

Clarence B. Carson



Beyond the Christmas Story

CHRISTMAS is many things. It is the time of the celebration of the birth of the Christ child. It is a season when many preparations are being made. Gifts must be bought, cards sent, decorations put up, food assembled, trips made, and much work done. It is a vacation time, a time of feasting, a time of the gathering of family and friends, a time of giving and receiving. As the long awaited day approaches, small children can hardly contain their eagerness, and older people feel, if they cannot entirely share, their excitement. And, if Christmas is not a time of unalloyed joy, much effort is given to making it have that appearance.

For adults, Christmas is apt to be

entangled in a bundle of childhood memories. It is a memory of crisp wintry mornings, with a sprinkling of frost or snow glistening on roof tops. It is a memory of an all-too-brief vacation in the midst of the school year, of special programs at school and church, of Christmas trees, and, for those who grew up in the country, going into the woods to find and cut a cedar, fir, or pine to bring home and decorate. Above all, it is the memory of a time in our lives when the sense of mystery, awe, and wonder was still alive to numerous possibilities, and the poetic had lost little ground to the prosaic.

For children especially, Christmas is a season of special sights, sounds, and aromas. Much of the appeal of Christmas is to the eye. There is the Christmas tree with its glittering balls, tinsel, strands of colored lights, topped, perchance, with

Dr. Carson has written and taught extensively, specializing in American intellectual history. He is the author of several books and is working at present on *A Basic History of the United States* to be published by Western Goals, Inc.

an angel or a star, and surrounded by brightly wrapped packages. There are often wreaths on the doors of houses, candles in the windows, colored lights strung around them, and even nativity scenes on lawns or a Santa on the roof in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. Churches, too, often feature nativity scenes, and business districts have their decorations in cities. Wreaths, bells, and colored lights are prominently displayed. Stores often have Christmas trees, frosted windows, wreaths and tinsel hung in conspicuous places.

But the sounds of Christmas are as impressive as the sights, and often more moving. The bell is almost as much a symbol of Christmas as the candle, for the ringing of bells signals the glad tidings that a child is born. Church chimes render carols, Salvation Army stations have bells that are rung, and, in some climes, when snow has fallen, sleigh bells can be heard in the distance. The most joyous sounds of Christmas, though, are the music. There is Handel's incomparable *Messiah* and its thrilling "Hallelujah Chorus." There are the great Christmas hymns: "Joy to the World," "O Holy Night," "Hark! The Herald Angels," and "Silent Night," among many others. There are secular favorites, such as "Winter Wonderland," "Nutcracker Suite," and "White Christmas," as well as those in between, such as "God Rest Ye Merry

Gentlemen" and "The Little Drummer Boy." There are sounds, too, which have the flavor of Christmas: the ringing of the doorbell announcing the arrival of guests, the clinking of glasses, the joyous cries of children as they open presents, and the murmurs that are only partly intended as words as relatives and friends renew contact with one another.

Then, there are the smells of Christmas: of wood burning in the fireplace, of the tallow melting on the candles, of cedar or fir as the Christmas tree is warmed, and of leather, paint, perfume, lotions, new fabrics, and the like, from newly opened gifts. There is the aroma of special foods being prepared: of the turkey baking, of all the ingredients that go into the stuffing, and the table laden with puddings, pies, sauces, and other delectable dishes. There are Christmas tastes, too, but with these we go beyond anticipation, which is the essence of Christmas, toward fulfillment.

A Feeling of Sadness

And yet. And yet. As we grow up and grow older there is a sadness associated with Christmas, a sadness that makes us reluctant to think about the one that is coming, a sadness that can overwhelm and become depression, a malaise of the spirit which, when it is upon us, makes it difficult, if not impossible,

to recapture the sense of joy we think we should feel. However deeply people may feel this malaise, they usually touch it lightly, if at all. They tend to disparage their own emotions with such statements as "I just don't have the Christmas spirit" or "It doesn't feel like Christmas to me yet." Or, a husband or a wife may say one to the other: "I wish we could go on a trip somewhere and let Christmas come and go without us."

The poet Frances Ridley Havergal touched this feeling in her poignant poem, "Bells Across the Snow." The opening verse reads:

O Christmas, merry Christmas!
Is it really come again,
With its memories and greetings,
With its joy and with its pain?
There's a minor in the carol,
And a shadow in the light,
And a spray of cypress twining
With the holly wreath to-night.
And the hush is never broken
By laughter light and low,
As we listen in the starlight
To the "bells across the snow."

She goes on, too, to suggest some of the sources of the pain. There are people missing from the circle, she says, which bring a tinge of sorrow to the occasion. The weight of age, too, is upon us, and so far as the merry Christmas of childhood memory goes:

This never more can be;
We cannot bring again the days
Of our unshadowed glee.

