

## The Return From Christmas.

Text: Luke 2:20

Suggested Hymns:

19, 623, 624, 22, 22

1) It Could Be A Meaningless Return

2) It Could Be A Cynical Return

3) It Should Be A Meaningful Return

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 2:20, <sup>20</sup> *Then the shepherds returned* ... (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

For each person there are memories. ...

*Memories that quicken the pulse. ...*

*Memories that stab and burn. ...*

*Memories that provoke laughter. ...*

*Memories that mist the eyes. ...*

Those who have stood at the rim of the Grand Canyon agree that this majestic and awesome scene will repeatedly flash across the horizon of their memory, often at those precise moments when they need to be reminded of their own smallness in the total picture of creation.

Again and again in our own lives there comes back the remembrance of some event. It may be while moving quietly across the surface of a lake, or a beautiful sunset with the sun just beginning to tint the heavens with a delicate pink.

In the midst of turmoil and anxiety the memory of those moments can bring serenity and calmness and a longing to return. We all have known such moments to remember.

In these past days we have added a few more precious flowers to the garland of Christmas memories. It is to be regretted, however, that at times we think so much of Christmases past that we do not fully appreciate the wonders and the blessedness of the present Christmas. None of us will have come away from this

Christmas the same as we were before it arrived; that is, if Christmas has been the spiritual experience that God intended.

What must the first Christmas have meant to those so closely associated with its events? What of the innkeeper? Did he, too, come to the manger? What of the crowds in Bethlehem? Did some of them also come to worship and adore Jesus?

We know what happened to the shepherds. After the startling appearance of the heavenly host, they found their way to the stable and saw the Child. How long they remained, we are not told.

But our text tells us that *Then the shepherds returned* ... and we, of course, supply the additional words “*to their flocks.*” They were still shepherds with work to do.

But they were at one and the same time changed men, witnesses of the King of Kings, the first to bow before God, made flesh. Throughout their lives they would relive those exciting moments that found them racing into Bethlehem and then reverently kneeling before the holy Child.

But eventually they had to leave the manger and go back to their sheep. Likewise, we must also leave the manger and make *The Return from Christmas*. Let us consider the return from Christmas. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. It Could Be A Meaningless Return**

We can have returned from Christmas to the ordinary and the commonplace quite unmoved and unaffected. There are many people who will have returned in just that way. This does not mean that they did not celebrate Christmas. On the contrary, they may have “*celebrated*” with greater vim and vigour than the majority of us. But now that Christmas is past, it is remembered as just one more occasion for “*celebration.*”

For them the entire Christmas story is a very pleasant little narrative, but wholly unrelated to the grim realities of life. They are not particularly eager to dispute with anyone who takes the story seriously, nor are they antagonistic toward any who refuse to believe it.

It makes a nice background for Christmas, gives it a sort of sacred touch, but more than that they will not admit. So the real meaning of the day, the meaning

it could have for their lives, escapes them completely, and they return to the daily tasks of life unchanged.

Some of these people become lavishly generous around Christmas but revert to being just as cold and calculating in their business dealings after Christmas as they were before.

They became mysteriously, friendly and warm, down at the office when there were Christmas carols in the air and all spoke excitedly of where and how they were going to spend and enjoy the holidays. But now they are just as curt and unfriendly as they were before the Christmas decorations went up.

Some may have even managed to get to church once or twice — to hear somebody's youngster say a piece in a Christmas program ... to join a few friends who think it's "*nice*" to go to church, at least on Christmas. But now that it is all over, they do not have the time for, or interest in, church other than to agree that churches are probably assets to a community.

Stranger still, there will be members of Christian churches who will have gone through all the motions of observing the birth day of the Christ but whose spirit and heart have not been stirred by it at all.

Christ remains for them just a historic personage and not the divine Saviour of their souls. Religion is just another fragment of life, like economics or politics. You dust it off on special occasions and then shelve it for a longer or shorter period. It has little to do with the way a person lives every day, the way he deals with other people and the way he dies.

So they return from Christmas, unmoved and unaffected — and, oh, the pity of it! How strangely out of place they would have felt on the road back from Bethlehem in the company of the rejoicing shepherds — men whose eyes had seen the King!

## **2. It Could Be A Cynical Return**

But there are those who return from Christmas deeply moved, but in the wrong direction. They have become quite cynical and bitter about the whole business of Christmas. There is a headlong rush away from Christmas and its message.

