

ADELAIDE, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1963.

ANOTHER SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

Despite the strenuous rush which precedes Christmas in our society, the kindlier, gentler impulses of that day are beginning to work in us. The familiar carols with their message of peace once again waken memories and soften our hardness. Very soon now we will be putting aside all troubling things and giving ourselves over to gladness and festivities with our families. Thousands will again hear the story of the Babe in the manger.

However, there are other aspects of Christmas which tend to be forgotten, and which have no part in a pretty story which is very nice for children. For example, there is the young mother, forced to have her baby in the stable because the inn is over-crowded during the peak season. This is typical of what happens in every age; people not powerful enough to make a way for themselves being given scant consideration by a busy, bustling world intent on making financial hay while the sun shines.

We do not go much further into the narrative of Christ's infancy before we meet the harsh realities of power politics in the person of that able, yet ruthless ruler, King Herod. Seeing in the new-born baby a possible threat to the status quo, he orders the massacre of all male infants in Bethlehem. The whole cycle of tradition about the earliest days of Jesus is then rounded off by the little family fleeing for its life to a foreign land.

There is nothing about which to wax sentimental here, neither is there anything very suitable for furnishing scenes for Christmas cards. It is the same grim plot which has been played out again and again through history, and never on such a vast scale as in our time.

We may draw some comfort from the sterner side of Christmas. If it were true that Christ came to a far-off age in conditions of idyllic tranquillity, we could perhaps assume that there was little in the whole story that really mattered to us. But seeing that the fragile and touching beauty of the Nativity is set in a period which, in its own way, was as harsh and heartless as ours, it could be that there is something these events have to say to us.

Men of goodwill are apt to become troubled by the tremendous forces arrayed against the Christian cause today. They anxiously conclude that Christianity is threatened. They are right, of course. However, this is nothing new. Not only were the dice heavily loaded against the Christ—in his childhood. During His brief ministry some 30 years later, He did not seem to count for much. What did it matter to the world at large that He had secured the rather wavering allegiance of a few nobodies in an obscure province of the Roman Empire? When, at last, His enemies combined to crush Him, it seemed that the pathetically idealistic project had come to the only possible end.

It has been the same ever since. In days of persecution and scorning His cause has been under attack from without. In times of prosperity, when all seemed to be well with the Church, it faced subtle perils from within, in the form of the worldliness and complacency of some of its adherents. And yet, from that One, solitary figure, there have flowed powers for human renewal, which neither the hostility of His enemies nor the weakness of His followers have nullified in nearly twenty centuries. Today, despite everything, He is the centre of faith and the source of moral strength for millions, and provides the motivating power for enterprises of service and reconciliation the world over.

At Christmas time we may often be guilty of sentimentality, yet there is nothing of this quality in the documents which have come down to us from the first generations of Christians. The New Testament writers had no tendency to ignore the fact that men can do evil in a world that is often hard. They were compassionate and humble before heaven, yet astonishingly tough-minded.

Perhaps it is this same Christian tough-mindedness which we need today almost more than anything else. This generation will only come safely through its manifold perils if, at every level of the world's life, there are men and women realistic enough to have no illusions, but unshakeable in the courage born of faith, and utterly unswerving in their goodwill towards men. Then St. John's words will apply also to our troubled century, "The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never quenched it."

THOUGHT FOR TODAY.—*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.*
—Luke 2:14.