

CHRIST THE KING & HIS TRUTH

Well, the stores have been decorated for Christmas for SOMETIME now and are starting to get CROWDED with shoppers. Our NEIGHBORS are beginning to decorate their HOMES and yards. We're starting to see SANTAS everywhere! And for the VAST majority in our country, CHRISTMAS will be a GLUTTONY of gifts, with people often spending money they DON'T have and going into DEBT, just to keep up. And it's BECAUSE we've been TAUGHT, mostly by the advertisers, that we show our LOVE by the GLUTTONOUS pile of GIFTS that we give, so that the MORE we GIVE to someone, especially our children and grandchildren, the MORE we LOVE that someone. Yes, starting NOW, CHRISTMAS, Christmas DECORATIONS, Christmas GIFTS, Christmas CARDS and Christmas PARTIES will just PERVADE our society. And other than the GLUTTONY of GIFTS, it's a WONDERFUL time of year, though STRESSFUL.

I do, however, have one QUESTION for you: IF you were an ALIEN from another planet looking IN on the United States over the next MONTH, and IF you had NEVER been exposed to CHRISTMAS, and didn't know the REASON for the season, DO you think that you would be able to figure OUT what it's ABOUT? Would you have any CLUE that it's ALL centered on JESUS? Quite frankly, I DOUBT it! And I think we need to be CONCERNED about that, because after ALL, what IS the REASON for the season, IF not JESUS.

My Uncle Al, an 82-year old retired journalist, has written a Christmas SONG that he's convinced Tony Bennett will be singing next year. But I'D like you to HEAR it. It's called "*The Babe to Adore*". Just listen.

SONG: *The Babe to Adore*

Yes, amidst ALL the glitz and glitter, gifts and greetings, where IS *the BABE to adore*? Amidst ALL the Santas and songs, sale flyers and sleighs, where IS *the BABE to adore*? Amidst ALL the TREES and tinsel, TREATS and TV specials, where IS *the BABE to adore*? Yes, where CAN the REASON for the season be FOUND? Because WHOSE birthday IS it anyway? Yes, what HAPPENED to *the BABE to Adore*? Because I don't think that an ALIEN would have a CLUE what it's all ABOUT by looking IN on the United States over the next MONTH. And unfortunately, NEITHER do the vast majority of CHILDREN these days, who are getting little or no religious EDUCATION. I'm SURE that we have children in our OWN church who come only a FEW times a YEAR, because SPORTS, weekends away and sleeping-in, ALL take priority over their religious education. And IF they don't happen to COME on the weeks that we're teaching the CHRISTMAS story, then they DON'T have a CLUE what it's all ABOUT.

SO, what are we to DO when we just can't FIND *the BABE to Adore*? WHAT are we to DO when our whole SOCIETY seems to be losing touch with the REASON for the season? WHAT are we to DO when the GLITZ, glitter and gluttony of GIFTS gives us GLAUCOMA when it comes to seeing GOD in disguise, which is what Christmas is REALLY about? Yes, WHAT are we to DO?

Well, I think that we need to remember, THROUGHOUT this Christmas season, not JUST the God in DISGUISE -- who is BORN as one of US and lies in a MANGER, and who lives and works, laughs and cries, suffer and dies, JUST like WE do -- but we ALSO need to remember WHO that Child in the manger really IS. In OTHER words, we need to REMEMBER not JUST *the Babe to Adore*, but ALSO *Christ the KING*, the *KING* foretold by the prophet, Daniel; the *KING* who said to Pontius Pilate: *My KINGDOM is NOT of THIS world... For THIS I was BORN, and for THIS I came INTO the world: the TESTIFY to the TRUTH. Everyone who belongs to the TRUTH listens to MY voice.* Yes, ALL through this holiday SEASON, we need to REMEMBER *Christ the KING*, and not JUST *the Babe to Adore*. ALL through this holiday SEASON, we need to REMEMBER the One who *CAME to testify to the TRUTH*, because THAT will REMIND us to keep JESUS, *the Babe to Adore*, at the very HEART of our holiday PREPARATIONS and celebrations.

