

Dec. 25, 1955

WHAT DID THE ANGELS MEAN?

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." That is what the angels sang as they came winging through the skies that first Christmas morning long ago. "Peace on earth; good will to men."

Didn't they know any better, those angels? Did they really think that that child, the little child of Bethlehem, was bringing peace. Didn't they know that soon the streets of quiet Bethlehem would be ringing to the tramp of the feet of Roman soldiers, and the shrieks of mothers trying to protect their young, all because that child had been born there? Didn't they know that He came "not to bring peace on earth, but a sword." Peace? Surely the angels picked the wrong child.

And good will? Jesus was not the kind of man we usually associate with good will. He was no boisterous, hail-fellow-well-met. We are told that he wept; we are not once told that he smiled. I am sure that he did, but that was not the important thing about him. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. His followers would remember him not by the glad sign of his coming, the star, but by the sign of the agony of his death, the cross. "He made more enemies than friends. Didn't the angels know that? Why sing of peace and good will at this man's birth?"

But the angels were right, of course. Angels usually are. The trouble is not with their song; but with our understanding of it. Part of ~~the~~ trouble is in our English mistranslation of the song. I remember using this verse a few years ago in China when I was asked to prepare some kind of a Christmas program at Yenching University. The girl who was translating it into Chinese for the bulletin came to me to ask, "How do you translate 'good will'?" I didn't know; I had just come. But I thought that she surely ought to know that familiar verse and sent her off to look it up in her Chinese Bible: Luke 2:14, "peace on earth, good will to men." When she came back she was still puzzled. "It isn't in the Chinese Bible," she said; and she was right and I lost considerable face. The Chinese version is a more accurate translation of this verse than our King James version. What the angels really sang was, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among ~~men~~ with whom he is pleased."

I must confess that I still perversely like the old translation of the song best; its music is too deep in the memories of most of us, I think, to be lightly uprooted. It is better poetry. But let us be honest enough to admit that though the new translation makes the angels poorer poets, it makes them better theologians. And if it will make you feel any better about losing the old familiar line, there is "good will" in that verse, even in the Greek. What the angels were singing about, however, was not good will among men, but God's good will [to men]. The angels put God first. And if, war-weary and troubled in heart and mind, we long for the old assurance of peace and good will at Christmas time, perhaps we had better begin, as the angels began, not with good will among men, but with "Glory to God in the highest..."

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There are ~~three~~ lessons to be learned from the angel's song:

1. Peace and good will come from God, not from men.
2. They come by changing the heart, not the world.

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Good will begins, as the angels sang, with God. That is where Christmas begins, of course. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son..." Look what happens when we let our holiday good will begin and end with man. We get what we deserve: a commercialized Christmas. We get a kind of synthetic mass emotion manufactured out of parties and bright lights and gay tunes played too long and too loud, and (much more appealing, but still not quite genuine) the contagious enthusiasm of youngsters who are about to get presents from Santa Claus. This kind of ~~gambol~~ hopped-up good will is at its best, perhaps, when we push our chairs back from the table after a rousing big Christmas dinner and relax with the happy feeling that we love the whole world and the whole world loves us. If that is all there is to the good will of which the angels sang at Bethlehem then let's replace the Jesus of the gospels with someone more appropriate roaming the streets of Jerusalem slapping people on the back and telling funny stories. Then the angels should have come winging through the skies singing in close harmony, "For he's a jolly good fellow."

That is all very well in its way--and frankly I enjoy it--but that is not what the angels were singing. And there is nothing wrong with all the sentiment that bubbles around us at Christmas time--except that it doesn't last. It lasts just about as long as the Christmas tree.

Durable peace and lasting good will must be built with stronger stuff than ~~that~~ that. They need the undergirding of the Lord God Almighty. You'd think we'd realize that by now. We've tried long enough for peace by ourselves, but the longer we live and the harder we try and the wiser we get, the deadlier our wars become. We're caught in a spiralling crescendo of disaster, and only God can save. The glad news of Christmas is that God looked down in mercy on a world that had always ripped itself apart; he looked down on a world that longed for peace and could not find it, and what man could not find, God gave.

"God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son...

"And He is our peace..."

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace..."

There was that in the cry of a Babe in a manger that would stop the crying of the world, for peace came down at Christmas.

What has happened to that peace, then? Why isn't it a little more in evidence? Up at the demarcation line last week a young captain reminded me soberly that there is still a war on. This is not peace; we're in an armed truce, and we are celebrating Christmas in Seoul on the edge of a volcano, almost in the shadow of the big guns and the barbed wire and the hard face of the enemy just a few miles to the north. We have seen more war in our lifetime, in terms of numbers of men involved and intensity of destruction, than the whole human race had seen from the beginning of time up to the birth of Jesus Christ. Where then is this peace

that came to earth at Christmas? And what has happened to good will of which the angels sang?

But the angels knew what they were singing about. They weren't blind. Only a few miles away over the low hills from Bethlehem they could see Calvary. They knew there was pain and suffering ahead, but they sang anyway. They sang of peace and good will. Why? Because they knew that Jesus Christ of whose birth they sang would conquer pain and suffering, would conquer war and destruction, sin, yes, even death itself--and that means peace.

