Radio Address: From Heaven Above (Church of the Air), 1940

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FROM HEAVEN ABOVE

ADDRESS ON THE "CHURCH OF THE AIR"

Sunday, December 22, 1940

To the Members of Valparaiso University, who heard many of these thoughts in a series of Chapel Addresses during the Season of Advent 1940, this Address is affectionately dedicated.

O. P. Kretzmann

Undoubtedly there are few men and women in the Christian world this morning who are not aware of the deep tragedy and profound irony of Christmas in the Year of our Lord 1940. As the song of the angels, "Peace on Earth", rings out once more, there are members of the human family who can find momentary peace only in bombshelters under the earth. Perhaps never in the long and wayward story of man has the day of the Nativity of our Lord dawned upon a world which needed it more bitterly and more desperately. It is 1900 years now since the last act in the world's great drama of redemption was ushered in by the trumpets of heaven and the massed choir of angels. The manger became the cradle of all the fair hopes that the hearts of men had ever known and a messenger of eternity closed all the yesterdays and opened all the tomorrows with the shining words: "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace, good will toward men." This morning we are once more standing near that silent and holy night in which the frail hands of a baby divided the history of the world, finally and forever, into before and after. Certainly for us who walk so far down the ways of time there is immediate and desperate need to return to the Manger, to tear away the blurred bitterness of the years, and to find once more an old faith and a new joy. Much has happened these 1900 years since the first Christmas. Sin has followed sin, woe has been added to woe, and ages of cruelty and unbelief lie between us and the Manger-cradle under singing skies. Today the story is more forgotten than ever - forgotten by the men who believe in the philosophy of power - forgotten by those who find forgetfulness in the lust for gold and the cult of the gutter - forgotten by countless men and women who have lost the faith of Christmas in the mad winds of the world's confusion and pain. Surely it is time for us to pause for a moment in the treadmill of living to see again what the angels saw and to hear again what the shepherds heard more than 1900 years ago. By the providence of God we may still hear it; by the mercy of God we may perhaps also believe it.

What after all is the meaning of Christmas for life in 1940? Is the story of Christmas only a fairy tale, woven of the hearts of men and spun by their broken dreams? Is it merely the story of a Baby, tender and beautiful, fragrant with old memories and surrounded by the wonder of childhood? Or is it the gray legend of the birth of a dreamhaunted wanderer far from the ways of men who gave to the world a set of ideals and of moral challenges which it has never been able to touch? If this were all the meaning of Christmas, we
might today just as well be preparing for the celebration of the birth of Buddha, Confucius, or Abraham Lincoln. The meaning of Christmas for life and living in 1940 and in all the years before us is far deeper and higher than that. It sounds in the first blessed note of the voice of the angel, "Unto you is born this day a Savior which is Christ the Lord", echoes in the words of the Child in the manger grown to manhood, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son", that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life", and rises at last through envy and hate and fear and all the ten thousand sins which have drawn the heartblood of the world - rises at last to the vision of the King of men on the throne of the Cross pouring out His blood as a ransom for many. You cannot believe in the Manger and refuse to believe in the Cross. If Christmas does not mean the birth of a Savior from sin - then in the name of God let us at least be consistent! Let the world and the Church make a party for the Christchild, inviting Puck and Peter Pan and Tiny Tim and dear old Santa Claus, and blending all into a weird and blasted harmony with the song of angels long ago. Christmas means more than that. It is a glimpse of heaven on earth, of the haunting pity of God for the lost children of men. Christmas is a fact - the fact of God's love for every wandering soul that has lost the way home. Christmas is a faith - the faith of every redeemed human soul that has seen the shadow of the Cross fall on the face of the Baby in the manger and heard beneath the song of the angels the triumphant cry of the redeemed of God.

I am dominated by the conviction that only this meaning of Christmas can bring it into more than a temporary and sentimental relation with life in 1940. Today we know, as we have not known before, that all our talk about good will toward men, if it is not a reflection of the Christmas love which came from heaven, results only as it did on Christmas Day in the fields of France in 1917 - in a momentary comradeship in the no-man's land of hatred and fear. Christmas should bring new life to the sorrowing heart of the world - life, full, free, abundant and brave. One whose eyes opened in Bethlehem and closed on Calvary saw life that way and gave us the power to see it too. Years of shadow and night may lie between you and that meaning of Christmas, but today I should like more than anything else to set it in the lonely places of your soul. The story of Christmas is the final wisdom of God which alone can give your life meaning and holiness and purpose and peace. In a world torn by war - in a world in which so many hearts are broken and alone, we must know again that for the life that has once worshipped at the manger in the faith of the shepherds no hope is too high, no dream is too holy to be fulfilled - not even the ancient hope and dream of "peace on earth, good will toward men."

Ours is a dark and dying world. This morning men are more bewildered than they have been for many a year. But perhaps it is just the wistful restlessness of the modern soul, so fearfully astray in its own life, which makes a return to the divine meaning of Christmas the most desperate need of our dark time. We may not always be able to put it into words, but we know it in our hearts as we know nothing else. By the bitter logic of time and circumstance we have learned that no law, no diplomacy, and no device invented by the wit of man, can free us from the law of the jungle, heel our broken lives, and bring them into harmony once more with the melodies of God's own eternal Christmas. Now in 1940 there must be some voice from Heaven Above to tell
us that our brief, broken, mortal life has immortal meaning—some song to stir the old forgotten memories of the soul—someone to tell us how to live, how to die, and how to be happy despite the tramp of all the heavy years. And that voice comes today as it has come for nineteen centuries of bitter hate and fearful malice from Heaven Above, down from the great halls of eternity, up through the mist and tears of time: "I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly." This is the abundant life which men seek with such passionate quest today—even though they may not know it. A life of faith in the Christ of the manger and the Cross—life, rich, overflowing and unending! This is the life that moves like an army overriding death. This is the life which was brought back into the world on Christmas morning 1900 years ago. This is the life that comes from Heaven and returns to Heaven.

Can Christmas in the Year of our Lord 1940 really mean that for you and for me? I truly believe that it can. Few generations in the history of humanity have sought life and its last meaning with more passionate earnestness. We have found small, broken fragments of it in the laboratory. We have tasted its ashes in the wine of pleasure. We have seen its shell in the conquest of nature. But for many of our generation the last great discovery still remains—the discovery that, by the power of the Spirit of the Living God, life can be more than man have made of it—more than an unceasing round of toil and labor—more than a strange interlude between nowhere and nothing. If Christmas comes to you this year as our Lord wants it to come, I can promise you that it will make you a master of life and time and death—a victorious conquering soul for whom the Child in the manger has become the Everlasting Arm and the Great Companion, the Captain of your destiny, and the Master of your soul. This is what Christmas can mean for you even today. Its songs come from the heart of eternity with healing for your weary life, heartsick and homesick for the Christmas of God. Give the Child of Bethlehem time and room—and you will know at long last the glory of a life which is its own pledge and prophecy of eternity.

A few days ago I heard a child say a Christmas prayer. It is a simple prayer—simple with the simplicity of God and of faith. Is it not time for us this morning to tear away our masks of indifference and sophistication now so ragged and so torn, and join the little children of the world—those who are still nearest to the Kingdom of Heaven—in a prayer which I am very sure, will give you a continuing and a holy Christmas:

Ah! dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber—kept for Thee.

Supplication for Peace

O God from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed; Give unto Thy servants that peace which the world cannot give; that our hearts may be set to obey Thy commandments, and also that by Thee, we being defended from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour."