3rd Wednesday in Advent
Rolling Meadows - 1966

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IN NOMINE JESU

Isaiah 7: 14 Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive a bear a son, and shall call His Name Immanuel.

Helmut Thielicke tells about attending a Christmas celebration in a priso Going from cell to cell and visiting personally with the inmates, he says that for the most part they received his ministry like hungry and thirsty men. ~~Later on~~, the convicts re-enacted the Christmas miracle. A large company of men in long white robes - most of them younger men - moved toward ~~an~~ altar with candles in their hands. At the altar there were four men - standing, kneeling, lying prostrate, ~~and~~ gazing in great terror at the approaching company. One of them held his hand before his eyes as if he were blinded - another appeared to be trying to hide - and a third was making a gesture of surrender. There was no mistaking what they were trying to portray: the white-clad figures were the heavenly choir of angels and the four men at the altar were the weather-beaten, terrified shepherds. Thielicke describes them as men who were not just playing at worship, but were really in it. One of the leading characters was a man who had killed his friend in a fight over a wrist watch. Kneeling before the manger, he prayed in the words of Paul Gerhardt's Christmas hymn:

> I lay in death, in darkest night;
> Thou wert the Sun that brought to me
> My life, my light, my soul's delight.

Says Thielicke: I tell you that when you hear these words out of that mouth, it goes right through you.

Why do I mention this? Simply because too often for us Christmas is associated with worship in a nice, warm church - fine suburban homes - bright lights and colorful decorations - feasting and the merry laughter of the children. Now I certainly do not wish to throw a wet blanket on all of this. I think our Lord would be the last One to suppress such demonstrations of joy and gladness at His coming - even though there are many who carry the festivities much too far and end up making a mockery out of Immanuel - God with us! I am simply suggesting tha our vision of the Christtide often tends to be much too narrow. And therefore, we often fail to grasp the full significance of what has happened for us at Bethlehem

or tears of all the centuries —

- the end of all the prayers and pleadings of the prophets and the people of God since the Fall into sin - the final fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, given to a broken & beaten people 700 years before it happened: The Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His Name Immanuel.

So it was that here, in prison, men were walking out of a dark and murky past to the manger, and the light of Christmas fell upon their bungled lives. And as it fell upon them, it transformed them and made them shine. The ChristChild - Immanuel - God was with them even here! - and while they lived their lives from day to day in locked cells, they were really free men - standing by virtue of this miracle beneath the heaven which is open and unbarred. Like the Prodigal Son, the turned about-face among the swine, and they learned to believe in this blessed Light, and they became new men. They were no longer just acting a play - they wer in dead earnest. Nor were they merely reciting some verses which had been drummed into them - they were confessing their faith! And when that convicted murderer spoke from the depths of his being: I lay in death, in darkest night; Thou wert the Sun that brought to me my life.... — this was the Christmas miracle!

Some of you may be thinking: He's carrying this a bit too far. Certainl convicts should have pastoral care and even their Christmas celebrations too. But to put us decent citizens on the same level with them - this is stretching our Christianity a bit too far. Just test yourself on this point for a moment! What was your immediate reaction - before you learned all of the facts - when you first learned that Dr. Samuel Shepherd was acquitted after all these years for the murder of his wife? I know what I thought: Boy-O-Boy - if you have enough money you can get out of anything. Or how did you feel when you first heard over the news that Jack Ruby was dying of cancer? I know what swept through my innermost soul: Good! Serves him right! He's getting just what he has coming! - Murderers Harvey Oswald

Now it would certainly be quite wrong and also completely out of accord with the Christian Gospel to wipe out all distinctions between honest people and criminals. The concern here is with something else altogether.

The point is this: God comes to us at Christmas down in the depths. I do not have to first whip up some kind of religious feelings in order to make myse

acceptable. Nor do I have to accomplish something inwardly or outwardly in order to have Him come to me. He comes to the stable, to the comfortless, the sick, and the despairing, to Publicans, pimps, & prostitutes - He walks with the fugitives and the outcast - and when my last hour comes and all else forsakes me, I shall still be able to say: When I depart, O Lord, depart Thou not from me. For He came down even to the dark valley of death. Crib and Cross are both of the same wood.

And then there is a second ~~point~~ thing. At some point in our lives every single one of us is poor. This may perhaps not be seen on the outside at all, for when it comes right down to it, we men know very little about one another. I may have a worry on my mind - I may have committed a wrong and feel the burden of guilt - or I may be secretly sick - or scourged by comsuming desires that are never fulfilled. All of these things - and a thousand more - may be secretly hidden inside of me - you too! We have all run through the whole gammit of sin, even though we may never have been convicted of any crime. The only difference between me and the convicted criminal is that he has had exposed what in me has still managed to remain concealed. In that darkness there is no light - only night, and black shadows, and hopeless dead-end streets.

But now another LIGHT shines through. Long before we begin to ask whether there is still any hope and meaning for our lives, Someone has already been on His way to us. Christmas tells us that God comes to find us no matter where we are. And when it seems that everything has come to a dead-end, then God's chance really begins! For this ChristChild is none other than Immanuel - God with us - then, and now, and forever! Amen