

PRIORITIES

It is always amazing to me to hear the conversations which buzz about at this time of year – that is, between Christmas and the New Year. “Well, Christmas is over,” I hear folk say. In many ways, in many phrases, it crops up in normal conversations. People mean no harm. They are not thinking theologically. They are just talking – commenting about schedules, seasons changing, and what they are facing next. It is nevertheless a strange thing that Christians could even mouth the words without choking. Christmas is over? What an extraordinary thing to say! If we have any concept whatsoever of the meaning and proclamation of Christmas, how could we imagine that it would ever be over? What would it take to close down the coming of the Christ – to stop it, to put it to an end? Satan has been trying with might and main for two thousand years, and he gets some assistance from us from time to time, to be sure. But closing down Christmas is a tall order. Once God reveals himself, how do we pretend we do not know or cannot remember? There are ways, of course. We have learned many forms of denial. Sometimes we go whole days at a time without remembering who loves us, who *we* love, or what we truly value – or even that we will soon die and meet the Creator we pretend does not see or care how we live or what we do.

Christmas is over? That’ll be the day! And so we know – whatever is said about grace and mercy and forgiveness – that it still matters how we live. Many have been drawn to the Christ by the way and manner in which His followers have lived. And huge numbers have been driven away from the Christ by the way and manner in which those who claim His name have lived and thought and talked. If we have no honor, how can we honor Him? If we do not love His WAY, who will be drawn to try it? So He speaks straight to us: Whatever keeps you from my WAY, put it behind you and come with me. If you are ashamed of me, you cannot help with my purpose or my Kingdom.

The residue of our denial is a nameless fear and dread that stalks our choices and drives us into ruthless schedules and impossible expectations of life, ourselves, and each other. This whole culture runs on guilt, drugs, and depression, while often displaying a happy face. Yet we also encounter wonderful, well-meaning, courageous, and generous people everywhere we go. So then we go positive – just in time to get robbed or beaten or betrayed or lied to. How very confusing!

Do you believe the story that a special agent was sent by God to draw and invite us into a different reality – a different WAY? I resist using the familiar titles on purpose. They are too familiar, and they pretend a precision of knowing that obscures more than they reveal. Nevertheless, if there is a grand design – and a wonderful purpose beyond all the limitations and confusion and travail we all encounter here – then once we see it, how can we forget?

So we can take down the decorations, but how do we get Christmas out of our minds and hearts – *Immanuel* – God with us? Christmas is always coming, and once we awaken to it, it is never going away – not ever again. Even though life moves on, seasons come and go, and shortly we will not sing the carols again for a while, still the true reality of God with us – God in our lives and Jesus as our leader and redeemer – where would it go? Once we know, will it ever stop lighting our lives?

What *really* happens each year is that we get confronted with carrying Christmas Truth into the realities of normal life, and into a mundane world where a great many people have never truly known Christmas. Once the presents are all opened and the lights come down, they think it's over because they have never awakened on the inside to what the celebrating is about. That makes us feel a little weird, at times – a little out of step with the world going on all around us. How can we carry Christmas Truth for the rest of our lives – trying to live by it and to live it out every day of our lives – when most of the world around us thinks it is just a holiday – a few weeks of glitter – then going, going, gone?

The answer is simple and obvious: We either get sucked back in to the world and abandon our Lord, or we abandon the world as we have known it and go with our Lord. Only, however much grace and forgiveness and love we claim and rejoice in, some choices are ours. We do not walk the Christian Path by accident. We do not live lives of prayerful obedience by happenstance or by doing what comes naturally. Christmas changes us or we do not yet claim it. Christmas – the coming of the Christ – is way beyond us, and there is no way we can manufacture it, pretend it, or control it. But even as it carries us, we also respond. It never carries us against our will. If we do not turn away, abandon it, reject it, or deny it, then it changes us. It is utterly impossible to hang on to Christmas and not be changed. It is impossible to let the relationship with Jesus and His Holy Spirit go on growing in your life and not be changed. Only, the change is a changing that *never stops* – a growing that does not end. We are too far from the Kingdom to make one little adjustment and be done with it.

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It's starting to sound okay so far, don't you think? There are bad guys and good guys and we are the good guys. We are the ones who are awake to God and we love Jesus, and most of the world is unaware – still lost in darkness. Is there no way to honor Jesus without seeming to dishonor everything else? And what do we really think about our own performance, our own witness, our own community of love and light and faith?

Why do we put up with it? Why do we put up with all the people who fail to keep the priorities and principles that would make this a stronger, better, more effective church: a true witness to our Lord – a better community of joy and light for all of us?

It is the ancient problem. We put up with it because we don't know where to go to find perfect people to join and run our church. We put up with it because none of us – *none of us* – live the Life the way we know we should, the way we want to, the way we hope one day to be able to. And mostly we put up with it because that is the core Message and Command from Jesus our Lord. He came for sinners. He wants nothing to do with the righteous. This He insists on over and over again. (Luke 5:31)

You are loved *anyway!* Do we all have that really straight? Do you know it? Remember it? Remind others of it? You are entering another New Year, and to review your personal history is a good thing, especially in prayer – in the presence of the Lord of compassion and true perspective. But be careful about resolutions and all foolish promises to suddenly get perfect. We grow toward what our souls know and love. There are few shortcuts, and twisting screws from the outside only causes frustration and delays authentic growth.

What is really helpful as we enter the New Year? To remember that you have a Lord who loves you! The great surprise, when we die, will be the lack of anger and judgment and scorn toward us. The great surprise will be how much Jesus weeps for our trials and failures and pain and remorse. The great surprise will be how much He understands our heart's intentions – that He understands how hard we tried; what we endured; how much we attempted to help, to achieve, to bring good instead of evil. Oh yes, we live in a broken world and our alienation is real. But the mark and stamp of the One who made us is also here.

I suspect that everyone here has heard of “The Day of Judgment.” Many of you dislike the connotations, so you put it out of your minds

or try to disregard it. Few people in our time still remember the full definitions of the ancient concepts. In the hands of those who find fear a useful tool for their ends, judgment has come to mean condemnation. But God's judgment is not condemnation; that is a human invention. God does not write us off! Why do you think Jesus came?! Remember Romans: "*Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?*" (8:33) Does it read, "It is God who condemns; who is to justify?" That is what many, many people go away hearing.

God's judgment is evaluation, not condemnation. Furthermore, the theme and celebration of The Day of Judgment will be *vindication!* Not that we will have no further changes to make or no further growth. But true growth comes from love and gratitude, not from condemnation. It is one of the greatest differences between the WAY of Jesus and the way of our world.

Have you ever longed for vindication? For true understanding? For someone, somewhere to truly know your deepest motives, the intentions of your heart, what you really meant, what you were really trying to do? I suspect so. And I also know you have never found true vindication in this realm.

Perhaps you don't follow this; the world has a difficult time trying to comprehend the Gospel. In any case, forget the resolutions. (Took me a long time to get that worded right.) Forget the resolutions. Let the gratitude and love and awareness grow ... until you truly want to serve Him more and more.

You know, some people talk as if following Jesus were a simple, one-phase conversion step. You "believe on" the Lord Jesus (how nice for Him) and then you are saved. By the way, there are folk who use these phrases who also know that they are deep and lead to endless dimensions. If you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, that does set up a lifelong adventure of following: of obedience and discovery and life together. But far too often the phrases are used and abused as formulas of in-group acceptance that have little to do with the depth and dynamism of the Incarnation, or of New Life in Christ Jesus.

We do sometimes get amazing moments that change our lives and our perspectives forever. I have had quite a few. So have you. And it doesn't take very long, sometimes, to go through a doorway into a very different place. Yet the doorway, however necessary and beautiful, is not

the place itself. I hope everyone here has a deep and abiding faith in the love of Jesus Christ. I hope you all know with confidence and joy that Jesus will save you: that you will not be rejected or abandoned – not here, and not through all eternity. But the doorway of awareness is not the same as the salvation itself.

Jesus is our Savior, and Jesus will save us. To doubt that is to doubt His power and His love. And to trust that is enormous release from fear and anxiety and worthlessness and depression. However, it is going to be a major project, this business of saving us. It is not going to be easy for Him, or for us. This is no magic-wand kind of operation. Every change must become authentic. Every new step must actually be taken. Every principle of the Kingdom must grow within us until it is our true reality. *“We even fight to capture every thought, until it acknowledges the authority of Christ.”* That is a quote from the Apostle Paul, for those of you who don’t yet study some portion of the Scriptures each day. (II Corinthians 10:5)