And friends, IF we remember *Christ the KING*, and NOT just *the Babe to Adore* -- which is WHY we put *Christ the King Sunday*, which is TODAY, just BEFORE the beginning of ADVENT, as well as at the END of the church year, to culminate the YEAR that ENDS this week -- IF we remember *Christ the KING*, we will KNOW how to PREPARE for and celebrate CHRISTMAS. Because IF Christ is KING, and WE are

citizens of HIS kingdom, then we will REMEMBER that HIS Kingdom is radically different from our earthly kingdoms. And in order to be good citizens of HIS kingdom, we need to live by HIS values. And friends, AS we witness JESUS in the gospels, we KNOW that CHRIST'S kingdom is where ALL people have ENOUGH and to spare; and where ALL people are faithful STEWARDS, or caretakers, of God's creation; and where ALL people LIVE together in HARMONY, peace and prosperity, respecting and cherishing the lives of all; and where ALL people put CHRIST first and foremost in their lives and allow no OTHER gods (with a small "g") to compete for their allegiance; and where ALL people strive to be faithful citizens of HIS kingdom and put HIS kingdom FIRST, EVEN before their citizenship in their NATION. And WHEN we live like THIS, putting CHRIST'S values FIRST, we AUTOMATICALLY prepare for and celebrate Christmas DIFFERENTLY. We DON'T allow the advertisers to CONTROL our Christmas giving, but we replace the GLUTTONY of gifts, given to our KIDS and GRANDKIDS, spouses and friends, with gifts of LOVE and COMPASSION for our neighbors ALL around the world, people who truly NEED our gifts and our giving. Now, I'm NOT saying: *Don't GIVE to your loved ones.* But I AM saying: *Don't buy into the GLUTTONY of the season. USE your money to accomplish the goals of the One who said, "Whatever you DO to even the LEAST of your brothers and sisters, you do it to ME. And whatever you DON'T do to them, you DON'T it to ME."* SO, whether it's buying FAIR TRADE gifts for those you love, or contributing in your LOVED ones names to organizations that serve the poor and make life better for ALL people, MAKE this season about CHRIST and HIS values. And when you DO that, people will look at YOU and be able to recognize *the Babe to Adore* in your ACTIONS. And if ENOUGH of us would DO it, then even an ALIEN would UNDERSTAND the REASON for the SEASON.

Now, I could END my sermon here, and SOME of you probably WISH I would. But I'm NOT going to. BEFORE I finish this sermon, I'd like to move in a DIFFERENT direction, because SOMETHING that Jesus says in our Scripture Lesson from JOHN today can be BAFFLING. Jesus says: *For THIS I was BORN, and for THIS I came INTO the world: the TESTIFY to the TRUTH.* So, MY question is Pontius PILATE'S question: *what IS the TRUTH to which Jesus came to TESTIFY?* What IS the TRUTH?

Well, I'd like to use 3 simple SONGS to EXPLORE what I think is Jesus' TRUTH. The first one is *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider*, probably one of the very first songs you ever learned, complete with hand motions. (**SING *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider***) It's a CUTE song, isn't it? But THINK about it from the SPIDER'S perspective. The truth IS that the spider is getting NOWHERE. From the SPIDER'S perspective, LIFE is just ODTAA ("One darn thing after another")! The ancient Greeks composed a MYTH to express this truth. It's the tale of Sisyphus, which ENDS with the hero condemned to forever STRUGGLE at rolling a huge STONE up a steep HILL. But EVERY time he reaches the top, and it looks like his task is finally accomplished, the stone ROLLS back down to the BOTTOM. And so Sisyphus begins EVERY day by once again facing his "Sisyphian task" of pushing the SAME rock up the SAME hill. And this happens OVER and OVER and OVER again! Well, the SAME is true for US, isn't it? And IF you don't BELIEVE me, just ask any OFFICE-WORKER, whose DESK has an IN box and an OUT box. And EVERY day, it comes IN and goes OUT, comes IN and goes OUT. And LIFE is just ODTAA, ONE darn thing after another: same old, same old. OR, ask a HOMEMAKER, who tries valiantly to keep the house picked up and looking decent. Day after day, he or she does it all over again. And life is just ODTAA! And of course, we ALL feel it, and we feel it OFTEN! Who DOESN'T know what it FEELS like to start over and over again, constantly climbing *up the water spout*, even though we know the RAIN is COMING? EVEN our old TEMPTATIONS and MALFUNCTIONS keep coming BACK to HAUNT us, like the LUGGAGE rolling around the LUGGAGE return at the AIRPORT – ROUND and ROUND.... And that's one important TRUTH about our lives. But is THAT the truth to which JESUS came to TESTIFY?

