



*Singing towards
Bethlehem*

DONALD O. SOPER

'In one sense,' says the writer, 'we've got everything ready for the Kingdom of God except ourselves!' This book contains talks on the important subject of self-preparation for the Festival of Christmas, by means of some lively comments upon the famous hymns of the Church—the Magnificat, the Benedictus, Nunc Dimittis and the like. Yet the good news of Christmas is not confined to the month of December, and Dr. Soper's shrewd words reinforce the validity of Christian ethics for every day.

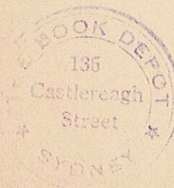
SINGING TOWARDS BETHLEHEM

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By
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THE EPWORTH PRESS

THE EPWORTH PRESS
(FRANK H. CUMBERS)
25-35 City Road, London, E.C.1

NEW YORK TORONTO
MELBOURNE CAPE TOWN

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Made in Great Britain
Published in 1954*

RUSH & WARWICK (BEDFORD) LTD., HARPUR PRINTING WORKS, BEDFORD,

ONE

I WANT to speak to you about getting ready for Christmas—because I believe it has been catching us unawares and taking us by surprise year after year. That's why, instead of becoming our standard of action and setting the tone for our everyday life, it's just a delightful brief interlude in which we take time off, so to speak, from the grim facts and bad habits all around us.

(That's the tragic side of the jingle you'll soon be hearing on your doorstep—'Christmas comes but once a year'—it does, more's the pity—it ought to come to stay.) And, of course, we all know, deep down, that things would be utterly different and infinitely better for everybody if the spirit of Christmas really did last for the three hundred and sixty-five days of every year—but how long *does* it last? It begins to get under way sometime on Christmas Eve; it's still going well on Boxing Day for most people, but it's gone long before we take the paper chains down—four days at most out of the three hundred and sixty-five; and what we do in those four days makes so little difference to what we do for the rest of the time!

Why doesn't it? The reason isn't difficult to find. We have turned Christmas into a holiday and forgotten that it's a birthday. You can't keep a birthday properly unless you prepare for it. You can't keep the birthday of Jesus properly unless you prepare to greet Him as the principal guest at His Party. Of course, in some respects we take very great care to get ready for Christmas. Weeks ago Christmas trees began to spring up in Oxford Street, and shops were already full of tinsel and imitation holly and coloured paper. In the business world 'shop early' is just another way of saying 'Be Prepared'—and at home, if our home is anything to go by,

preparations for Christmas are well under way—the lists of those entitled to receive presents are being made, plans for the pudding are being laid, and a conference has already met to decide who shall be invited to share the eating of it. Now all this is right enough, but if it stops there we're like the man in the parable who hadn't taken the trouble to put his best clothes on for the feast to which he had been invited as a guest, and so because he hadn't *prepared himself* all the other preparations did him not the slightest good, for the master of the feast kicked him out. You may think it a bit hard on him, but that's not the point. The point is—it's true to life isn't it?—it's true of the world today?—in one sense we've got everything ready for the Kingdom of God except ourselves, and because we're not ready all the other preparations are wasted—in fact they become a menace rather than a blessing. You and I have got to give our minds and lives as a present to Jesus Christ just as we give our presents to one another, or it seems to me that sooner or later there won't be anybody left to give presents or to receive them; we've got to find the real answer to the question what makes a pudding into a Christmas pudding (besides the extra currants and peel that we have saved up to put in it) for that's the only way to make sure that everybody was intended to have them and nobody was meant to go hungry. So I invite you to spend time now in getting yourself ready. I know where to begin. Christmas is first of all something about God; it begins, like everything else that is real, with God and not with ourselves. Do you remember the song of the Heavenly Host? If we had composed it we should probably have begun to sing 'Peace on Earth, Goodwill among Men'. But those angels were a lot wiser. They began, 'Glory to God in the Highest,' and then, 'Peace on Earth, Goodwill among men.' In the words of the late Dr. Temple: 'The worst and most deadly sin—the original sin—is putting ourselves first, putting ourselves where only God has the right to be.' Starting with ourselves I wouldn't give much for the chances

of Peace on Earth, would you? From *our* standpoint the future seems likely to be much the same as the past. That's why there are so many cynics about. It's only from God's standpoint that things will be different, and *Christmas* starts with God's standpoint. Do you know the *Magnificat*? We'll sing it in a minute. It's one of the great Christmas songs, and it's all about God. It was the preparation of heart and mind and will that Mary, who was to be the Mother of Jesus, made for the very first Christmas Day, and Christians have been singing it ever since. Let us sing it now.

Magnificat

My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced
in God my Saviour.

For He hath regarded the lowliness of His hand-maiden:
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me
blessèd.

For He that is mighty hath magnified me; and holy is His
name.

And His mercy is on them that fear Him throughout all
generations.

He hath showed strength with His arm; He hath scattered the
proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted
the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he
hath sent empty away.

He remembering His mercy hath holpen His servant Israel.

As He promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed, for
ever.