In any case, if we trust God in Christ Jesus to save us, do we imagine that it will be simple, instant, or easy? And even more to the point, do we want to cooperate with Him, or will we go on making it just as hard for Him as we possibly can? Some of you still love to play “hard to get.” Lying, cheating, murder, and adultery are not the only things that make it hard for Him. Not that we should get careless about them, but most of us struggle with more familiar sins: being inattentive; getting distracted; moments when we get thoughtless, or careless; moods when for a while we just don’t care anymore. At such times we neglect spiritual growth and disciplines, going back to familiar attitudes and approaches, and getting focused on our own needs and desires instead of on His will. That also works against the salvation He is bringing. And yes, He will forgive us when we repent – and yes, He will go on finding ways to reach us. And yet, excuses change nothing. In this case, getting excused from the Kingdom is the last thing we want. The work must still be done before we are fit for the Kingdom. There is no skipping steps. Death changes the realm, but it is no substitute for what we must become or what we must grow into. What we hate or love or honor or value here, we will hate or love or honor or value *there* – until or unless we truly change ... until we grow. Life is not a charade; it is not a magic show. Nothing is automatic. There is no way to cheat. (Why is cheating a sin? Because it misleads us. Pretense is never our friend.) Skipping steps does not mean we are precocious. It means we are kidding ourselves.

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We do not have to be frightened or to fear rejection or abandonment. But that is no excuse for going back to false idols, or for spending our time and life on things that will not last and do not truly matter.

Christmas is real. That is, the coming of the Savior is real. But to make it real for ourselves, we must claim it. Otherwise IT is real but WE are not. Then we still live in the half light and the shadow world. One of the fastest ways to see how much we have claimed Christmas – how real it has become for us – is to see how it has changed our priorities.

His coming changes us – from within, on the inside. We are loved, valued, wanted, invited – beyond anything we have ever imagined before. And by the Creator – by the numinous, omniscient God – now revealed in the Life and Message and Resurrection of Jesus. That changes our identity and destiny! And so it changes our priorities.

But it's tough – even with all that He did and showed us – to get the outside to match the inside. At least it is for me.

What changes do we make to honor His coming – to accept His invitation? If He invites us, do we not also invite Him? If He is now with us, do not all our priorities change?

To make Christmas real in our own lives, the priorities must change. They must shift to the new values and purposes of His Kingdom. Unless the priorities change, new behavior – if it comes at all – will not last. It will be as impotent and futile as a New Year's resolution.

It is a terribly disorienting moment for Peter. Having just made the strongest claim possible for recognizing Jesus' true identity – having just claimed Jesus as the Christ of God – without even time to catch his breath, Peter makes his greatest blunder. This one is even worse than the rooster's cry. Peter decides that he is wise enough and caring enough to get in Jesus' way, to take Him off course – to interfere with His purpose and destiny. And Jesus responds with the harshest condemnation we ever hear Him make toward a friend: "*Get behind me Satan!*" When the true Messiah and Son of God calls you Satan, that is not a joke!

We suspect that even in this moment, Jesus realizes that Peter is oblivious to his own evil. It is Peter's concern for Jesus, whom he loves, that motivates this response – this objection to Jesus' statement that He must suffer and die. Without even time to think, Peter steps in as if his own authority and comprehension are greater than Jesus'. How many

humans ever realize that caring and love not yet surrendered to God ... can be satanic? But Jesus cannot let it stand. Certainly not from His top disciples. So Peter gets hit right between the eyes. Then Jesus calms down enough to give Peter a hint of what is truly wrong with his well-meaning but satanic response. It is a hint we all need, from time to time. *“You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”* (Mark 8:33)

How many times I ponder this scene into the night. Dear God, how can you expect us to be this aware, this trusting, this obedient, this faithful? To live for you on such levels would take a nearly total commitment – a total surrender to constant prayer and obedience. You really expect the whole world to come around to such a Life – such a WAY? “No, not the whole world. Just you. And some of your friends. And by the way, a lot more have come around to this Life and to this WAY than you can possibly imagine.”

More and more we come to realize that Jesus sounds most harsh when He is being most loving. Why the rigors of denying self, taking up our cross, and turning away from every relationship or goal that tries to come between us and Jesus? We cannot have New Life and true love if we stay with old fears and old priorities – if we hang on to former securities and to idols that are false. We cannot turn toward love if we will not give up hatred. We cannot be generous if we are terrified of want. We cannot follow the Holy Spirit if we think fame or approval in this world is the way to succeed. Fear is not our friend, however many reasons we may have for it. Jesus cannot take us into New Life if He cannot pry us loose from the old one. So His sayings and teachings seem stark indeed: Do not compromise my WAY or you will miss the salvation I bring. You will be tempted to keep one foot on earth and one foot in Heaven. You will want to hedge the bets, keep it safe. You will say inside yourself, “Love God and his Kingdom but don’t get carried away.”

So I say to myself and I say to you, my friends: If we do not get carried away, where do we expect to find ourselves when the dust clears and this brief life is over?

The priorities must change. WE must change! What we live for and work for and die for must change. Or we do not yet know Christmas. *“For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”*