

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS



The Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah 9:2 "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined."

It was mid-December just before the end of Michaelmas Term and as a young graduate student at Oxford, I had been invited to dine at High Table in College with my Tutor. It was an honor to be so invited. My Tutor and I then met before dinner in the Faculty Common Room for a glass of sherry and introductions to the other dons and their guests. Once escorted to High Table, we were waited upon at dinner by white jacketed servants, using ancient College silver, and china, and crystal. The food was

exquisite, and decidedly not what the students were eating down below in the Great Hall. The wine was from the College's own vineyards in France. After coffee and dessert, we all retired to the smoking rooms for brandy and cigars. The evening was an absolute delight. I was feeling very satisfied with myself. Life was good and pleasant. Then my Tutor asked a simple question that changed everything, "Are you going home for Christmas?" he asked.

"Are you going home for Christmas?" That simple question rekindled within me all sorts of fond images of Christmases past with my family, especially with my mother, who had recently died. I suddenly remembered with childhood innocence, the magic of Christmases past. I recalled sitting before a blazing fire with my parents, drinking eggnog, and watching Christmas movies. I remembered the excitement of new toys under the Christmas tree and no school for days on end. "Was I going home for Christmas?" No, I wasn't going home for Christmas. You can never really go home again.

I was just a poor student at Oxford, and would be spending the holidays with my wife and small child in our little student flat along the Thames. We were going to have a very Dickens-like Christmas, meaning it would be dark, cold, and impoverished. For my wife and I were both a long way from home. We were strangers in a foreign land, with no real family or friends with whom to

celebrate. I was just another American doctoral student passing through. And on the long walk home that night, I suddenly felt strangely alienated from my surroundings. As if I wasn't really a part of all that I saw, as if I didn't really belong.

Indeed, psychologists tell us that many people do not feel entirely comfortable or at ease during the holidays, not quite "at home" perhaps? For many of us, we feel that someone or something precious is missing at our celebrations. This year because of the pandemic, many households will have an empty chair at the table. And not surprisingly we are suddenly pricked by an unexpected sense of melancholy by the absence? Many of us feel a nagging sorrow for some treasure that seems lost, or perhaps never quite found? There lies in the human heart, I believe, a deep-seated sadness, a mysterious sense of inevitable loss or disappointment, a knowledge that something is missing in our lives, and we often feel that most keenly at this time of year. Our lives, like our Christmases, do not, as a rule, turn out quite the way we expected them to be, often despite our best efforts. That is certainly true this year! Most of us will admit that there is a strange, aching gap between what we imagine to be and what we end up with. We may explain it to ourselves and others in a variety of ways, but the reality is a painful discontinuity between our lives and our dreams for our lives,

between what is and what might have been. And perhaps that gap is never more keenly felt than at Christmas.

And so, we struggle, I think, in all sorts of different ways to bridge that gap. We run around in a frenzy trying to "get it all done" before the holidays arrive, all the things we are supposed to do. Then we buy too much. We decorate too much. We eat too much, or drink too much. But to what end are we doing all these things? Why do we carry on so at this time of year? What has any of this to do with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth?

These are the actions of people who long for something more, a sense of wholeness perhaps, of recapturing a dream we hold dear. These are the actions of a people who long to get home again. We perpetually yearn for Christmas to come as it once was or is longed to be, and then, then to never end, to never pass away again. What we are really craving for, I believe, is God.

St. Augustine of Hippo, the third century Latin Church Father, suggests that this basic human longing comes from our memory; we long for a place we once knew but have forgotten. Yet its presence remains in our subconscious haunting us. For we all come ultimately from God, he writes, and somewhere we lost our way, and our whole life, in all its forms, is a searching for the way back to God. In the words of St. Augustine's famous prayer, 'O God, you have made us for yourself alone, and our

heart is restless until it finally finds its rest in thee.' We have all discovered in ourselves at one time or another, I believe, that hunger and restlessness for a lost innocence, a past Christmas, for a different manner of living than this, one that will permanently lift us out of the emotional and psychological tangles that enmesh us here. We do all seem to remember Eden. We know that place. And we want to go home. We want peace on earth and goodwill among mankind.

We have longed for that place again and again, in the darkness of the night, in the silence of our rooms, in those hidden moments when we think that no one is looking, and especially at times like these, when we are tired and anxious and perhaps weary of life, when we are suffering, when we are hurt, or confused, or confronted with death, we then long with a seemingly endless longing to escape this place, and to find our way back home. But it is not a thing that we can seem to bring about on our own. We cannot save ourselves it seems. We must wait, and watch for another.

And so it is that on this night of all nights, we celebrate that at last God has come to us, to begin to lead us on the long road home. Because we could not reach him on our own, God has come to dwell with us, to be one of us. In so many of his parables, Jesus emphasized this activity of God searching for us. God comes after us, Jesus says, like a shepherd leaving

behind 99 of his flock and desperately searching for the one lost sheep. God comes after us like a woman sweeping her entire house till she finds a single lost coin, or discovers that pearl of great value. God is like a waiting father who sees his prodigal son while he is yet a great way off and runs to meet him, with tears on his cheek and outstretched arms, in total disregard for common sense and worldly justice, to embrace his son and bring him back home again and to kill the fatted calf and celebrate. God comes searching for us again and again, and many of us feel this most keenly at Christmas.

For in embracing the Christmas story we can rekindle a hidden joy and innocence and hope within ourselves; a remembered past or a longed-for future, a place we might call home, where there is indeed peace on earth and goodwill among mankind. The story of Christmas rings true in our hearts. In its recital, we find God, and in so doing we find ourselves wonderfully fulfilled. We see ourselves in the eyes of that tiny little baby born in a poor stable in Bethlehem, and the process of our salvation is at last initiated, the long journey home begins. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, we sing. We are going home. Jesus is the fulfillment of a dream, we sing. Through him we dine at a different High Table and share a foretaste of another Kingdom; we partake a glimpse of our long lost home. And we are strangely relieved and satisfied. And so, on this night,

let us join together and sing out our thanks and praises to the God who has come to us, who has taken upon himself our flesh and blood, our life and death, that through this activity we might draw closer to Him, and to our true home. Thanks be to God.