ox and the ass, in homage to creation's Lord and Master of all living things. And there, rapt in happiness and heavenly worship, kneeling by the side of the new-born Babe, Mary and Joseph, the adoring heart of the world. The great hour of history had struck.

In all its completeness was now to be fulfilled the Angel's promise to Mary regarding the sublime mission of that Child conceived of her by the Holy Ghost:

He shall be great, and shall be called the son of the Most High; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David, his father; and he shall reign in the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom there shall be no end. (Luke 1:32, 33.)

Venite Adoremus! Come, let us too adore Him: sweet Babe, sweet Christ, sweet Child of Mary, our Brother, King and God.

The expected of the nations had come, the desired of the Patriarchs and the Prophets, the hope of all the world was here. Dimly He had been foreshadowed in the first great prophecy made to Adam and Eve when the tears for the transgression were still moist upon their cheeks. Dimly they had foreseen Him, a rainbow of hope in the clouded sky, a vision of future happiness revealed to them in the promise of a great mother who, with her offspring, would be in relentless opposition to Satan and his wiles:

I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel. (Gen. III:15.)

Literally, the reference here is to Eve; typically, it is most certainly to Mary, the Mother of all who by grace shall live in Christ. So the whole church has understood it. Her offspring, as mentioned in this great prophecy, is not our Saviour only, but all the just who through Him shall triumph over the tempter, and so shall crush the serpent's head, giving the mortal wound to sin and Satan.

So complete, we know, was to be that enmity between Mary and mankind's deadliest foe, the infernal Serpent, that it began with the very moment of her Immaculate Conception. Hell was not to claim one single victory over her, such as the conception in original sin would have implied. Only the all-pure among women might worthily bear the God of purity. How far our first parents could then have understood the full meaning of this prophecy we do not know. But sufficient was the knowledge it gave them to keep hope alive in their breast. Even the Rabbinic literature of later years say in it the clear promise of the Messiah to be born as the Child of the great Mother here announced in this "protevangel."

But if that first promise of the Mother and her Child may have sufficed for the generation that preceded the Deluge, the prophetic visions of the birth of the future Messiah became ever more distinct in the days that now followed. From among the sons of Noe one was pointed out under whose tents the Almighty Himself should come to dwell: "Blessed be the Lord God of Sem." And so more and more definite became the prophecies of mankind again multiplied and increased. Not merely was the Divine Child to be descendant of Sem, a member of his family, but he was further to trace His line through Abraham, through Isaac and through Jacob. All this was made plain by successive prophecies in regard to each of these Patriarchs.

"In thee shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed," God foretold to Abraham. This promise, it was further pointed out, would be fulfilled in Abraham's offspring. (Gen. xxvi:4.) It was repeated to Isaac, and again to Jacob. It was rendered in the prophecy of the Gentile soothsayer, Balaam, who had consecrated himself to the true God, though he proved unfaithful to Him. Yet through the mouth of this unworthy messenger the Almighty was pleased to reaffirm His great promise in those striking words which are especially associated in our minds with the Christ Child.

A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall spring up from Israel. (Num. xxiv:17.)

Balaam thus prophesied that a ruler should come from the family of

Jacob and the aged Patriarch himself, pointed with equally prophetic vision to the one among his sons from whom the Messiah was to spring. He would rise, the brethren were told, from Juda's line. Then came Nathan, the prophet, and out of all the descendants of Juda he identified David as the one chosen of God to be the inheritor of the great promises, in whose line the Saviour should be born. The Messiah, the Jews were now further told, would be of David's blood, and His reign would be without end. His coming from the House of David would remain certain under every circumstance; and He would moreover be the Son of God no less than the Son of David: "And I will establish the throne of His kingdom forever." (1 Kings viii:13.) Such was to be the Babe that should be born.

From the promises of the Lord to David we turn to the prophecy of Jeremiah, foretelling the birth of this Heavenly Child and describing the blessings He was to bring.

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will perform the good word that I have spoken to the house of Israel, and to the house of Juda. In those days and at that time, I will make the bud of justice to spring forth unto David, and he shall do judgment and justice in the earth. In those days shall Juda be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell securely, and this in the name that they shall call him: The Lord, our just one. (Jer. xxxiii:16.)

In the Hebrew text, "Yaweh our justice" is given as the name by which the character of this wonderful Child, that was to be born of the house of David, could with accuracy be described. For how can we better define the results of the Redemption than in that title which makes of Christ the source of all our supernatural graces? He is in truth our Justice.

Nothing more was needed now to complete the details of the prophecy than to mention the place of the Saviour's birth, and the time in which He would come. Of these two circumstances the first was supplied in clearest terms by the prophet Micah.

And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda; and out of thee shall come forth unto me He that is to be the ruler in Israel, and His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity. (Mich. v:2.)

Here is pointed out, in words that no one could mistake, the city of the Saviour's birth, Bethlehem, in the land of Juda. But lest it might be thought that the Messiah would be merely man, because born in a temporal birth, the prophet further tells of His eternal generation, from the beginning, from the days of eternity. That Child, to be born in time of human Mother, existed as God before the heavens and the earth were created. His temporal going forth would be in Bethlehem, but His eternal birth was from the bosom of the Father. The Babe of Bethlehem, here foretold, was therefore, to be both God and man.