It's a grand song, isn't it? I wish all those who think that Christianity is a mushy, vague, unintelligent superstition would read it and listen to it and let its message lay hold of them. Here are three facts among many others about God in the *Magnificat*. It starts with Mary's confidence that God is concerned with us and has dealings with us as individuals. He's not only the great architect of the universe—I never think that's much of a description of God, anyway, though it seems to be a very popular one—He is personally in contact

with each one of us as His children. That's what the theologians mean when they say that Christianity is 'through and through personal'. We can never think straight about religion unless we begin with a God who is in touch with us through His personality and ours, *rather* than beginning with the idea of 'laws which never can be broken'. God lives in His Family and not in some cosmic laboratory. God is interested in you and me and everybody else as individuals. As Mary sang, 'God has done great things for *me*.' Just as any little child always makes us think of homes and parents rather than of equations and formulas so the child of Bethlehem *makes* us think of God as the Heavenly Father who loves each one of us.

And it doesn't stop there. The second fact is that the same God who cares for us as individuals possesses the power to achieve those loving purposes which He has for His children. Mary sang, 'He hath shewed *strength* with His arm,' and then follow those terrific words which make all other revolutionary manifestos sound about as exciting and explosive as a recipe for batter-pudding. 'He hath put down the mighty from their seats and hath exalted the humble and meek—He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away.' Don't you feel like saying, 'That's the stuff to give them!'—well, be careful, for it's a dangerous emotion to entertain, but if you really see what it means then you can believe it with all your heart. Jesus, born in a cattle shed among poor peasant folk, is the hope of all the oppressed and downtrodden people in the wide world. His Father and ours cares for them, and His power is available for them. They will get justice. Tyrants will be overthrown. The rich will have a very salutary taste of what it feels like to go without. The meek will inherit the earth. The universe is on the side of righteousness and peace, for God is at work for us and with us. The Christmas message is the one authentic hope for the future.

One thing more. All this that we celebrate at Christmas

is no sudden fad and afterthought in the mind of God, for the birth of Jesus links yesterday, today and tomorrow together in the eternal plan of God. God is saying to us at Christmas time the same things 'as He spake to our forefathers Abraham and His seed for ever'. That's the great fact with which the Magnificat ends. Christmas doesn't contradict any other facts that honest men have discovered. It isn't a queer belief or occurrence unlike anything else that we know about. Its message is what God has always been saying to His children, but they couldn't fully understand it until at last it was made quite clear in Jesus. You'll find it all there in Jesus Christ, just as Mary saw it all as she thought of the baby who was going to be born to her—God who cares for each of us and deals with us in love; God who is the fountain of justice, and in whose power is the one hope of peace and goodwill on earth; God who is the same yesterday, today, and for ever, so that we can trust Him and depend upon Him at all times.

I suppose it's a fairly hard life for most people today. I'm sure it's a terrible life for some, but it's still God's world and God is at work especially through Jesus Christ. So something can be done about it all if we can find God and get in touch with Him. The best way I know of finding God is getting to know about Jesus, and Christmas is the great time to do it. It will lift your heart up, it will turn your eyes to the future with faith and hope, as it did for Julia Ward Howe when she wrote 'My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord'.

TWO

I HAVE been inviting you to get ready for Christmas by thinking of what Christmas has to say about God—for I'm sure that, although most people don't seem to think it matters very much, in reality by far the most important fact in the universe is that God *is at work*. It is *because* God is at work for justice and peace that it's worth our while hoping that they will be realized. But that doesn't mean that all we have to do is to sit back and leave God to it. The theology of Christians has always taken the wrong turning when it has concentrated on God's power alone. The result has been seen in all kinds of caricatures of the Christian's life. Haven't you come across the man who spends all his time with his hat and coat on, so to speak, waiting for the end of this wretched world in which there's nothing he can do to put things right, or the woolly-minded dreamers whose heads are always in the clouds and who never come down to earth, or the preachers who want us to believe that man is utterly depraved and helpless? They are all the victims of the fatal half-truth that we need God. Of course we do, yet it is not irreverent but absolutely accurate to say that God *also* needs us, and that's why those evangelical hymns about 'leaving it all to the Lord' are a hindrance rather than a help.

Christmas is *first* a great declaration about God, what He is like and what He is doing, but it is also just as great a declaration about man. The Incarnation which is the theological word describing what happened in Bethlehem is God's way of bringing these two great declarations together in Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and the Son of Man. So Christmas not only gives to God the first place, but gives to man his right place in God's world, and whoever you are you won't want to quarrel with the assertion that man in the modern world has *lost the place*. There's something fundamentally wrong when *man* becomes the pawn in the game

of power politics, or a commodity to be bought and sold, like coke, by big business, or a guinea pig in the scientist's laboratory, or cannon fodder in the war machine, or the servant of the nation state, or worst of all when he is 'man the unknown' in a world where he seems to know almost everything else. No wonder that Bill Jones opens his morning newspaper, reads the headlines and feels that there's a terrible lot going on but it can't really concern him. No wonder he feels that he is left out of account altogether and on the few occasions when he is invited to come into the picture it's the wrong picture. We are all in desperate need of a new doctrine of man—the ordinary 'common or garden' man—and we can't afford to wait much longer for it, for all our dangers are not only larger today but *quicker*. That's what the man meant who said pithily, 'Atomic power is here to stay.' The important question is *are we?* It's all very well to know what we were like thousands of years ago, it's all very well to be told what we shall be like in the glorious future—what we want to know is the truth about ourselves *now*. Are we all competent beings temporarily paralysed by lack of education; are we just another species like the ant destined to end up in a sort of totalitarian ant heap; are we totally depraved sinners dependent entirely upon the inscrutable mercy of God; are we on the way out of a universe which is cooling off or on the way in to an Earthly Paradise the secret of which is held by the economist? I've heard all these suggestions and many more made in Hyde Park sometimes by people who have thought about these things deeply, often by people whose attitude is that any answer is better than none. What do you think?

