



THE WRONG SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

Psalm 72:1-8; Acts 8:26-40

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

William Powell Tuck

December 30, 2007

Several years after the Second World War was concluded, a group of Japanese soldiers was found hiding in the mountains on the Philippine Islands. Unaware that the war was over, they continued to hide fearing that, if they were found, they would be put to death. When they were discovered by American soldiers and informed that the war had been over for several years, one of them committed suicide. In some ways that story is a kind of parable of life. These men were living on the wrong side of the war. The war was over, but they were still participants in it in their own way.

There are many people who live on the wrong side of Christmas. The revolution which has come through the life of Jesus Christ has transformed our world. But many people live as though it had not happened at all. We have just celebrated the birth of Christ—Christmas, but it does not take anyone with much insight to realize that the life and teachings of Christ have not fully had their sway in our world. Even minor episodes reveal how little many people have let his life and teachings affect their lives. A few days before Christmas free gifts were passed out to some needy people in a city. About a hundred people had been anticipated, but thousands came. Five thousand free gifts were given out to needy individuals. As gifts were being given to the needy, a man snatched a teddy bear out of the arms of a young boy and rushed away with it.

Another event indicates how little Christ's spirit has been caught by many. On the day after Christmas Macy's Department Store had a near riot as people pushed and shoved to purchase the sale items. Obviously Christmas has not made much of an impression on the lives of these people. And these episodes only address the impact of Christ on some people on a superficial level. Push the influence to the level of world peace, human justice, and righteousness and then you have to wonder where the real reign of Christ is.

Still Anticipate Christmas' Coming

Some people live on the wrong side of Christmas because they still live in anticipation of its coming. The Old Testament is filled with anticipation. The Ten Commandments offer guidelines for relating to God and others. But these rules for living do not cover every issue we have to face in our daily living. The teachings of

the great prophets like Micah, Amos, Hosea, and others instruct us in the areas of righteousness and justice. As helpful as all these ethical teachings are, they are still incomplete. The Old Testament writers are constantly pointing toward the future for the fulfillment of their teachings. They are reaching forward in anticipation to something—someone—to complete their hopes and dreams.

The seventy-second Psalm is an example of this spirit of anticipation. This royal psalm was most likely written in connection with a coronation of a king. It may have been written at the time Solomon was crowned king. It was sung in anticipation of his reign. The writer prayed that the new king would rule with God's justice and righteousness, be a defender of the poor, and reign a long time with peace and prosperity. But, whether this king was Solomon or someone else, those ideals were not fully realized. The Jewish people lived in anticipation of the king who would one day come and reign as they envisioned. Isaac Watts based his hymn, "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun," on this particular psalm. He joined the psalmist in anticipation of another whose rule would lead men and women closer to experiencing the reign of God. The prophet Isaiah wrote about One who would lay down his life for his people. He, too, was looking to the future in anticipation for a Savior.

Someone once asked the renowned Jewish theologian Martin Buber why he had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. "When my Messiah comes," he responded, "there will be a reign of peace, justice, and righteousness for all mankind. Your Christ has not brought this into the world. Friedrich Nietzsche was asked why he had not become a Christian. "When I see one," he replied, "I will become one." Both of these persons have issued a strong indictment on how far removed our daily living is from the teachings of Christ and how little Christ has really penetrated our lives.

Many are still living in anticipation of the coming of Christ. In Samuel Becket's boring play *Waiting for Godot*, two tramps wait endlessly for the coming of Godot. Scholars and theologians have wrestled with the question of who is Godot and why are they waiting for him. Some theologians have speculated that Godot is the Old Testament God—God-OT. The tramps, signifying mankind, wait and wait for God to come. But he does not appear and they finally leave without anything happening. Some people live in anticipation of God's coming. They are still looking for God to come, and they do not see his presence in our world.

Looking Backwards

There are others who spend their lives on the wrong side of Christmas, because they only look backwards. They look back to Christ's birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection. We, of course, have to look back to study who he was and what he said, but these persons spend all of their time looking back in the past. Christ for them is like one of those small bubble-like Christmas scenes you can shake and see

snow whirl all around when you set it down. The Christmas scene is self-contained and artificial. It may be beautiful, but it offers no life—only fantasy. For some people, this is their concept of Christ. He is a far distant person in the past. They believe that he gave us good teachings, lived a good life, did some marvelous things, but he is confined to the past.

We all place a great deal of our Christmas celebration on the past, don't we? There are, of course, many rich heritages from the past which we want to hold on to. I love Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, Handel's *Messiah*, *The Nutcracker*, and a lot of the other traditions from the past. But for some of us Christmas is nothing but nostalgia. We become absorbed in looking back and thinking about the time when we were small children and sat in front of the fireplace with mother and daddy. Christmas for us is primarily a time of looking back to the past. There is no sense of the present in it at all for us today.

