WHAT TO MAKE OF CHRISTMAS IN AN AGE OF TERROR

Pilgrim Church, Duluth — Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

December 17, 1972

Matthew 2:16. Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men.

This is an atrocity story. We know it traditionally by the title, "The Slaughter of the Innocents." Like many atrocity stories this one may relate an event that never actually occurred. It is widely reported, for example, that a good many atrocity stories were made up by British public relations people about the Germans during World War I in order to get the Americans into the war. Such tale-telling is in itself a kind of atrocity. But not all atrocity stories are invented. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that a man like Herod, who murdered his own son, might kill other people's children besides. Such acts of terror did happen in those days.

We would like to think that such acts of terror do not happen in our day. But perhaps the last few decades have stripped us of such illusions. Some of us may have believed in something called progress and felt that it was inevitable. In these enlightened times we were quite beyond any slaughter of the innocents. But then we read of four little girls killed by a bomb in a Birmingham, Alabama Sunday School. Then we read of a school bus bombed in Israel.

We may have believed at one time that the answer lay in a little more education. But then what do we make of those Germans in the 1930's and 40's? Where else could you find so low a rate of illiteracy or so high a rate of professors per capita? And where else was Christmas kept with so much sentiment, so much Gemutlichkeit? If you want to know what Christmas sentiment really is, then like me, you must have some rootage in that Germanic culture. But when we think of the gas chambers, we wonder, did all that education and all that sensitivity make a difference? There too Rachel cried for her children, and on a scale unknown to previous history.

Perhaps we have believed that we could eliminate the terror if everybody adopted the right religious affiliation. After all what can you expect from the heathen hoards of Asia? But what do we make of those strict Presbyterians and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland? A young girl on her way to mail her wedding invitations just this week...

But perhaps there is one last resort for our assurance that indeed we have passed beyond the slaughter of the innocents. There is still the clean-cut American boy, well-disciplined, neatly uniformed and with a box of Christmas cookies in the mail from Mom. But then there was My Lai. And there seems to be much evidence that My Lai was not an isolated incident.

"Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem..."

Does that really sound so strange, so foreign to our own experience? Think of Southern University, of the Olympic Athletes in Munich, of recent attempts at political assassinations, of the airplane hijackings, of the violence in the streets - is the world into which Jesus was born so very different from ours? One is almost tempted to believe that we ourselves live in a time especially addicted to violence and terror. We like to call it the "jet age", or the "space age". But it is not too hard to believe that future historians might label our time "the age of terror."

Now what do we make of Christmas in an age like that? Can we still believe in Christmas? I do not refer to the problem of what to make of singing angels, a traveling star and a virgin birth - that is not the problem before us this morning. The issue is this:

> Can we believe that there has come into our world a power for good that has the strength to free us from the terror of this age, not only the terror outside, but the terror that comes from the knowledge of our own share in its making?

Let's forget the trivial question of who said it first, an angel with golden wings or a fisherman with greasy hands - the question is, was he right in proclaiming glad tidings here?

Well, we can give a Christmas tinsel answer to that question, a bit of pie in the sky sentimentality. We can make believe that things aren't so bad after all and that all the world needs is to play "The Bluebird of Happiness" at midnight, preferably in the Jan Peerce recording.

Or we can give a cynical answer. We may suggest that things being what they are people might as well live by their illusions.

But if we go to the Bible and to Christian experience in the centuries since, perhaps we can find still another answer which some of us may wish to call, "Word of God."

That answer has two parts, I think. One part is a declaration of forgiveness. That may sound strange. We haven't talked so much about that in churches like this in recent years. The forgiveness of sins. Old-fashioned business, that. But truly that comes close to being the very nutshell of the Christmas message as the New Testament sees it. And as people like our Protestant forefathers saw it.

You see, no matter what other possibilities there may be, we do need this word of forgiveness. It is the only thing between us and despair. A friend of mine, Ralph Sundquist, once wrote a very interesting article in which he compared Martin Luther's experience to that of the main character in Albert Camus' THE FALL. Both saw that they and the human race were caught in a web of guilt from which they could not escape. Both saw that even their most gracious acts, their tenderest feelings were shot through with self-service. Both wanted to become something other than they were. The difference was that Luther found what he called Justification by Faith. For Jean-Baptiste Clamence, it is "too late," "impossible."

