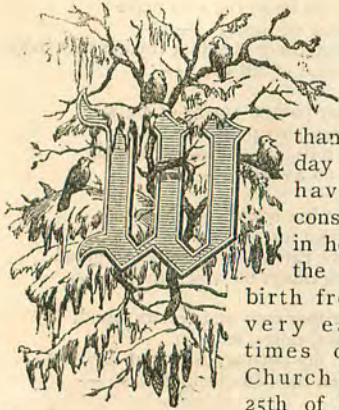


Christmas.

By HIS GRACE THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY.



WH A T more natural than that a day should have been consecrated in honour of the Lord's birth from the very earliest times of the Church? The 25th of December has been thus consecrated. The date of the first observance of this day cannot indeed be given with certainty; neither can we tell now on the authority of what tradition or history its consecration rests. It may or may not have been engrafted on the Jewish Festival of the Dedication, which was in the winter; or have been made to take the place of a Roman holiday which marked the closing year. The Christians of the Western Church adopted the observance at that season very early, though some uncertainty prevails as to the exact day. It would seem that for a time in the East the commemoration of the birth of Christ and of His manifestation to the wise men were combined. But dismissing minute antiquarian questions, we can have no doubt that our present Christmas Day has been hallowed by the worship of fourteen centuries.

Not an unimportant thought is thus suggested. Are we thankful to know that the doctrines preached to us now and here in England are those which the Apostles derived straight from the Lord Himself? Do we prize the two Sacraments as gracious gifts direct from Christ, which have nourished spiritual life in the Church since He first appointed them? Is it well that we should remember that the facts embodied in the Church's creed are the very same which we find in the four Gospels? Still, we shall be unwise not to prize also, according to the degree of their importance, many words expressing doctrines and many forms of worship which come to us indeed without directly divine sanction, but the value of which has been proved by their being helps to piety for many centuries.

There are many divisions amongst Christians in the present day, and many things divide us here in England in this 19th century from the Christians of the

old times. Yet all the faithful in Christ in all ages form one body through their union with Him; and every word, or rite, or ceremony is to be prized which has become venerable as the means of keeping up this union. When, therefore, we gather together in church on the 25th of December, it will be well to think what a multitude of redeemed spirits have, in all lands and in all ages during this long time, been helped, by the observance of Christmas Day, better to express their thankfulness for that wonderful condescension which brought the Eternal Son of God to begin His life on this lower earth as a helpless infant that He might redeem us.

Is there joy in every family when a child is born into the world? And does it please us to keep our own and our friends' birthdays, notwithstanding all the uncertainty of coming happiness or misery which must throw some shadow over the brightest mere human life? And is it not right that we should celebrate with joy and thankfulness the birthday of Him whose coming upon earth has dispelled so many sorrows and opened to all of us such bright hopes of joy eternal? Every ordinance, then, and arrangement of our worship which helps us better to realise the greatness of the gift to man of Christ's birth is much to be prized.

In Roman Catholic countries it is common to exhibit in church at the Christmas season some outward image of the Holy Babe and His Mother and Joseph, with the shepherds and the oxen standing round. To our English and Protestant ideas there seems to be a childishness and even a coarseness in such representations which we do not think suitable to the simple majesty of the worship due to the great mystery of the Incarnation. It is true that unlettered Italian peasants, whose whole life and training has been very different from our own, may have the truths of the Gospel forced on their imaginations by such sights; and young children can probably admire them, feeling that the Christ thus represented in His infancy is brought very near to their simple minds.

After all, these representations may, in a certain stage of knowledge and feeling, have much the same effect as some noble picture of the Holy Family executed by a great painter has on the educated and refined. It is not denied that under quite different circumstances to ours they may be helps to devotion. What is to be guarded against in such

representations is, not their setting forth a vivid image of the sacred history, but, first, their tendency to give a somewhat low idea of what the Lord Jesus Christ is in His Divine Majesty; and, secondly, that they may be used, as these certainly have been in some countries, to withdraw the mind from Christ Himself to the worship of the human mother, to whom the Heavenly Babe was subject.

But though we may not feel any inclination to imitate this kind of representation by which Roman Catholics seek to recall the history of Christ's birth, we are right to mark the Christmas season by such decent alterations in our churches as custom and the manner of our worship approve as suitable. There has been a great change in this respect in our churches of late years. We are not necessarily the better for this—but certainly we are not the worse—and we may well be the better if we use the signs of an outward adornment to impress more vividly on our minds the reality and importance of heavenly truths. We are not to make too much of these things either in opposing or approving of them. They are things indifferent which may have a very good use.

I remember when I first went to live in the extreme north of England there was scarcely a single church within many miles of our cathedral city in which any green boughs or other decorations were allowed to mark the Christmas season. I do not think the people in that district were either better or more staunch in the reformed faith because their churches, usually very poor edifices, carelessly kept in order, were thus bare. There always seemed something cheering when I came to the south again about the Christmas season, and found every church in its simple way getting ready to proclaim in all our villages that there ought to be thankful joy for the birth of Christ. Let these things never be matters of contention. Let them be used to express that our religion is full of happiness and to help us to think more of its doctrines and the practical lessons they teach. Thus shall we use these outward symbols aright.

Was Christ once a little child? This speaks to us of the blessedness of a holy childhood, reared in a holy home, and taught with its dawning reason to welcome holy thoughts.

Did He not afterwards call little children to Him? Did He not take them in His arms and bless them? Did He not tell us that in simplicity His disciples must become as little children?

Christmas is the festival of the childhood. All who have to deal with children may learn many special lessons from it besides its general lessons for us all.