I am convinced that history is going to judge Harry S. Truman, the thirty-third president of the United States, as one of the great presidents of our country. He made some of the most difficult decisions that had to be made in our recent history. He was a man with little formal education, but by the time he was sixteen years old, he had read all six thousand volumes in the public library of his small town. He was also a Baptist and attended church faithfully. Someone asked him once what he thought about Christmas. This was Truman's response. "We miss the spirit of Christmas if we consider the incarnation as an indistinct and doubtful, far-off event unrelated to our present problems. We miss the purport of Christ's birth if we do not accept it as a living link which joins us together in spirit as children of the ever-living and true God. In love alone—the love of God and the love of man—will be found the solution of all the ills which afflict the world today. Slowly, sometimes painfully, but always with increasing purpose, emerges the great message of Christianity: Only with wisdom comes joy, and with greatness comes love."

Christmas is not just a past event. The past should become a steppingstone to enable us to realize the deeper meaning of Christmas so we will not live with our focus in the wrong direction. We draw on the past to live more creatively in the present.

Looking Only to the Future

Some others live on the wrong side of Christmas because their vision is directed primarily towards the future. You have seen the signs as you drive down the highway, "Prepare to meet your God," or "Jesus is coming soon." The chief emphasis here is on a Jesus who is to come. He is the distant Christ, the One who will come sometime in the future. These persons spend all of their time speculating about when the return of Jesus will be, how it will happen, what our condition will be, and, what

we might be doing. Everything focuses on a Christ who is still in the future. That is the wrong side of Christmas, too. This is not to say that the second coming has no place in our theology. Of course it does. But when it is our primary focus, then the emphasis is in the wrong place.

This does not mean that we are to live without some sense of expectancy toward the future. Alexander Pope has given us what he called the ninth Beatitude. “Blessed are those who never expect anything, for they shall never be disappointed.” Too many live without any real expectations about the future. That is the reason some persons accomplish so little in their lives. They have no expectation, no sense of doing anything with their life. One of the champion pole-vaulters in our country always kept on his desk a picture of himself crossing the bar. He kept that picture of his crossing the bar to challenge him with a vision of himself always reaching higher and higher. Our approach through life cannot be a “Que-sera-sera”—whatever will be, will be. This is a fatalistic philosophy which is non-Christian. Meaningful living arises out of having expectations for your future and genuine goals. We are constantly reaching toward fulfillment. We live with an openness toward Christ to guide us in his way.

Expectations of Others

We also need to have some expectations of other people as well, do we not? But sometimes our expectations of people at Christmastime can be unrealistic. After Christmas, many people send thank-you notes. Sometimes people have a hard time trying to express their response to a gift. You may have seen the Peanut’s comic strip where Sally is writing a thank-you note. Charlie Brown is seen standing nearby as she writes her note. “Dear Grandma,” she writes. “Thank you for the sweater and money. The sweater, however, was too big and the money was too small.” Then she stops, holds her note up, and says, “Somehow that didn’t come out right.” “No, I’ll say it didn’t,” Charlie Brown responds. So she tries again. “Dear Grandma, Thank you for the red sweater and the green money.” She asks: “Is that better?” “Perhaps you could throw in a little happy new year,” Charlie Brown replies.

Wrong Expectations

Some of us have difficulty expressing ourselves because we have wrong expectations, false goals, improper motives, or distorted images of persons. We need to have some sense of who we are as a child of God. We can easily give in to the false or shallow images of who we are. It is easy to buy into an image of our self as an inferior, weak, or hopeless individual. Can we ever accomplish anything if there is not someone who expects greater things from us? Sometimes, if another expects greater accomplishments for us or sees unrealized potential within us, we are able to reach

higher and become more than we are.

A young man sat in my study a number of years ago. He had reached the bottom of his life and seemed to be hanging on to a knot in the rope of his life. He poured out the ills that he felt were in his life and exclaimed that he didn't know where to turn. I tried to turn him to God. I pointed out the good things that I saw in him. I noted the high virtues I saw in him and spoke about the dreams, hopes, and possibilities that I saw in him. He still had great promise. Unless a person can see the possibilities in his or her life, then that life remains anchored to the past and that individual cannot really grow or reach his or her potential. The power of God is never released in you without some vision of what you can become. You cannot live a productive life with your eyes focused only on the future, but you do need to have some sense of expectation as you move forward into tomorrow.

Live in the Present

How then are we to live in the light of Christmas? We have to learn to live in the present. At this point the characters from the book of Acts enter our story. Earlier Philip had given his life to Christ and became his disciple. There are some lessons in the story on the encounter of Philip with the man from Ethiopia which may offer guidance for us in learning how to live in the present. One day a messenger from God came to Philip and said, "Arise and go to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza." And you notice what he did. Immediately he followed the guidance of God's spirit. He was obedient. He heard God's direction and, he obeyed. Growth takes place as we are open and obedient to God's guidance.