I'm quite certain that many of you find it all so complicated and bewildering that instead of finding an answer which gets you on to your feet, you've got the sort of headache which is tending to lay us all out, and keep us off work and off our food. Now I do fervently believe that the message of Christmas is not an aspirin for this headache—it's the cure

for it. The birth of Jesus is not a fairy story about imaginary people living in a world of fancy; it is a piece of hard fact, a piece of history, if you like, which gives us the key to the meaning of ourselves in God's world. It really does put us in our place, gives us our bearings and our marching orders.

There's a great Christmas song called the *Benedictus*. It is ascribed to Zacharias the father of John the Baptist—John the Baptist who was Jesus' cousin and had a most important part to play in preparing the way for Jesus. Zacharias had caught the vision of our human share in God's purposes, and the *Benedictus* brings men like David and Abraham—the fathers and the prophets of Israel—and especially John himself, into the Christmas picture. I believe if you listen with imagination you will hear not only God's name but yours in the *Benedictus*.

Benedictus

Blessèd be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people;
And hath raised up a mighty salvation for us in the house of His servant David;
As He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the world began:
That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hands of all that hate us;
To perform the mercy promised to our forefathers, and to remember His holy Covenant;
To perform the oath which He sware to our forefather Abraham that He would give us;
That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life.
And thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto His people for the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us,
To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

If the *Magnificat* is the Manifesto of the Kingdom of God—then don't you agree that this *Benedictus* is like the programme of the Kingdom? I'll suggest to you three things it says about us in that programme. First it says that man is the servant of God as David was, and his destiny on earth is 'to serve Him in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life'. If man is to be the master of his circumstances and the master of himself he can only do so by becoming the servant of God. We don't like the word servant, and it's not surprising, for the word has become degraded, but in our revolt against 'servitude' we tend to talk a great deal of nonsense about freedom. True freedom isn't taking orders from nobody but taking orders from the right person. James Ward said, 'the only freedom worth having is the freedom to do God's will,' for God's service is perfect freedom. The lack of this 'Divinely ordered restraint' lies behind so much of the moral anarchism, particularly among young people, today. Workshy, irresponsible, irreverent—of course they are—what else can you expect when they don't know what their lives are for? Some form of discipline and obedience to some kind of authority or person is absolutely indispensable, and if it is not given willingly to God that freedom will be imposed upon us by tyrants, or it will be corrupted by state or class or party. Obedience is the key to man's happiness and his freedom. That's why I ask you when you think about Christmas to look at Jesus, whose name is above every name because, in the words of St. Paul, 'He became obedient even unto death.' I know of nothing that can give such a sense of purpose and worthwhileness to ordinary people than to tell them that the job of living has been left on their hands, but that God who made them has laid out the work that they can do and ought to do, and if they will do their part obediently they can leave the rest in His hands.

Now a second fact about ourselves in the *Benedictus*. We are God's servants not His slaves. Our place in God's world is as obedient children who carry out our part with under-

standing and not just as 'moving instruments' (as Aristotle described slaves) whose obedience to God is mechanical and blind. Our job is, like that of John the Baptist, 'to go before the face of the Lord to prepare His Ways, to give knowledge of salvation unto His people'. Putting that into the jargon of the twentieth century—man has the job of putting God's plan across in terms of politics and citizenship today, so as to make it real and intelligible to others, for God has no voice with which to speak to the peoples of England and Russia and America and China and Germany and Japan, except our voice. We have to translate 'peace on earth, goodwill among men' into bread and butter, and jobs and security, and we can if we try. *We* have to interpret the love of God to the persecuted and the outcast, to the bitter and the hateful, and that's not the job for a few specialists, or bishops, or parsons, it's the business of us all. If everybody already inside the Church would consider himself or herself called to be a witness to what God's purposes are there would be a new wave of zeal and fervour in organized Christianity, and a new unity among Christians; but better even than that, poor despondent downtrodden men and women all over the world would be transformed by hearing the Good News of God's love and power in words they could understand, and in ways in which they could share.

And so to the last thing I have time to say. The *Benedictus* ends with the fact, above all other facts, that with the birth of Jesus Christ mankind finds its perfect expression. Here is man really taking his rightful place in the world. Here is man co-operating with God so that God's light shines for them in our darkness and in the shadow of death, and our feet are guided into the way of peace. Here is Jesus Christ 'the representative man'—the Son of Man as he called Himself—who says to us all, 'Follow Me'. That's not only a challenge, it's a promise, for it means that where He goes we can follow. A worm can't follow an eagle, but we ignorant, weak, unreliable men and women can follow Jesus

because though we behave like worms we were meant to 'mount up with wings as eagles'. That's our true nature. I think that most of us are secretly ashamed of ourselves in this twentieth century—we've blotted our copy book—because we've lost faith in ourselves. Jesus came to Bethlehem that we may get it back.

