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## SERMON.

*Sunday after Christmas.*

LUKE ii. 8-14.

WE are still observing in the services of the Church the joyous Feast of Christmas. It will therefore be appropriate for us to make the birth of the Infant Jesus which we celebrate the subject of our thoughts at this time.

The portion of the narrative from St. Luke's Gospel, which has just been read, is very familiar to every one of us from our childhood, and doubly dear to the memories of all gathered under the restored Apostleship is the vision of the shepherds abiding in the fields by night, and the glorious song of the heavenly host praising God. We remember them as the words used for the Anthem after the Creed in the full Morning Service on Christmas Day; and, year by year, on that joyful early morning, they surely served to stir up in our hearts that true spiritual joy with which every Christian man, woman and child should welcome the birthday of Him who is their Saviour and their King. We rejoice that this peculiar joy of Christmas

time is becoming felt and expressed more fully by our brethren in the Churches of this our land, by open churches and appropriate services on Christmas Day. And in the everyday world, too, we are conscious at this season of a spirit of friendliness, good-will and kindness perhaps less apparent at other times, the true source of which is undoubtedly the glad tidings announced as at this season by the angels of God. Then do not we seem to realise more at this time the sacred ties of family relationship and the goodness of friends? We greet one another more kindly, and far and near we send our tokens of love and of affection as reminders of the places that absent ones hold in our hearts. Those near and dear to us, who are scattered by circumstances and isolated in distant lands, also turn their thoughts to joyous gatherings of former days, and long to mingle once more in old familiar scenes. It is indeed a season for kindness, for love and remembrance of all, when our hearts most readily respond to the message of the angels' song of "peace upon earth and good-will to men."

But while we are glad that all this social joy is seen among us, we remember that Christmas is far more than a time for family or social joy. The *true* joy of Christmas is, that unto us, and to all mankind, is born a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. Christmas tells of the love of Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, shown most wonderfully

to the world, for its salvation. "God so loved the world that He *gave* . . ."

At this season if we receive an unexpected gift, do we not pause to wonder what it may prove to be? Some one has said that if the wisest of mankind had been asked what best gift God could give to sinful man to lift him up out of his sad plight, not one could have guessed aright that God would *give*, as the Gospel tells us, His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

It is this great fact of the birth into this world of God's dear Son, as a helpless babe, for which we commemorate and joyfully bless and praise God. It is the mystery of the Word made Flesh, which we declare, Sunday after Sunday in the Nicene Creed, when we refer to Him who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, *and was made Man*.

These thoughts are brought prominently to our minds at this season, and form part of the doctrine of the Incarnation. We know the word "Incarnation" has a difficult sound to many, especially to the young; but we can express it more simply, and call it "the Christian belief in the person of Jesus Christ." Who is Christ, and what is He? From the Gospels we learn that these questions were discussed when Jesus was upon earth, and to-day are still being argued about in most con-

fusing ways. Is He merely an extraordinary man with great wisdom and holiness, the world's greatest spiritual teacher, misunderstood at the time and put to a cruel death? Or is He not something more, even God visible in flesh? The apostles who companied with Jesus while He was on earth, who knew Him best, knew that He was indeed true Man; but they knew also that He was far more than any other man. They realised and testified that He was their Lord and their God; and the Christian Church has borne its testimony to the truth that before Jesus was born into time as a little child He had been from all eternity the Son of God, Himself God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God. A right faith on these points is necessary for us all, for we have often been taught that the fact of Jesus taking our human nature with all its weakness, yet without sin, makes the Christian religion different from all other religions the world has seen. And we are to remember that all the spiritual blessings for which we give thanks to God, our Heavenly Father, are secured to us by the obedience of our Lord becoming man; our redemption by the blood of Jesus shed for us, all the means whereby spiritual life and grace are ministered to us in the Church, and the blessed hope of everlasting life which we shall share with our Lord when He comes to reign.

At this season when we especially remember

our Lord's first coming to the world in all the weakness of a helpless infant, we also lift up our hearts with hope and prayer that God's own Son will come again in power and strength to continue the blessed work begun in Bethlehem.

Our faith is that the coming of the Lord is very near, and now, on the threshold of another year, what can we say by way of exhortation and encouragement to all, old and young, except that amid our difficulties and perplexities we give ourselves more wholeheartedly to Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Lord, to the work that is appointed for us to do, or that may yet be laid upon us. We should do so with full trust and confidence in our gracious Heavenly Father for the final issue.

We are now being led forward to another stage in the spiritual experiences of this work of the Lord. We have been brought to a time of solemn crisis. Another period of God's merciful dealings has closed, and our position is peculiarly altered. We realise that we are being tried, and our numbers greatly reduced. It has been observed that hardly a month passes without news of the loss of some valuable minister, of gaps left in churches which we cannot, we dare not fill up, and we are being greatly weakened in the way, but we must still endure; for these are the things which have been told us of the Lord which are now being fulfilled.

What does it all mean? We can only say that it means we must seek to the Lord for His help, and for strength to keep us faithful and trustworthy, and from being faint-hearted concerning the future. In the Old Testament Scriptures, and in the Book of Judges from which this day's Forenoon Lesson was taken, we have instances of times when the Spirit of the Lord came upon God's servants and moved them to do many astonishing things. Gideon was one of these servants so chosen, and at first showed himself in some bondage of spirit, timid, seeking signs, feeling he was of little importance. "My family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." Nevertheless he obeyed God's word, and afterwards stood up boldly before the men of Abi-Ezer, and blowing the trumpet of the Lord, sent messengers throughout the land and gathered to his side many men who came at the call to fight the enemies of God's people at that time — the Midianites and the Amalekites. In this he is a type of our Lord, who is the true Gideon, our Saviour and our Leader, the Man of war, who, under cover of darkness of night, shall lead forth His people from weakness to final victory.

In Gideon's case, as you will remember, the work of preparation was done in three stages. First, he gathered the army of thirty and two thousand, and pitched the camp for the battle. But the Lord said to him, "The people that are

with thee are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me saying, 'Mine own hand hath saved me.' . . . Therefore go proclaim in the ears of the people saying, 'Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from Mount Gilead.'" And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand, and there remained ten thousand. The twenty-two thousand had no heart for the struggle and could not be depended upon. And the remaining ten thousand were also reduced by the strange trial at the water-side. Three hundred only stood God's test, and these were chosen to go forward with Gideon to victory.

We cannot say what stage in Gideon's experience corresponds to our present position in the Lord's work, but who among us does not long to be included in that gallant band who shall follow the Lamb of God whithersoever He goeth? We must not forget that we, too, belong to a numbered band, having the lamp of God's Holy Spirit in earthen vessels, yet ever longing and praying for the time when we shall be changed, and shall receive spiritual bodies, and be clothed with light and immortality to carry on the further work of the Lord.