

# COURIER-JOURNAL

16 Pages

Wednesday, December 24, 1975

NEWSPAPER OF THE DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

20 Cents

## The Hopes and Fears of Christmas

Tonight is Christmas Eve, that holy night so full of excitement for the younger children and so full of memories for us older children. One of the most haunting memories which I have from childhood is singing the familiar carol, "O, Little Town of Bethlehem." Every year, as a young person, I was struck by the line that reads, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." It was not until years later that I could really begin to understand what this line meant.

Bethlehem is certainly a good symbol for all of us. We are often in a "deep and dreamless sleep" and we miss the most important of happenings. Just as the men and women of old, we long for the coming of Christ into our lives, but we are not really "awake" to what this will mean. The coming of Christ, if really understood, must see the uniting of our deepest hopes and most awesome fears.

Certainly, we deal more easily with the hopes. It is at this season that we are given a small glimmer of the peace and harmony that will be ours when Christ truly comes. It is reflected in the eyes of the children who are delighted with the wonders that are around them. It is felt at the Family Mass when the possibility of community at the Eucharistic table seems to be realized. It underlies the care and concern that so many individuals and groups have for the poor and underprivileged, lest anyone have a lonely or hungry Christmas Day.

All of these fleeting glimpses give promise of a more permanent reality of which Isaiah spoke: "Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together with a little child to guide them." (Isaiah 11:6) At the coming of Christ, there is much hope. After all, no one is afraid of a little child.

But the little Christ Child comes no more. Our Advent prayer was not for the birth of a child. It was a prayer for the coming into our lives once more of the Word-Made-Flesh, the all-powerful Son of God, Who died and rose, and Who sits at the right hand of the Father. I wonder if our invitation for Christ to come is often much too casual? Do we say "Come in!" without looking up to see who it is that comes? As one preacher has said it, "When Christ comes in, we must watch out!"

When Christ enters into our lives, He provokes a crisis. We must allow ourselves to be judged and be willing to make some changes based on that judgment. We must begin to make choices: is He or is He not the Lord? Do we follow or turn away? Are we willing to pay the price, to run the risk, to encounter the unknown? With this in mind, it is not at all surprising that at one time, the

Church assigned the Gospel reading which tells of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple for one of the Sundays of Advent.

There is, of course, a paradox in all of this. When God comes into our lives, there is a very human reason for fear. And yet, the message of the angel to the shepherds was, "You have nothing to fear!" (Luke 2:10). And this is right. Once we experience the love of God and we begin to live in Christ, then fear is no longer present. But, like the shepherds, it is very difficult to leave the flock and start out on the journey. It is only faith that will overcome fear.

And so, as we celebrate Christmas this year, let us be aware of the reality that is Christmas. It is not a nostalgic trip into childhood, but an event ever-new which brings us face-to-face with Christ — and face-to-face with our own human hopes and fears.

We are not the little town of Bethlehem which lies still asleep, but Christians who have experienced the Lord and sing out the lines of another Christmas hymn:

Wake, O Wake! with tidings thrilling,  
The watchmen all the air are filling,  
Midnight strikes! no more delaying,  
'The Lord has come!' we hear them saying.

*Joseph L. Hogan*  
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The Christmas message above is Bishop Joseph L. Hogan's Pastoral Perspective column which regularly appears on Page 3. Because it is especially appropriate for Christmas Eve, we print it on Page 1 this week.