Toward New Hope and Joy

But it is not my purpose here either to dwell upon the sadness or to attempt to make any extended explanation of it. Rather, I wish to point the way beyond the sorrow to new hope and joy. For that, we may begin with but we must go beyond the Christmas story. Children have been taught, perhaps inadvertently, to view Christmas as an end in itself, as a fruition, a fulfillment, a completion. They have anticipated the day for days, weeks, and sometimes months, and our customs supply them a culmination. It is the opening of the presents. It is not uncommon, however, for an older child to open his presents, look them over, and turn to the givers to ask, "Is this all?" The seeds of the sadness which many feel about Christmas lie in that question.

But Christmas is not an end itself, nor a fruition or fulfillment. It is the celebration of a beginning. The birth of every child is a beginning. It is often a joyous occasion, as friends and relatives gather to marvel at the wonder that is a newborn baby and congratulate the parents. Even so, it is the beginning of something, not the end. Nor would any adult think of looking at the tiny infant and asking, "Is that all?" We know it is not; it is only the beginning. Just so, the story of the child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas did not end with that event. It was a beginning,

an auspicious one, a beginning with a star bright promise, if you will, but a beginning nonetheless.

Ahead lay the fulfillment of a mission for Jesus. It was to teach the ways of God to man. These He taught by example and in words. Before He could do that, He had first to grow up, to learn by experience, to make it a part of second nature, so to speak, how people think and talk and act. Above all, He depended for the success of His undertaking upon its meaning being grasped and acted upon by flawed men.

Jesus provided an answer to the child who asks of his gifts on Christmas day if that is all, though a child who would ask it may not yet be ready for the answers. No, that is not all, He would surely reply; it is hardly even a beginning. Those poor gifts are but an uncertain key to a paradox, indeed, to a whole bundle of paradoxes. Here are some of them. It is better to give than to receive. It is better to serve than to be served. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. He who would gain his life must lose it. If you are struck on one cheek, He said, turn the other to the assailant. Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for a friend.

The Ways of Peace

Jesus came not to impose a peace treaty but to teach men the ways of peace. He came not to take up the

sword but to sacrifice His life for others. He came not to govern but to make men governable. He taught that it is better to serve than be served by becoming a servant Himself. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, enabled the lame to walk, and did good deeds wherever He went. He taught that it is better to give than to receive by giving of Himself without stint. No one was too lowly to get a full measure of His attention. Even small children He welcomed, for of such, He said, is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus taught many things, far too many even to allude to in a summary. There was much that He did not teach, however. He did not teach statecraft, the arts of warfare, economics, sociology, biology, physics, medicine, or even religion, as we understand such things. Instead, He taught those things that apply to all people, whatever their station in life, occupation, or calling. He taught love, compassion, concern, helpfulness, generosity, sacrifice, humility, faith, hope, and charity. Above all, He taught about life and a way of life. He came, it is written, that men might have life, and have it more abundantly. This life, He taught, is lived in voluntary giving and exchange.

It is necessary to go beyond the Christmas story to learn His teachings. It is necessary to go beyond the

Christmas story, too, to encounter the full measure of hope He brought to the world. These promises ring with hope for those who might otherwise be hopeless. "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." Gifts under Christmas trees are but baubles beside such goodly rewards.

It is appropriate, even so, that there should be a sadness as we look beyond Christmas, and the thought may be comforting to those who may be guilty about their own feelings. It is written that Jesus was a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief. In varying degrees, this is so for every man born of woman. Every child is brought forth in pain, and it is not a matter for surprise if much heartache, tribulation, struggles, and failures lie ahead. Undoubtedly, it is an occasion for rejoicing when a healthy child is born, but if the trials that lay ahead for many a baby could be foreseen, as happily they cannot, we might well be overcome with grief. For none other was this so true as for the Christ child.

The angelic chorus of "Peace on Earth" had hardly been completed

before the troubles began. The second chapter of Matthew's Gospel relates that when rumors of the birth of the child reached King Herod he began plotting against the baby. He sent Wise Men to search for the baby, but when they had seen the Christ they returned to their own country without making a report to Herod. The child was taken secretly to Egypt. Not knowing this, Herod proclaimed that all the male children in Bethlehem who were under two years of age should be slain. The child Jesus was kept in Egypt until Herod died.

Despised and Rejected

The trials of Jesus as He was growing up and of His young manhood, such as they may have been, are not a part of the record. We do know, however, that during the brief period of His ministry He was continually being tested, having traps set for Him, and kept on the move to evade His enemies. Even at the height of His popularity, when multitudes gathered to hear Him speak, when crowds followed in His wake, when, as one writer says, His fame spread throughout all of Syria, there were murmurings and charges made about Him. When He returned to His home community to speak after triumphant journeys through other lands, people asked how one of His origins had the temerity to speak with such authority. Jesus lamented

that a man is not without honor except in his own country.