ANOTHER truth is expressed in the song, *Rock-a-Bye-Baby*, which has had a long, cherished CAREER as a soft, soothing lullaby. But did you ever really LISTEN to the words? (**SING: *Rock-a-Bye Baby***). And THIS is supposed to sooth a fussy baby to SLEEP, a song about a BABY falling out of a TREETOP? BUT, isn't ONE truth about life the fact that sometimes terrible things DO happen, and LIFE unexpectedly JOLTS us with tremendous pain or trauma, betrayal or death. After all: the lullaby DOESN'T say, *IF the bough breaks, the cradle will fall.* It says: *WHEN the bough breaks, the cradle will fall.* And it's TRUE: to be ALIVE in this world is to live in the MIDST of falling branches, FAILING relationships, and FRAGILE health. As Scott Peck said at the beginning of his book, *The Road Less Traveled: LIFE is DIFFICULT!* Moreover, life CAN be downright TRAGIC! In fact, the New Testament bears witness to this TRUTH by opening and closing

with TEARS. The FIRST gospel, Matthew, BEGINS, in chapter 2, verse 18, with the words: *A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they ARE no more.* And in the LAST book of the Bible, REVELATION, we read: *I saw, UNDER the altar, the SOULS of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord ... how LONG will it BE before you judge and avenge ...* (Revelation 6:9, 10). And if you THINK about it, even Jesus HIMSELF suffered the truth of life's tragedies when, in pain and despair, He called OUT from the CROSS: *My God, my God, WHY have you forsaken me?* Yes, it's TRUE that life is DIFFICULT, and SOMETIMES even TRAGIC! It's FULL of SURPRISES, but not ALL of them are GOOD ones. SO, is THIS the TRUTH to which Jesus came to TESTIFY?

Well, there is ONE more TRUTH-song that I'd like to SHARE with you today. The WORDS are written by a Princeton professor, Henry Van Dyke, and the music by Ludwig van Beethoven. The song is called, *Ode to Joy*, OR as WE know it, *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You*.

*Joyful, joyful, we adore You, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before You, opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness: fill us with the light of day.*

Friends, I believe that THIS truth is DIVINE truth? THIS truth is the ULTIMATE truth: the truth to which JESUS came to testify. And THIS truth says that, no matter how SERIOUS the GRIND, and no matter how GRINDING the tragedy, God's LOVE prevails! And BECAUSE God's love PREVAILS, we can experience JOY, gladness and PEACE, even in the midst of an *Itsy-Bitsy Spider* WORLD and a *Rock-a-Bye-Baby* LIFE.

This past week, we all sat at our Thanksgiving tables, re-creating in our OWN families a MOMENT from our nation's HISTORY that we'd ALL like to CAPTURE and CONTAIN in the present. That little band of 102 ill-prepared PILGRIMS who, on a cold November morning, established a tiny outpost at Plymouth Rock, spent a grim and grueling first YEAR, learning and living the TRUTH about how LIFE was going to BE in this New World. Their crops had failed. Their seeds had rotted. They fell ill from disease and malnutrition. And DESPITE a new land and new hopes and new horizons, once again LIFE just seemed *itsy-bitsy*. It just seemed ODTAA. And although they had come to this New World with high ideals and tremendous reserves of faith in God's providence, the unexpected HARSHNESS of the land, the hardness of their new life, and their heartsickness for HOME, sent HALF of them packing for ETERNITY. And AS they buried their wives, husbands and children in the frozen ground of Massachusetts, they found OUT that the lullaby of religious freedom had verses just as MOURNFUL and SCARY as *Rock-a-Bye-Baby*.

BUT, for those who stuck it OUT and experienced these tough TRUTHS about life, there came a time when, at LAST, they could HEAR the strains of another ode-to-joy TUNE, weaving its way through their SOULS. It went like THIS: *O JOY, that seekest me through PAIN, I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain, And feel the PROMISE is NOT in vain: THAT morn shall TEARLESS be.* (V. 3 of George Matheson's, *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go*). And SO, calling together their COLONY, and joining the NATIVE peoples -- who were here FIRST, and whose generosity of spirit, knowledge of their environment, and material goods had made it possible for the Anglos' EVEN to survive -- our PILGRIM ancestors genuinely and joyfully celebrated the REAL truth about their new life in the New World, the TRUTH to which JESUS had come to TESTIFY! And that TRUTH simply SAYS that, no matter what ELSE we face in our lives, God's LOVE is ALWAYS in our MIDST; God's FORGIVENESS is ETERNALLY available to us; God's PEACE is poured out to EACH of us in a NEVER-ENDING stream; and God's JOY can fill up ALL the cracked and imperfect corners of our lives, IF we will just TRUST God, LEAN on God, and find our life's MEANING and PURPOSE in advancing GOD'S Kingdom and GOD'S values. Yes, THAT'S the TRUTH to which Jesus came to TESTIFY. And it's a LIFE-GIVING truth, a truth WORTH celebrating, and a TRUTH that can help us REMEMBER and TESTIFY to *the Babe to Adore*, so that ALL people will know the REASON for the coming SEASON. Thanks be to God! Amen.