If you want to do your bit for world peace and world justice, then here is the truth about yourself whoever you are; you were meant to serve God; you were meant to be a partner with God; you were meant to be a friend and follower of Jesus Christ.

*Rise up, O men of God!
Have done with lesser things;
Give heart and soul and mind
and strength
To serve the King of kings.*

THREE

I WANT to wish you a Happy Christmas. If that wish comes true it will mean special and distinctive bits of happiness for each of you. A much hoped for present in your stocking, a family party that goes off without a hitch, a good long rest, the chance to see some football or a play, a few precious hours with loved ones who are usually far away from you. These are some of the differing ways in which each of us will find happiness. But wouldn't you agree that it will be a Happy Christmas for *everyone* if they can forget their worries for a day or so, and especially the biggest worry of all—what's going to happen to us and to our children in this atomic age—is it peace or is it war?—for there's little point in finding the answer to all our other anxieties if we can't find the answer to war. You see, this issue of peace or war is no longer only the most important problem for society. It's the only one. War now is 'total', and that's the devil of it! The thought of war simply haunts everybody who has got a mind to think with and somebody to love. So we are looking forward to Christmas to take our minds off these things for a bit, though we realize that it will only be for a bit, for we shall have to come back to them just as they were before. Well, I do sincerely wish you that holiday from care, but I wish you much more than that.

I want you to discover at Christmas time how to get rid of your haunting anxieties about the future, which is far better than time off from them. And you can. I know that is a terrific thing to say, especially today, and I only dare to say it because it is what God is saying in Jesus Christ. Christmas is the *promise* of peace on earth—the Good News that it's *coming*, not the pious hope that it ought to come. Does anybody else dare to promise Peace? Historians tell

us that, if the past is anything to go by, there's not much chance. Scientists hope so, but they are frightened to death by what they are doing. Politicians are almost unanimous that, though they want peace, the only sensible assumption is that we must be prepared for war. The best that even many religious leaders can say is almost the same—Hope for the Best and Prepare for the worst. And what does that universal figure, the man in the street, say about it? What a friendly bus conductor said to me the other day: 'Good luck to you, Reverend, but there always have been wars and there always will be.' Of course, there are thousands in every part of the world who see peace as a glorious ideal, who demand it in the name of common sense, and who strive for it in the name of humanity—and they are the salt of the earth—but if you said to them, 'Do you think Peace is a foregone conclusion because the universe is on the side of peace?' their honest answer would be: 'We don't know about that, but even if it's a forlorn hope we prefer to live and die in that hope rather than go on existing without it.'

Now amid all these doubts and fears and 'ifs and buts', I invite you to turn to Christianity and to hear the authentic ring of the Christmas Message. 'God Rest you Merry, Gentlemen; let nothing you dismay.' It's all right—Jesus Christ has come into the world to bring peace on earth among men of goodwill—He is bringing it as God's gift to His children. That doesn't mean that it will just happen like a conjuring trick. There will be no magical influence which will suddenly turn gunpowder into soapflakes. Atomic bombs won't disappear overnight. Warmongers and ruffians won't be transformed while they sleep. No, somebody, you and I, will have to turn the swords into ploughshares and the spears into pruning hooks. But the glorious truth is that this job of peacemaking is the one we were intended to do, that the world is the workshop already prepared for it, and that best of all God will see to it that if we do our part He will be our guarantee against failure. In other words Christmas

turns peacemaking into 'practical politics'—goodwill and realism become one and the same. That's exactly how the first Christians thought about it, for when Jesus was born men were looking just as anxiously into the future as we are. For the Hebrew people the terrors of war were never very far away. The Messiah who was to deliver them was to be the Prince of Peace, and so the *Benedictus* ends with the sublime confidence that Jesus will 'guide our feet into the way of Peace'. But perhaps the simplest and most beautiful of the expressions of confidence in the certainty of peace, now that Jesus has come, is to be found in the *Nunc Dimittis*. It is ascribed to an old and saintly man named Simeon who had been looking all his life for the dawning of a new and tranquil day of peace for humanity and at long last had found more than a hope—a certainty. And having found it, he doesn't argue that it's a reasonable idea, he announces it with all the assurance of his heart.

Nunc Dimittis

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word:

For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,

Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of Thy people Israel.

Now isn't it a relief to sing about the future like that? It's so much more satisfying than whistling about it to keep your spirits up, and it's not just being carried away on the wings of a vague promise that 'all will be well'. The 'Peace on Earth' that is God's Christmas gift to His world is a particular sort of peace; it has special characteristics. We can put it into words as well as keep it in our hearts. Let me put into words three things that Christianity says about Peace, so that you can make them your own and then pass them on to someone else. First, peace on earth comes through loyalty to a Person rather than adherence to a plan or acceptance

of an idea. Man is more than a political animal, and more than an *economic* one. He is a *person*, and if you want him to respond to plans or ideas, you must show him those plans or ideas in personal form and not merely on paper or in programmes. We know to our cost how a Hitler can move men to follow him to carry out evil plans, and to exploit false ideas, while the best plans and the finest ideas leave men cold and unresponsive when they are only to be found in pamphlets and class rooms. Ideas really haven't got legs at all until they get moving on your legs or on mine. Peace doesn't get moving until it comes alive in someone who explains it in himself and commends it by his life. That's what Simeon meant when he said: 'For mine eyes have seen Thy Salvation.' Jesus brings Peace to life so that you can *see* it in action. Those of you who feel frustrated because your neighbours won't listen to your arguments about the stupidity of war because everybody seems so helpless to stop the drift towards violence, although everybody knows that the results are deadly, stop *arguing* for a bit and start *introducing* instead—introducing your neighbours to Jesus Christ, not as a theological figure, not even as the Son of God, but as the Man who can make the idea of Peace intelligible and real. I'm sure that we could profitably stop telling the world what we think about Jesus and let Him tell the world through us what we are all waiting to hear; that man has it in Him to be at peace with His brother Man in the Kingdom of God.