These are the people who like to point out that Christmas is just another escape mechanism, a device by which people are kept from facing stern reality for a little while. For them people who really seem to enjoy Christmas are like people attending a convention. They have a chance to act and speak in a way quite unlike the way in which they would normally act and speak back in the old home town.

These cynics point out that Christmas gives people an excuse for being kind and friendly, when for the rest of the year they are anything but that. They point out that it gives people an opportunity for doing a lot of wishful thinking and talking about peace on earth, and salvation, and applying a great deal more theological wordiness which is easily recognised as such, under the glare of human logic and common sense.

For them Christmas is a pathetic little story much in the same vein as some of Grimm's fairy tales. We agree that there truly is suffering and compassion in abundance in the story of God's love for a world that loved Him not; a love so wondrous that it would find Him giving up heaven in exchange for a manger, and a crown of glory in exchange for a cross of shame.

But there also is suffering and compassion in the spectacle of people cynically decrying the one great story which offers them rest for their souls. We are at times discouraged in the realisation that there are those people in the world who deal so unkindly with that which is so sacred and divine. But we remember that Jesus "*came to His own, and His own did not receive Him,*"<sup>1</sup> and the world still finds no room for Him.

Oh, these cynics would not go so far, perhaps, as to suggest that Christmas be abolished. It does have some benefits. It does seem to affect people in strange ways. But let it be a day strictly for children.

So until there are no more Christmases, there will be those who, having been caught up in all the externals of the season, will look back to it with cynicism, spiritually impoverished and devoid of understanding of its eternal significance.

For such it is our daily prayer that their eyes may be opened so that they, too, may see and know what the shepherds knew as they returned to their flocks.

### **3. It Should Be A Meaningful Return**

Thanks be to God, there are always those people who, like the shepherds, return from Christmas glorifying and praising God for all the things which they have seen and heard as it has been told to them. We Christians should have grown a little taller in spiritual stature in these past days, for we, too, have seen in the manger our Saviour and King.

Once more we have been given the sweet and blessed assurance that all of the promises of God are true and righteous. Now we must put away the trappings of Christmas. The carols and the hymns will only be echoes in the heart until Christmas comes again. We shall strip our homes of the Christmas tree and the decorations.

We must put away the greeting cards and gifts. The young shall soon return to their schools. But Christmas and our Christ shall not be stripped from our hearts. As we return to our duties and the tasks of living, we shall carry in our hearts this glorious truth — we are the redeemed of God. It was for us that He became a Child. We know! We were at the manger!

Christmas is for us more than a tender memory. It is for us a living vibrant truth — God and sinners reconciled. The verdict of eternal death has been withdrawn, for the Judge Himself has sent His own Son, and He is punished in our stead. Through faith in Him we are made the children of God, and He encircles us with the everlasting arms of compassion and love.

Are we fearful because of the sins with which we have sullied our lives? convinced that we are beyond the reach of His forgiveness? Then lift up your eyes, and see Christ, who came into this world as a little Child that He can say to you, *“be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven.”*<sup>2</sup> *Look to Me, and be saved.*”

Are we sad and sorrowful? Into the gloom of life comes the message of Christmas, telling us that it is through sadness and sorrow that God leads us to gladness and eternal joy. As His own dear Son knew the sum total of this world’s sadness and sorrow, so must we because of sin know sorrow, that one day we may by grace through Jesus thrill to the joys of eternity.

Are we troubled and confused as life places one burden after another on our frail shoulders, as living becomes more complicated and we find ourselves enmeshed in a web of distress? Then let Christmas remind us that we have a wonderful Lord who hears the prayers of His children and will never leave them

nor forsake them. The proof of His abounding love is found in the manger at Bethlehem.

Are we concerned about the future? worried about what may lie in store for us and for our loved ones beyond the present day? Then hear again the Christmas Gospel, which alone can strip fear from men's hearts and know that because we are Christ's there is nothing which can separate us from the love of God, that life eternal looms just beyond the border of this present time, and that we through the Child of Bethlehem shall be partakers of that glory.

So let us return from Christmas, with hearts rejoicing and spirits lifted. We, too, just as the shepherds, have been to Bethlehem and must praise and glorify God for all that we have seen and heard. This shall be our return from Christmas. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:11

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 9:2