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A Christmas Sermon

Ross Winn

1902

A great many years ago there was born, in an obscure village of Palestine, a babe; and its parents were so poor that this little child came into the world among the cattle and was laid in a manger upon a couch of straw. This infant of lowly origin had not even the birth certificate of legal parentage, for his mother was a virgin, and he was the progeny of the gods — which in those days was the polite term for bastard.

But above the humble place of this poor babe's nativity there shone a bright and radiant star — the star of genius. The great world of that day was as indifferent to the doings of the common people, the toilers, as it is to-day. The birth of a prince was an affair of great moment — not because a prince was wiser, or better, or more noble than other men, but because he WAS a prince, the son of a king. But this babe in the manger was not a prince; he was the nameless offspring of poverty and shame. But the star of genius, which has seldom lighted the birth-advent of a tilted prince, stood over that lowly manger, and from the portals of that cattle stall in Bethlehem, a new age issued forth, an age that has been made glorious by the greatest achievements of the human race.

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This child, Jesus, as he grew to manhood, was not much of a success in life. He had no business enterprise, no financial ability. Instead of adapting himself to circumstances and going in to make his pile, he began to tramp around from place to place, making speeches against the rich and well-to-do, and stirring up discontent among the poor. He even attacked the religion of his time, and called the priests hypocrites, which was very wicked and impious, altho he doubtless told the truth. He assailed the established church of his day as bitterly as did Ingersoll the church of HIS day, and with far less politeness. He went around with a handful of ragged and shiftless followers like himself, for the most part ignorant fishermen, who could neither read nor write. He associated with rough and dissolute characters and was himself known as a winebibber and a glutton. He refused to condemn lewd women, but intimated that thy were but little worse than their male patrons. His beard and hair were unkempt, he was negligent in dress, and of course all the respectable well-to-do people called him an Anarchist, and though he should be locked up as a matter of precaution.

His teachings were perfectly incomprehensible to the people of his day. Not even his own disciples understood him. He wanted to "divide up everything." He was continually agitating against the social order. He talked about the best people in society in the most disrespectful manner, intimating that a full grown dromedary could gallop thru the eye of a cambric needle with less difficulty than a Wall street magnate would experience in squeezing under heaven's golden gate. Like the true Anarchist, he was always "agin the government," and was looked upon by the better classes as a perpetual nuisance and calamity howler.

He went around making stump speeches and steet talks, in violation of the city ordinances. His motto seems to have been that of John Burns, "Down with all that's up, and up with all that's down." He not only wanted the rich to give everything they possessed away to the shiftless poor, but he inculcated im-

Christmas message that THE FIREBRAND would give to all: The kingdom of heaven is at hand. From the story of Jesus, be it true or mythical, we may draw the divine inspiration that prophesies in darkness the coming of the dawn.

It is quite evident that Jesus believed that he was come to herald a new order, for the burden of his message was the destruction of the existing system and power, and the institution of a new kingdom of perfection. A reference to the old Hebrew prophets, whom Jesus greatly respected and often quoted, being himself a Jew, will give a full explanation of the central idea of his agitation. Daniel, far back in the dim centuries, had foretold the rise of the world's four greatest empires, of which the last, Rome, was approaching the height of its power at the time when Jesus lived. But Daniel's prophesy introduced a fifth, the Universal Empire, in which humanity was to come into its own, and the Golden Age of brotherhood and peace be realized. This fifth monarchy was to be diverse from all previous governments, for it was to be built without hands — i.e., direction or authority, and was to destroy all human governments. It was to be of God, which is to say, of man, not men. Jesus expected it to come in his day, because he saw the last of the four empires that were to precede it fulfilled in the Roman power. He thought that, as Rome had then reached her apex, the Universal Empire would appear, and finish Daniel's prophesy by establishing the universal brotherhood. That this was the idea of Jesus' mission is proven by the fact that his followers continued to look for the coming of this new empire long after his death. His friend and disciple, John, imprisoned on lonely Patmos, paints in the sublime sentences of the Apocalypse a vision of the coming of this Golden Empire, using the very types and figures employed by the prophet Daniel in the first prediction.

The Anarchists to-day are proclaiming that ideal state, that Golden Empire of Man, many unconscious of the fact that they are but repeating the old, old prophesy of the sages and seers of past and forgotten ages. But tho humanity has waited thru the long centuries, waited and watched for that which is to come, we of to-day should gather hope that, for those who have waited long, is the reward of realization. And this is the

providence as a virtue. He said "take no thought for the morrow." He wanted people to despise money and business affairs, and to emulate the example of the fowls of the air and the flow-ers of the field. He was opposed to authority, to government. He decried punishment, repudiated resistance to evil-doers. He said let the robbers rob; if they take your best Sunday coat, give them your Roosevelt hat or your necktie, or anything else that will satisfy them. Now, it is reasonably certain that he was not rightly understood. We do not know that he was correctly reported. He certainly would not be by the average American newspaper reporter of to-day. But assuming that Jesus really said the things attributed to him, it is little wonder that the ruling class of his day were anxious to be rid of him.