Next, Peace for the Christian is a universal thing, or, in the popular phrase, Peace is Indivisible. Simeon's confidence was worldwide and therefore complete. The salvation that he sees is something prepared 'before the face of all peoples'. Civilization has been paying a bitter price for this truth. The world has shrunk to the size of a neighbourhood, though not to its quality. We are thrown together, whether we embrace each other or smother each other. It was a tremendous step forward for a Hebrew to realize that peace for his own people

could only come through a series of similar blessings for other people—that is the Christmas *step forward* for us all—there is no such thing as ‘one at a time please’ in the programme of peace. Peace is a priority for all people. We can have peace for all now, we can’t have peace for some now and for the rest later. That is God’s will and nothing else will work. That’s why I believe so much in the Christian Church, despite all that can be said against it, for it is the only worldwide community and therefore the one community through which worldwide peace can come. Let the Christian Church set its face absolutely against war and there will be no war. That’s the road to Christian unity and Peace on earth.

One more thing. Simeon in the *Nunc Dimittis* did not forget he was a Hebrew and a *patriot*, but he saw what the real meaning of patriotism was. The glory of the ‘people of Israel’ was not to be the glory of being a great power, of winning resounding victories on Rome, or of dominating other peoples. The glory of Israel was that Jesus was born of the lineage of David, that from Bethlehem was to come the Prince of Peace and the Saviour of the world. It is the problem of the Nation State with its prestige, its war capacity, its self-sufficiency, that we must solve, for it is the conflict between the nation state and the world’s need which is crippling peaceful planning everywhere now. Let me speak to myself as an Englishman. What is our true glory—a world empire, a great military prowess, a position of economic domination? No, our true glory has been in our poets like Shakespeare and our political institutions like the Mother of Parliaments. Our greatest glory could be as a Reconciler of the Nations, bridging the gaps between them by offering them the mediation that is free of selfish interests, and becoming world missionaries for the Kingdom of God. And all this can begin this Christmas.

FOUR

CHRISTMAS Day is the time for giving presents, and eating meals, and playing games—yes, and singing carols and praising God, but you probably think it’s no time for giving sermons. I think so too, but if a sermon can be described as the ‘communication of a faith and the exhortation to accept it’ then I suggest to you that there are very few, very few indeed, who won’t do a bit of preaching, and eloquent preaching at that, before today is over. It’s the job and the privilege of parsons like me to preach the Message of Christmas all the year round, but it’s you who take over the Christian pulpits and wear the dog collars once a year at Christmas time, and today in thousands of homes throughout the world most unparsonic-looking preachers have already given out their text of ‘Goodwill towards men’ and are expounding their theme, around the fire, in the kitchen, in hospital and prison, among the poor and the lonely. And what a hearing and a response they are getting. The world has suddenly become a different place. The greedy are giving presents, the workshy are hard at it, the cynics are bubbling over with enthusiasm, enemies are shaking hands, and coming to church this morning I nearly ran into a taxi and the driver smiled at me. It’s nothing short of a revolution overnight. Even the furniture seems different, and life itself is transformed. This yearly phenomenon really is a most extraordinary thing. I try to imagine what sort of report a delegation from Mars would take back with them after spending the month of December on this planet. I’m sure it wouldn’t be very complimentary, but among all the other queer and apparently meaningless things they found us up to I’m sure they would say that human things seem to live two quite different sorts of life;

one, a life of fear and violence and selfishness for most of the time, and then, once in a while, quite the opposite—a life of comradeship, co-operation and goodwill. And they would go on to say that when these human beings were asked which of the two was the *real* sort of life they said, 'Oh the second, of course!' and that was about the only thing upon which they all seemed to agree.

That's true isn't it? We find on Christmas Day the one thing we've all agreed about. *This* is the life, and our behaviour and attitude to one another bears our witness to this truth. The way we behave for three hundred and sixty-four days of the year is only real in the sense that it is actual. Greediness happens, wars take place, quarrels break out, but a Frenchman named Edmond About was very wise when he said: 'There are many truer things than those that have happened.' There's another kind of reality that isn't just history. Christmas is real in the sense that it's right. It satisfies something deep down in us. It strikes the right note, and that's the only note that will do. You know how it feels when the pianist at your party gets into trouble with *Good King Wenceslas*; you are prepared to put up with a permanent base note, but when he reaches the last note and can't find it, the wrong notes are real enough, but if at last after a process of elimination he gets the right note it's the most real sound in the world, isn't it? The tension is over and everything is all right again. The Reality of Christmas is like that. We've found the note that is in harmony. We may not be able to sing the tune right through, but we know it when we hear it, and we know when it's played out of tune. I believe God put that tune into your head, otherwise it seems to me utterly impossible to explain how it got there. God has put something of Himself into all of us, and that's the only conceivable reason why we dare to believe that Christmas Day is more real than any other day. It's no mysterious accident. We are made for God and restless until we find our rest in Him. The Christmas holiday is what it

is because it was just a Christian Holy day—it was what happened on the first Christmas morning that put these real thoughts into our minds, and these real feelings into our hearts, and if we want them to stay there for good we must link them up again more firmly than ever with what happened nearly two thousand years ago, what happened once in Royal David's City, for although we have forgotten it or ignored it we would never have known what we were meant to be like except for the baby who was born in a cattle shed and whose mother laid Him in a manger for His bed.

Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle-shed,
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for His bed.
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child.

He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable,
And His cradle was a stall.
With the poor, and mean, and lowly
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.

And through all His wondrous childhood
He would honour and obey,
Love, and watch the lowly maiden
In whose gentle arms He lay.
Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as He.

For He is our childhood's pattern:
Day by day like us He grew;
He was little, weak, and helpless;
Tears and smiles like us He knew;
And He feeleth for our sadness,
And He shareth in our gladness.

And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love;
For that child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above;
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone.

And now, a Happy Christmas to you! A Happy Christmas to all *family parties*, reunited today perhaps for the first time for many years. Family life is the real way to live. We can be sure of that now because we can go to Bethlehem and see God coming into His world through the Holy Family and so making every family a holy thing. The Kingdom of God will be built up from *families* not from classes or from nation states or from *herrenvolk*, for where two or three are gathered together by the ties of family there is God in the midst of them. Anything that helps to keep family life clean and wholesome is of God—purity, economic security, peace, simple pleasures, a house of your own—these are not just political or ethical objectives they are Christian necessities, while war and poverty and impurity, industrialism, overcrowding which tears the family apart and corrupts it are the great evils against which we have got to fight for our very lives. You've a grand chance on Christmas Day to recover something of the family spirit that we've all been losing of late years. Don't play the gramophone all the time, gather round the piano and sing *The First Nowell* all together. Play games that everybody can join in. Snap is much better than Bridge, and golf is thoroughly anti-social and ought to be prohibited on Christmas Day. Even if there are some gaps and vacant chairs around the fire, close your ranks and don't let anyone feel he's out in the cold, and I'm sure you'll know something of 'that peace which passes all understanding'.

A Happy Christmas to all children. This is children's day *par excellence*. They come into their own today. The child has his real and rightful place in the world because Jesus Christ our Lord was born as a little weak and helpless child on Christmas Day. I remember during the war that soldiers thousands of miles from home, soldiers who never came to church all the year round, would bring money and toys to us here at Christmas time so that we could 'give the kids a treat'. Christmas for them meant the laughter and happiness

of little children, and if they couldn't see happiness and laughter in the faces of their own, they wanted at least to make sure that some other children were happy. The hope of the future is to make the well-being and happiness of children the first charge on our statesmanship and the test of our civilization, so that children will have as good a time as we can possibly give them. When men asked Jesus about the Kingdom of God He set a little child in the midst and told them to look for that Kingdom through the eyes of a child. The real world for all of us is where the little children of every country will have enough to eat, time to say their prayers, and not much to be afraid of if they hear a bang in the night. If we make a world like that—fit for little children to live in—the rest of us won't have much to complain about. Let us make sure that every child finds God's place for him in the world this Christmas Day, and keeps it for His sake and for ours.

A Happy Christmas to everybody, not forgetting the dog! Yes, I mean that. Isn't this the one day when we believe that the world is one world and there's a place in it for all God's creatures? The spirit of friendliness to animals as well as the spirit of universal brotherhood is the Christmas spirit, and all because the cattle shed where Jesus was born is the one place in the whole world where not a single one of God's creatures is out of place. Look again at some of your Christmas cards—the real ones, I mean, not those counterfeit substitutes with pictures of battleships, or a Fox Hunt on them—or look through the eyes of the great masters, and see who have come to the stable to greet the baby Jesus. Wise men, shepherds, Dutchmen in the Dutch paintings, Frenchmen in the French, Germans in the German—children, oxen, donkeys, horses, dogs, cats, birds. Listen to the carols about the Manger Throne. You'll find bird, beast and fish all represented as coming together there. There's even a carol about a monkey who found his way to Bethlehem. The real world is not the divided world, man against man, man against beast,

or even creature against creature. The real world is the one in which Jesus is Lord of all living and in His love all creatures can dwell together in Peace.

And so 'A Happy Christmas' to *you*, because there's a place set for you, whoever you are, at the birthday party of Jesus Christ the Lord.