But the worst, incomparably much the worst, came at the end. He died in disgrace. It is of this time that it is said He was despised and rejected of men. He was betrayed by one of His beloved disciples, arrested by Roman soldiers, and tried before the representative of the might of Rome, Pontius Pilate. Though Pilate found Him guilty of nothing, he yielded to the pressures of the mob and condemned Jesus to an ignominious death by crucifixion. Few, if any, could be found to defend Him now. Even that disciple who had seen so deeply earlier, turned his back upon Him, cursed at his questioner, and denied that he had known the man. The depth of Jesus's disgrace is described this way in the 27th chapter of Matthew:

And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down

now from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

Of His suffering and agony, none who understand may write or speak except in deepest grief. But the shame was not His; the shame was the shame of the world. He came to His own, and His own did not recognize Him. He was innocent of wrongdoing; He taught and did only good.

But beyond these events lies not sadness but gladness and joy. Jesus bore our sorrow as He bore our guilt. As the Apostle Paul said, "Death is swallowed up in victory." He meant that Jesus rose again from the dead, that He was seen by many after the resurrection, and that His resurrection was surety for the life after death of all believers. Therefore, Paul continued with the Good News (15th chapter of I Corinthians): "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

The Good News

For some, of course, the anticipation does end with Christmas. It was that way in ancient times, and it still is. Those who anticipated that Jesus would come as an earthly king and would rule with righteousness bringing peace to all the earth were doomed to disappointment. Those

who think in terms of the transformation of nations by the use of force are still fated to have their hopes dashed and to be disappointed.

But for those who accept and believe the Good News, the anticipation does not end with Christmas; it has a new beginning in an incomparably greater anticipation. For those who do not believe that peace can be brought by the sword, that nations are not transformed except to the extent they may be one by one in the hearts of individuals, that desirable changes come, as it says in Zechariah, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts," every day can be an adventure. It is an adventure in discovering how things can be accomplished in peaceful ways. It is an adventure in discovering new evidence that force fails in economic production. It is an adventure in learning of individual growth and transformation.

There is the broader picture, too. That the Christmas story was only a beginning is evidenced in the annals of history. The Good News has indeed now been carried to all the world. From those beginnings nearly two thousand years ago in a remote town where people gathered to pay taxes, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, and millions upon mil-

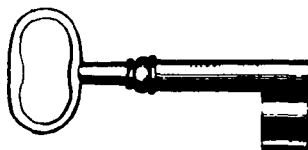
lions have professed their belief in the teachings and life of Jesus Christ. Of the impact of this, we know so little, but the fact itself is a cause for wonder and hope.

Of Things to Come

But there is an anticipation beyond all these anticipations. It is the anticipation of things to come after this life. There is the promise that however hard the road in this life, however much of trial and tribulation, however great our disappointments, however numerous our failures, however much there is of sorrow and sadness, there will come a time for the faithful when, as it says in the 21st chapter of Revelations, "God himself will be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

That is the fruition of Christmas. That is the fulfillment. That is the end that is the last beginning. The Christmas that small children anticipate so hopefully is only a foretaste. Looked at in that way, when we examine the story beyond Christmas, we learn of the possibility for people of all ages to have a Merry Christmas. ☸

THE KEY TO SUCCESS: Do Unto Others



SET ASIDE YOUR ENVY. Set aside your prejudices. Today, in terms so simple, with logic so irrefutable, you'll discover the key to financial success, understand the two moral imperatives to its attainment, and learn who best serves his fellow men. And, you'll see how you *can* be successful and why you *should* be.

If someone satisfies *your* wants or needs, you're willing to pay him. The more and the better products he provides you, the *more* you're willing to pay him. That obvious truth also works in reverse.

Our economy is so intricate and so complex that most people, through envy and prejudice, have lost sight of this simple truth: We are *all* paid

in *exact* proportion to the service we render others. The more anyone wants your products, the more he will pay you. And, the more people who want what you have to offer, the more they will pay you. So, to achieve financial success, simply offer more and better products to more people. Remember, and this is important, you must offer what others *do* want—not what you *think* they should want.

If you want something you have exactly *four* choices:

- 1) produce what others want and trade with those who produce what you want,
- 2) make it for yourself,
- 3) do without, or
- 4) steal it—either directly and illegally, or indirectly and legally by having the government take it for you through taxation or regulation.

Mr. Burnham is an insurance adviser and author (CPCU and CLU) in Southbridge, Massachusetts.