I suppose some people will object if I call Jesus an Anarchist, but I am sure the whole world would call him that if he lived to-day, and preached such doctrines. I believe that his most consistent disciple of note in this generation is Count Leo Tolstoy, of Russia, who is an Anarchist. And I am certain that the church that bears the name Christian, does not believe in the doctrines taught by Christ. I am sure that the people who put a lightning rod on their \$50,000 churches do not believe in the precept: "Take no thought for the morrow." John D. Rockefeller is a devout Baptist, but I suspect that he is not worrying much about what Jesus said of the camel, the needle's eye, and a rich man's chances of heaven. And so I say, Jesus was not understood in his day, and that very few of his professed followers to-day care to understand his teachings now. As the ruling class of that day had no use for Jesus, they put him to death. That was not strange, if we reflect that, in our own times, about nineteen centuries later, five men were put to death in Chicago for holding and teaching views very similar to those held and taught by Jesus. You see the ruling class of all countries in all ages have very little sympathy with reformers and revolutionists.

For three centuries after the death of the Gallilean reformer, his followers were the object of persecution, and thousands suf-

ferred martyrdom for their convictions. It seems very strange to us that these early Christians should have been regarded as enemies of social order by the Roman empire — that nameless crimes should have been charged to them. History tells us that the Christians were outlawed; that every act of violence committed against the Roman government was laid to them. They were supposed to be thieves, assassins, and incendiaries. When Rome burned, it was charged that the Christians did it. They were persecuted with relentless vigor by the Roman government. They were hanged, beheaded, burned at the stake, and fed to wild beasts. And their persecutors honestly believed that they deserved this persecution.

This all sounds strange and wonderful in the light of our present triumphant Christian civilization. But is not history being repeated, right in our own time? Is not the present insane prejudice directed against the Anarchists a parallel of the experience of the early Christians? Does not the dominant power to-day view the Anarchists very much as the dominant power of Rome viewed the Christians? Are not the Anarchists charged with all crimes under heaven and relentlessly persecuted by authority? Yet they teach, as did Jesus, a doctrine of love and peace. Their very philosophy is the negation of violence — the antithesis of crime. Yet it has been proposed in Congress to make even the teaching of this philosophy of love and peace and human brotherhood a crime, punishable with death. So really, we have not progressed very far — our Christians to-day are not very far ahead of the pagans of Nero's time. And if Jesus should appear to-day, he would not be crucified, perhaps, but he would certainly get the cold shoulder from the church that is loudest in his worship. And he would find Judge Gary not so fair a judge as Pilot; he would discover in President Roosevelt a kindred spirit of Herod.

The Anarchists, some consciously, most of them unconsciously, are to-day the exponents of the gospel which Jesus really proclaimed. I mean that which is reported in the New

Testament as his teachings. I do not know whether he said those things or not, because I do not know whether any of the New Testament writings are authentic — nobody knows. But assuming that Jesus said the things accredited to him, it is only the Anarchists who now believe and practice them. He repudiated the principle of authority, opposed punishment, and denied the right of judgement between man and man. He condemned wealth. He was bitter in his denunciation of the church and its priesthood. For this he was regarded by the ministerial fraternity with about the same amount of affection that the same class had for Ingersoll. Jesus appears to have been a unitarian in theology; by which I mean that he thought everything in nature was an expression of God. But the world could not comprehend this sublime truth, and has stupidly given to Jesus a super-human character, which none of his teachings warrant. Jesus declared himself to be one with God. So was he, and so is every great and noble soul that has reached the plane of SELF CONSCIOUSNESS. God, by which I mean that Supreme Intelligence of which every atom of matter is a form of expression, is universal. The orthodox church declares God to be omnipresent: If he is omnipresent, he is all there is, because if aught existed that was not God, God could not be omnipresent. The church maintains that man has a free will, and that God is omnipotent: This is illogical absurdity, because if one being besides God possessed a free will, that will would be the limit of God's power. Jesus taught none of these absurdities preached in his name by the orthodox theologians. He founded no church. He formulated no creed. He gave but one law — the law of love. "Love thy neighbor as thyself, and God with all thy heart; upon these hang the law and the prophets." His one supreme injunction, in which he expressed the sum of his social philosophy, was in these words: "Judge not that ye be not judged." This is the Anarchist formula. Stated in other terms it means simply, "Mind your own business."