There was nothing obvious about it then. It is not too obvious now. God's peace begins small. It begins with a baby in a forgotten corner, far from the center of empire, and it begins with a group of shepherds who are touched and worship him. And when Jesus begins his mission, he does not begin by changing the whole world; he begins by changing people. Peace, as the angels sang, is for "men in whom God is pleased", and the unchanged man does not please him. "They that are in the flesh," says Paul (Rom. 8:3) "cannot please God." Jesus came to change us; to make us pleasing to God, to give us peace.

"Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth.

Hark the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the new-born King.'"

Realists tell us that it will take a revolution in human nature to bring real peace to earth.

Do you remember the story of the great peace petition that was prepared for presentation to the League of Nations back in the Twenties. They say it had been signed by more people than had ever put their names to a single document before. Five prominent women were chosen as delegates to bring the huge scroll to Geneva, a symbol of more than the longing of the world for peace, a symbol of its demand for peace. But when the great moment of the presentation arrived, there was no scroll and there were no delegates. The five women were in their hotel room quarreling over which should have the honor of making the presentation speech.

Peace, as the angels sang of it, is for "men in whom God is pleased", and proud hearts like that do not please him. This is the "pride of the flesh" of which the Bible speaks, and "They that are in the flesh," says Paul (Rom. 8:8), "cannot please God". A revolution in human nature is exactly what it takes to bring peace, so radical a change that the Bible calls it "the new birth", and this is what Jesus was born to bring.

"Born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth.

Hark the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the new-born King'."

The peace that passes understanding begins with a changed heart. It begins with a man like Peter, when Jesus takes all the sin and the bluster out of his heart and he is ready to go out and die for others. It begins with a man like Thomas when Jesus takes all the sin and doubt out of his skeptical mind until Thomas is ready to sell himself into slavery to die for others. It begins with Paul when Jesus takes the sin and pride out of his heart until he too is ready willing to die for others. Peace for you can begin right here today if you will let Jesus into your heart. There is no other way to peace, no shortcut. You may be looking for peace on a grander scale, a world-wide scale; it still begins with a changed heart, and there is no by-passing that first small step.

But Christian peace and good will is not intended to stay small. It may begin as small as a grain of mustard seed but it grows as big as all outdoors. The Christian mission to proclaim the love and peace of God cannot stop with anything less than the whole world. Love, you see, which is the Christian form of good will, is spelled with a capital L. It begins with God, comes down to earth in Jesus Christ, at Christmas, and from that time on it spreads. A love that does not spread, that stops in your own heart, is nothing but a selfish I. Christian love begins with a capital L. It spreads.

At this point it is easy but dangerous to jump to the conclusion that the Christian mission is to spread good will. Not so. What we are called upon to spread is not good will, but the good news. Good will is like happiness: make it an end in itself and you never reach it. Make it an end in itself and it becomes distorted. It has been tried--winning friends and influencing people--but it is more effective in selling refrigerators than in making peace. But begin where the angels began, with Jesus Christ, the power of God in Christ to change the human heart, and you will find that when you put the King and His Kingdom first, all these things, including good will, have been added unto you.

Take Korea. There was not much good will here when the first Westerners arrived. This was the hermit kingdom, fanatically suspicious of the foreigner. I was brought up on stories of the early missionaries. They were stoned in the streets; they were chased with axes. Had they come only to spread good will they'd have given up and gone home. But they had come to preach Christ. They lived good will; they preached Christ who gave them the power so to live. And the result? I suppose that nowhere in Asia is there a deeper reservoir of good will toward the West than right here in Korea. Many things have contributed to it; and sometimes it gets rather thinly strained, but it is there. Where else has an occupation army been more genuinely welcomed. I've lived under occupying armies; friendly armies, needed armies; but even when they were needed and the people knew they were needed, the people hated them. Why was it different here? Why the good will? I asked a Korean that the other day, and he said, "I suppose it is because there are more Christians here."

Or take New Guinea. I have read the account of the Christian penetration of the almost inaccessible interior of that island. "Those people", said one missionary "were worse than savages. It was like taking the gospel to wild animals. They didn't know the meaning of the word love. If a woman were walking along with a baby on her back, and the baby cried too much and bothered her, she would throw the little thing away by the side of the path. There were always more babies. If a man broke his leg not a soul would help him crawl back in agony to his village." But these were the people of whom we heard so much back in World War II, who tirelessly combed the mountains for our downed fliers, and tenderly cared for the wounded, and brought them back at risk of their own lives thru enemy lines to safety. What had happened? They had become Christians. Some one had told them of Christ, and Jesus Christ had come and taken the animal savagery out of their fierco hearts until they were ready to die, in His name, for others. And being ready to die for others is the Christian form of Godd will. The Bible calls it love. It begins with God. It changes hearts, and it reaches out across this whole wide world.

If we really want peace and good will at Christmas time, perhaps we had better begin where the angels began, with God in Jesus Christ.