There is no hope for us unless there is that word of forgiveness. Now this is a word that we cannot give, not we or any other person, who

as Camus put it, is "in the soup" with us. The word we need must come from the place of innocence. But we are not innocent. It must come from the place of truth. But we are not truthful; even our honesty is self-deception. Nor can this be a word that just overlooks the terror, that simply condones the wrong. The word of forgiveness that we need must be spoken by the same One who speaks the word of judgment on us, speaks that judgment with a force and a finality we could never pronounce.

We ourselves cannot forgive the slaughter of the innocents. I wish old Harry Truman well, I hope he goes to the saints everlasting rest. I have always admirdd the simple purity of soul that enabled him to cut through the debris thrown up by more sophisticated minds and to act incisively. I admire his marvelous peace of mind. To order the bomb dropped and then to sleep. Yes, that is greatness!

But I cannot forgive Harry Truman. I can understand his reasoning. I can even agree with his reasoning. I can make all the same calculations on lives lost and saved. I probably would have done the same thing myself - had I the same moral courage. For it did take moral courage, you know, to give the order killing several hundred thousand civilians in Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

But I cannot forgive it. Who can? Not even Harry Truman can. If there is forgiveness it must come from a place beyond our understanding. Luther and Camus both knew that. They knew it far better than most of us. That is why THE FALL, written by an agnostic, is far superior as a Christian sermon than all the moralistic, Pharisaical, Christmas-tinsely business going on in ten thousand churches today. But in one respect Luther and Camus differ. They differed on whether that word from beyond ourselves really is spoken.

Camus - at least in that book - said, "No", there is only despair. Luther said, "Yes, I have heard the Christmas angel; there is the glad tidings of a declaration of forgiveness."

The child of Bethlehem was and is that declaration. He spoke it in his parables. He lived it in his life. He became it in his death. There is a word from the place of innocence and the place of judgment that forgives the slaughter of the innocents and in spite of all that accepts us for ourselves. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

That is what Christmas means.

But there is a further word - a word beyond forgiveness of the past, that looks to new possibilities, a word with power for goodwill to all people.

It is hard to believe in this power. The world does not seem to have improved very much since King Herod's day. We may even feel it is getting worse. Pessimism is as seductive as false optimism; both are excuses for laziness.

There is power for good in the world. And the child of Bethlehem is the decisive expression of that power in human life. He is like an electric conductor through whom that power passes into the lives of others. Years ago the great Unitarian preacher, John Haynes Holmes,

preached a sermon on "Spiritual Power", in which he took Francis of Assisi as an example. He said of St. Francis"

> "There can be no question that this man was an embodiment of power. For two decades and more the world watched him doing things on a gigantic scale. The consequences of his actions were more momentous than those of an earthquake or a tornado. There was a center of force within him which registered its effects from one end of Europe to the other, and made his personality the most potent influence of his time. This gentle friar tamed birds and animals, subdued criminals and outlaws, healed disease and disarmed violence, brought peace to the hearts of men. Three popes sat upon the throne of Peter during the career of Francis, and not one exercised the power of the Assisan. He conquered more countries by his teaching than many a captain by his sword. His Franciscan order seized more captives than all the armies of Caesar and Napoleon.

That's so. And yet if you were to ask St. Francis from whence his power came, he would tell you that he found it in the one born at Bethlehem. It was that day when he sat almost in despair in the little church at St. Damian, staring at the crucifix that the conductive power of Jesus Christ entered into his life. He decided to found a community modeled as far as possible on the lifestyle of Jesus and his first disciples.

This same conductive power still flows from the child born at Bethlehem. He is still the demonstration and the agent of our best possibilities. The Christmas spirit that arises from him is the spirit of hope, both personal and social. It is a spirit born of the faith that there is in the life of man a driving force that carries us beyond where we are.

> "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold the new has come."

That is what we are challenged to believe. Can we believe that there has come into our world a power for good that has the strength to alter the age-old pattern of fear, hatred and conflict? In an age of terror is there hope for shalom?

The answer is an answer that every person must seek in his own heart as he contemplates that happening that made shepherds leave their sheep and wisemen forsake their books and angels come down from heaven.