Sunday December 19, 1976

"CHRISTMAS CAN ALSO BE TOO SPIRITUAL"

John 1:1-14, I John 4:7-12, 19-21

We hear it said a lot that what is wrong with Christmas is that it is too commercial. That can happen. But what is also often wrong with Christmas is that it is too "spiritual" in the wrong way. The commercial aspect of Christmas can be easily ignored or repudiated by anyone who wants to take this holiday seriously. But the false "spiritual" aspect is harder to separate from the true message.

It is easy to think Christmas, and easy to believe Christmas; but it is difficult--sometimes intolerably difficult to act Christmas. It is not our false commercialism that prevents it, but our false spirituality. Not the clang of the cash register, but the jingle of bells, calling us to sentimentality, and seducing us from the patient, year-around task of loving those who are unloving.

This was made plain by a letter to the editor I came across recently regarding the Christmas season. The letter writer said, "UNICEF is again selling Christmas greeting cards which in no way reflect the true meaning of the Christmas observance. The scheme to associate the United Nations with Christmas is part of a long-term Communist plan to destroy all religious beliefs. Perhaps one day we will all awaken to find that December 25, is being celebrated as a 'One World Peace Festival' instead of the birthday of Christ."

The letter-writer was saying, "Keep Christmas spiritual and don't let it get mixed up with anything that's going on in the real world." She also forgot the words in the Christmas story, "Peace on earth" which is the hope of Christmas.

Let's put it this way: Christmas was and is primarily something physical, something worldly, in addition to being something spiritual which happened a long time ago and which we remember with sentimentality. It was the supreme connection between the physical and the spiritual. A baby is born. God became flesh and dwells among us. This wasn't some kind of mysterious spiritual birth removed from the world, but a physical birth, a baby born.

That baby grew into an adult. He healed the sick, and got into trouble with the authorities and was finally put on trial and sentenced to death. And most of the trouble Jesus go into was because he was not spiritual enough, not religious enough-- he was criticized for being too worldly.

The Bible says--"The word became flesh," it became physical, material. It does not say the word became spiritual. Sometimes we mistakenly divide the world into two parts-- the religious or spiritual part and the worldly or secular part.

But it isn't that way at all in the Bible. And this is what Christmas is all about. The birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus were all events in the world. It was all one world to Jesus and God was everywhere in it, not just in solemn and beautiful religious places. God, like Jesus, is wherever people are, all kinds of people, especially those who are poor and oppressed.

The whole action of Christmas can be summed up in two statements from the Bible, "If anyone says, I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar," and "In-as-much as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it unto me."

The fact that God came to be among us in Jesus Christ means that we cannot love God without loving every fellow creature God made; and an act of contempt or rejection or injustice or neglect toward the least, the lowest, the poorest, the weakest, the dumbest, is an act against God.

If Christianity does not mean this, it means nothing. If this central fact is ignored or slurred or rationalized away, the whole structure of Christianity falls apart and we are left with nothing but another primitive magic other-worldly religion.

Christianity certainly is spiritual, but it is also an intensely practical religion, having its roots in the practicality of Judaism. It was not designed to change the way we think or believe as much as to change the way we act.

Christmas then, is a worldly event, a physical event, an event of action. Not long after Jesus' birth, Herod the

King tried to get rid of Jesus by having all the male children under two years of age killed in that part of the world, hoping in that way to get rid of Jesus.

In our time as we celebrate Christmas, tragedy remains in the world. Violence continues in our midst. Yet in the midst of the tragedy of our time and every time, Christmas means that God is not shut off in some spiritual sphere, away from us; but God is here, radically involved in our humanity, in all of our relationships. God shares our common lot.

The creche scene we see so much at Christmas time does not just speak of the baby Jesus in a manger many years ago--the creche scene speaks of Christ's presence in the world, then and now.

There is no direct vision of God, but there are other human beings to be loved and that is where God is--that is where Christmas is. We can't see God directly and we can do God any good, but we can love others, stand by them. God does not way our love for God, God wants it for other mea and women. Thus the best stories about Christmas are those which speak of Christmas in action--listen to one of these stories which comes from France.

(SCM Book 163, "THE SACRIFICE, p. 83)