FIVE

TO those who think of Christmas as something more than a holiday, and the New Year as something more than a particular date on the calendar, there is nothing accidental in the fact that the 1st January so quickly follows the 25th December. A really New Year is the continuation of Christmas, and this will only be a New Year in the sense of its being really different in quality from the old one if we take the spirit of Christmas with us into it. Leave that spirit out of 1st January and you've nothing left but twenty-four hours exactly like the 31st December. That's the trouble with New Year Resolutions. They are made at the wrong time and in the wrong spirit, and that's why they've become almost a joke, and have an expectation of life of about a fortnight. Just before midnight on New Year's Eve, at parties which will be decent and jolly enough, but not conspicuously Christian, a great many people will be making last-minute resolutions to get up earlier, to cut out some fault, to do a bit more for others, to knock off smoking so much, (you can fill in the particular resolutions out of your own experiences) as if there is some magic in the air at that moment that will give immortality to such resolutions. But far from being immortal, those resolutions are mostly still-born because they come out of the old world of failure and selfishness, which is the same old world whether it happens to be New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. There's nothing to keep them alive. They need the environment and climate of a New World to give them strength and enable them to live. It's the New Year Resolutions that you make *today*, for instance, when the memories of Christmas are still strong and bright, and its influences are still pervading our homes and our affairs, that have a real chance of survival. They will be born under ideal con-

ditions. The climate is just right for them. Christmas is the very air of unselfishness that good resolutions need to breathe if they are to thrive. I believe that they are almost bound to die in any other atmosphere but that. There is genuine magic in the air that we breathe at Christmas. Let me quote you a typical example. I overheard this as two people were discussing what they'd been doing on Christmas Day. 'You ought to have seen Uncle George. He was twice the man he usually is. So good-tempered, so funny, such good fun—you'd hardly have known him.' That's true of a lot more people besides Uncle George. That's how goodness *grows* in the right atmosphere. Let me give you another example. How many are there who, if you said to them, in mid-July, will you sing a song at the children's concert, or will you take part in some amateur theatricals, would say: 'Oh dear, no, I couldn't possibly sing in public' or 'I can't act!'? But they are the selfsame people who have in fact been doing quite well with *Lily of Laguna* and giving quite good performances in the family charades at their Christmas parties—surprising themselves, and causing their friends to say: 'I didn't know he had it in him!' He hadn't it in him in July, it needed Christmas to give it birth. It needs the spirit of Christmas to give birth to a New Year. And, my word, how we need a New Year—to bring back hope to the millions who in Central Europe and elsewhere are on the verge of the nihilism, of empty despair! Their condition is almost too horrible to contemplate. Yesterday a nightmare, today a hell, and tomorrow a hopeless void. Yes, we need a New Year to take fear out of the lives of whole communities who live from hand to mouth in insecurity and poverty: to heal the quarrels between races and creeds and classes: to bring joy to our unhappy, disordered humanity. Do you care about these things? I believe you do. Do you care about them enough to determine that you will *do* something? Then, whoever you are, I will invite you to make some New Year Resolutions now. (Never mind the fact that

you made some last year and they didn't last. Never mind the sneers of those who will think you have 'gone religious', and never mind if you don't know just at this moment what in the world to resolve about. Don't *start* thinking about those resolutions from your end at all.) First of all turn your minds and hearts again to Bethlehem, because that's the place where we can find the wisdom to make the right resolutions and the power to carry them out.

See, amid the winter's snow,
Born for us on earth below,
See, the Lamb of God appears,
Promised from eternal years.

*Hail, thou ever blessed morn!
Hail, redemption's happy dawn!
Sing through all Jerusalem:
Christ is born in Bethlehem!*

Lo, within a manger lies
He who built the starry skies,
He who, throned in height sublime,
Sits amid the cherubim.

Say, ye holy shepherds, say,
What your joyful news to-day;
Wherefore have ye left your sheep
On the lonely mountain steep?

As we watched at dead of night,
Lo, we saw a wondrous light:
Angels, singing peace on earth,
Told us of the Saviour's birth.

Sacred Infant, all divine,
What a tender love was Thine,
Thus to come from highest bliss
Down to such a world as this!

Teach, O teach us, holy Child,
By Thy face so meek and mild,
Teach us to resemble Thee
In Thy sweet humility.