Chance Encounters

Secondly, notice that his meeting with the traveler along the road to Gaza seemed to happen by chance. Along this busy road, he seems to meet this stranger just by "chance." It was not planned or thought through. God may sometimes work in your life or through a "chance" encounter you have with someone else to accomplish his will. Through that chance meeting you may have an opportunity to help another person or they may influence you.

Begin Where You Are

Note thirdly that he began with the man where he was. This man was reading a passage of Scripture from the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. When he found out that the man did not know the meaning of the passage he was reading, he took time to start where he was and guided him into understanding its meaning. Verse 35 indicates that he shared the good news of the Gospel with him which may have taken some lengthy period of time. But he began with the man where he was. That's where

God always begins with us. He meets us when we are hanging on the end of the rope of our frustrations or in our failures, sorrows, pains, joys, hopes, ignorance, and wisdom. Wherever we are, God begins with us there and gently guides us further into truth.

After the Ethiopian eunuch had heard the message of Christ and realized that the prophet Isaiah's servant was fulfilled in Jesus' coming, he saw water near them and asked Philip: "Look, here is water. What is there to prevent my being baptized?" At that moment he was baptized and arose from the water to live for Christ. When you surrender your life to God, you begin to live for him right at that moment—not sometime in the future—but right then. At any moment, in any place, God can touch your life through a friend or stranger and challenge you to live for him. Having been changed by his spirit, you are to begin living for him today.

On April 12, 1913, Dr. William Osler delivered some lectures at Yale University. Dr. Osler was a noted medical doctor in England whose contribution to medicine had spread to the United States and other parts of the world. But he was also considered a great scholar in English literature and was recognized as a philosopher. One of the things he told the young students in his lectures was to acquire the practice of living for each day—to live in "day-tight compartments." He was able to accomplish so much because he lived each day in a "day-tight compartment." He didn't spend all of his time in anticipation of the future, or reflecting on the past. He didn't spend all of his time worrying about tomorrow, but tried to live with the gift of today.

God has given us this day. Live today. Utilize it well. Accept it as the gift that God has given you. This is the time we know we can live for the Christ. Remember the words of the prophet: "He shall be called Emmanuel, which means 'God with us.'" God is with us now, not just in the future, not only in the past, but he is in the present. He is Emmanuel—God with us now.

A young man went to visit a friend in a large city, and his friend invited him to go on a subway ride with him. His friend led him from one subway train to another. On the last one they stood up the whole way. After they rushed off the train and headed up the escalator, his friend turned to him and said: "See, by coming home this way we have saved two minutes." The friend from out of town looked at him and asked: "What significant thing will we now do with the two minutes we have saved?"

God has given you the gift of today. None of us knows about tomorrow. The past is spent. The opportunity to live for God is now—this moment. This is the right side of Christmas to live on. Live in this moment. Christ has come. He is present. He has given you new life now. What are you doing with the gift of this time which you have to live in the present?

Gracious God, teach us to live in the present with the sense of your presence with us. We thank you for being the Emmanuel, the One who is with us now. Thank you Lord for coming to bring us redemption and for being ever-present to us. Teach us how to live in your presence in the present. Through Christ we pray. Amen. ■

PASTORAL PRAYER

O loving God, we have now taken our yearly journey to Bethlehem, but many of us are tired from lives that have been too busy and too cluttered. Did You mean for us to celebrate Your Son's birth in that way? Surely You intended for Your Son's birth to bring us peace, joy and renewal and a sense of togetherness, of being in touch with life's deepest mysteries and realities. Grant that sorting through the debris of Christmas, we may find that sense of being in touch and may breathe easier knowing that You are at work in the world, continuing to become Incarnate in the acts of love and fellowship begun in Your Son Jesus Christ.

As we near the end of another year, we pray that world peace may find root in honest desire and grow into an atmosphere of trust and goodwill among men and women around the world. We pause today to remember the poor and homeless and ask that we may find ways to feed and house them. We remember the sick that they may receive healing. We pray for the grieving that their hearts may be comforted, for the lonely that they may find relationships that help, for the fearful that they may be given confidence, for the doubtful that they may have faith, and for the cynical that they may experience trust, for all children and young people that they may be kept from harmful ways until they are wise enough to meet the temptations that confront them.

Grant to Your church courage, strength and endurance. Help us to covet Your leadership above riches, powers and earthly approval. Teach us how to find You in quietness and follow You in faithfulness. We shall praise You with the angels forever and ever. Through Jesus Christ, our living Lord, we pray. Amen.