That the Jews themselves understood this prophecy is plain from the fact that when Herod inquired into the birthplace of the Messiah, the priests and scribes, without any difficulty, answered him: "In Bethlehem of Juda." For so it is written by the prophet: "In Bethlehem of Juda." (Math. ii:5.) Not merely the priests and the learned in the law, but the people themselves fully understood this truth. When the multitude was gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration of a high feast they discussed the birth of the Messiah, and at once they demanded, as St. John recounts: "Does not the scripture say that the Christ cometh of the seed of David and from Bethlehem, the town where David was?" (John vii:42.) Thus revelation after revelation had constantly defined more perfectly the circumstances of the Saviour's birth, until an expectant world had been told that He should come of David's royal house; that He should be born in David's native city; that He should have a two-fold birth; one in time and the other "from the days of eternity." To these prophecies we must now add those others that define the very period set for the temporal coming of that Divine Babe of Bethlehem, in whom the world was to be blessed. This date had already, in general terms, been pointed out by the dying Patriarch Jacob, when, as his sons were gathered around him, he singled out Juda and said to him with the voice of inspiration: "Juda, thee shall thy brethren praise." From him indeed was the Messiah to spring. But it was not to be in the day when Juda's house reached the zenith of its glory in David and in Solomon that the Saviour was to come. But when the sceptre should have passed away from their line, and a stranger would sit on their royal throne. That time was at hand when the noblest of all the descendants of Juda, and of David's line were Joseph, the lowly carpenter of Nazareth, and Mary the unknown handmaid of the Lord. Here are the words of Jacob's prophecy and they went into fulfillment when Christ was born at Bethlehem and the manger formed his throne.

The sceptre shall not be taken away from Juda, nor a ruler from his thigh, till he come that is to be sent.

And he shall be the expectation of the nations. (Gen. xlix:10.)

But still more definitely was the date of the Saviour's birth to be made plain when there stood before the Prophet Daniel the very messenger of God, the Angel Gabriel, who more than four centuries later was to appear to Mary and make known to her that God had chosen her for the Mother of the Great Redeemer. But the special coming of the Saviour referred to in Daniel's prophecy is not the time of His birth, but of His public appearance, when He was to

be baptized in the waters of the Jordan. The "weeks" spoken of in the Hebrew text are "weeks of years"; i. e. periods of seven years each. This was a familiar method of expression among the ancient Jews, and can be found in their law of the Sabbath and of the Jubilee year. The fact and time of the "slaying" of Christ is also given by the prophet, and the consequent destruction of Jerusalem is predicted.

Having prayed to God for pardon of the sins of His people, and to look in mercy upon their ruined sanctuary, Daniel is told by the Angel:

Seventy weeks are shortened upon thy people, and upon thy holy city, that transgression may be finished, and sin may have an end, and iniquity may be abolished, and everlasting justice may be brought, and vision and prophecy may be fulfilled, and the Saints of Saints may be appointed. Know thou, therefore, and take notice that from the going forth of the word to build up Jerusalem again unto Christ, the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks, and the street shall be built again, and walls in straitness of times. After sixty-two weeks Christ shall be slain, and the people that shall deny Him shall not be His. And a people with their leader that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary, and the end thereof shall be waste, and after the end of the war the appointed desolation. (Dan. ix:24-26.)

"The going forth of the word" alludes to a royal decree granting leave to restore the city, from which edict the prophet reckons his week of years. The date of this document was then well understood by all, and the prophecies contemporaries could reckon with exactness the date of Messiah's public coming, after sixty-two weeks of years, as likewise of His violent death which the prophet foretold should follow in the seventh week.

Thus men might compute with sufficient exactness when the Saviour's birth was to be expected, since they

clearly knew the date of His public appearance. That the advent of the Messiah was really expected by the Jews at the very time of Christ's coming into this world is certain beyond all doubt, both from the secular historians, such as Tacitus and Suetonius, and from many passages of the New Testament. But elsewhere, too, over the face of the earth, there was a mysterious stirring. Many of the ancient nations awaited a great Teacher, a Redeemer. "O Alcibiades," are the words put by Plato upon the lips of Socrates, "ask nothing of the gods; let us wait until the One sent from heaven comes to teach us our duties towards gods and men, and let us hope that His coming is not far distant."

Passing over Ezechiel's prophecy of "a tender twig" that should be cropt from the royal cedar of David, and the words of the Lord to Aggeus: "Ye, one little while—and the desired glance at the prophecy shall come," we need now but cast final glance at the prophecy of Isaiah predicting the wonderful ways of God in the Virgin Birth of the Christ to be:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel. (Is. vii:14.)

Of a pure virgin only is the word almah ever used in the Sacred Scriptures and is here applied in a literal sense to the Maiden Mother of the Christ, Emanuel, "God with us." To this same Son of the Virgin the prophet refers in the ninth chapter, as the Child through whom salvation is to come to Juda; and in the eleventh chapter he describes Him as the red that shall spring from the root of Jesse, the most glorious scion of the royal house of David, who will bring God's peace to all the earth and possess the remnant of the chosen people.

Here finally are the names the prophet enumerates as accurately setting forth the sublime attributes of this future Messiah:

For a Child is born to us, and a Son is given to us, and the government is upon His shoulders; and His

name shall be called Wonderful, God, the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace. His empire shall be multiplied, and there shall be no end of peace; he shall sit upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom to establish and strengthen it with judgment and with justice, from henceforth and forever. (Is. ix:6-7.)

Such is to be the eternal kingdom over which the Christ Child would come to reign. The names given Him are in the original Hebrew grouped so as to read: Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God, Father of the age to come, Prince of Peace. Thus the mystery is revealed.

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