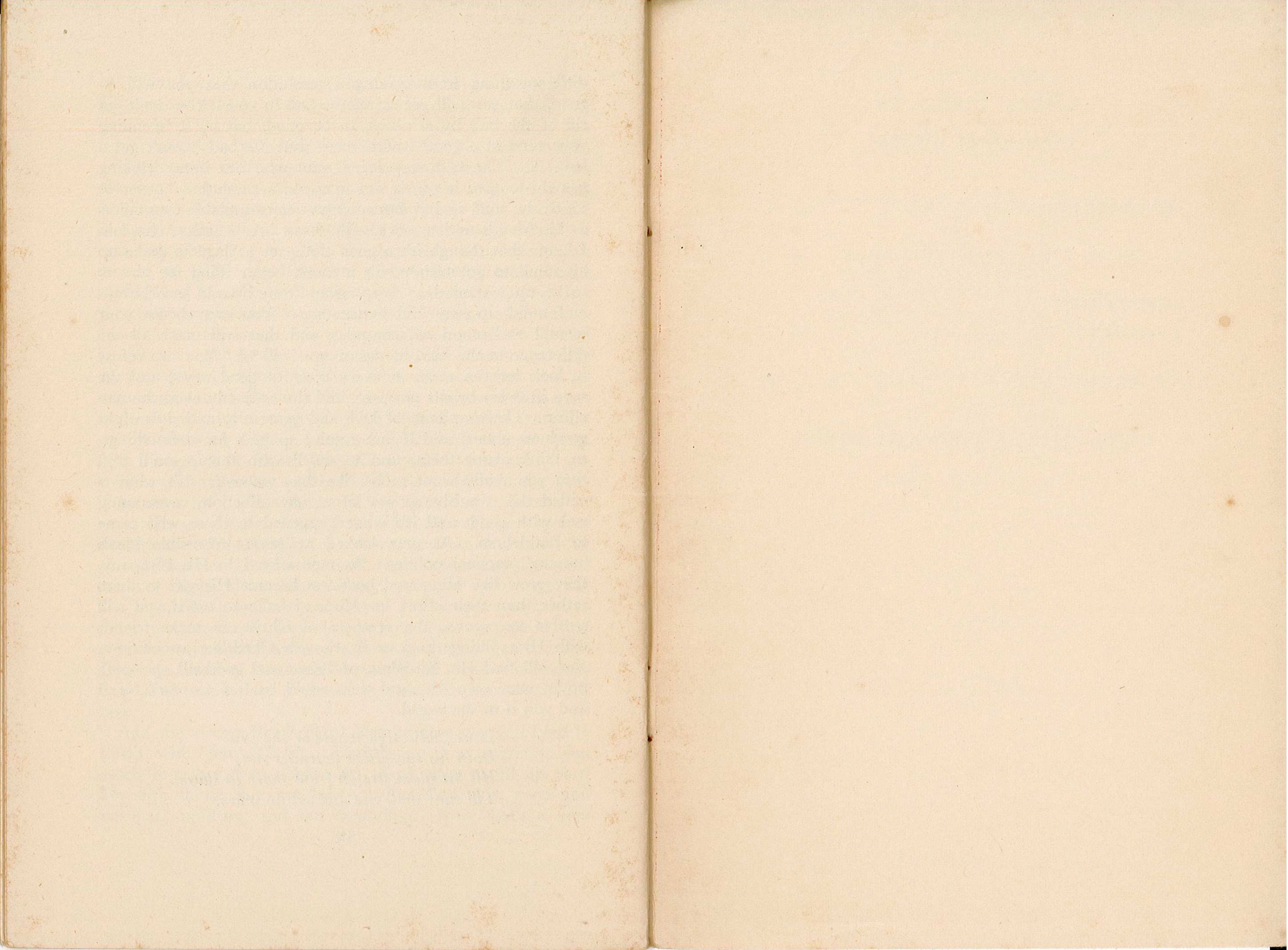
First, *Resolve* that you will get to know Jesus Christ. The key word of Christianity is '*come*' not '*believe*'. You can't make yourself believe in Jesus Christ, but you can resolve

to get to know what He said and what was the meaning of His various actions. I have no right at all to say to any of you who have honest doubts about Christianity, that you ought to make a resolution that you'll throw them on one side, and surrender your mind to the claims of Jesus. But I *can* ask you to do what the shepherds and the Wise Men did long ago. They had plenty of doubts, but they made the journey to Bethlehem and took their doubts with them. It was only when they saw Jesus for themselves that their doubts turned to faith. I know that Jesus tells the truth about myself and everybody else, but *that* assurance springs not first from a resolution to *believe* what He says, but to *understand* what He says. It's a lamentable fact that a lot of people are much better acquainted with the ideas and doings of pugilists and film stars than with the one Man who on any count has made more difference to the world than anybody else who has ever lived. That's not so much a comment on their lack of religion, but on their lack of common sense. You *can* come to know Jesus Christ—He is no misty, unsubstantial myth—for you can read about Him in the New Testament (in modern speech if the authorized version puts you off), you can come to know Him through the eyes of His friends who are called the saints, you can find out a lot about Him in the church, and there are many fine and exciting books about Him. And, remember you were not far from Him on Christmas Day! I'd be quite content to leave the verdict in your hands since I'm not afraid that men will reject the claims of a Jesus they really get to know. I'm only afraid of what will happen if He remains unknown. Let all of us who are prepared to make this resolution do it now.

And the *second* Resolution. Resolve that you will keep in touch with Jesus Christ. Christianity is contagious, you catch it rather than achieve it. Find time to fill up your life with things that are lovely rather than ugly, good and not bad, uplifting and not degrading. Now that's a very

different thing from making a resolution that you will *be* good, that *you* will get rid of the bad in you. You don't get rid of the bad by *resolving* to be good, but by so spending your time in a good environment that the bad doesn't get a look in. The best way for a man who has been drinking heavily to give it up, is not to make a resolution 'never to touch the stuff again', but to choose some amiable teetotallers as his friends and to stick with them. As a prison chaplain I know that though it's a good thing for a 'lag' to make up his mind to go straight, it's a much better thing for him to make up his mind to keep away from his old associations and build up new and better ones. You can choose your mental and emotional company and that will make all the difference to the kind of person you will be. You can refuse to look for the *catch* in every piece of good news, and the *snag* in every bright prospect, and the *racket* in every human affair. There's plenty of love and generosity and downright goodness about, and if you resolve to look for these things, to think about them, and to dwell with them, you'll find that you really want to be like that yourself. It's what is called the expulsive power of a new affection, overcoming evil with good, and it's what happened to those who came to Bethlehem. As men looked at Jesus, impossible ideals became practical politics. As men stayed in His company, they grew like Him, and goodness became His gift to them rather than their effort for Him. I believe that if you will resolve to practise the presence of Christ, to make friends with Him, filling up your heart with Christlike associations, you will find His Kingdom of Peace and goodwill *springing* up in your own life, and then you'll be free to work for it and win it in the world.

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till suns shall rise and set no more.*



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