

FROM EARLY POEMS: 1894 – 1900

XMAS DAY

- from GKC's notebook, circa 1895 - quoted in M. Ward's biography

Good news: but if you ask me what it is, I know not;
It is a track of feet in the snow,
It is a lantern showing a path,
It is a door set open.

THE WISE MEN

- from *The Daily News*, Dec 25, 1905

Step softly, under snow or rain,
To find the place where men can pray;
The way is all so very plain
That we may lose the way.

Oh, we have learnt to peer and pore
On tortured puzzles from our youth,
We know all labyrinthine lore,
We are the three wise men of yore,
And we know all things but the truth.

We have gone round and round the hill
And lost the wood among the trees,
And learnt long names for every ill,
And served the mad gods, naming still
The furies of Eumenides.

The gods of violence took the veil
Of vision and philosophy,
The Serpent that brought all men bale,
He bites his own accursed tail,
And calls himself Eternity.

Go humbly...it has hailed and snowed...
With voices low and lanterns lit;
So very simple is the road,
That we may stray from it.

The world grows terrible and white,
And blinding white the breaking day;
We walk bewildered in the light,
For something is too large for sight,

And something much too plain to say.

The Child that was ere worlds begun
(...We need but walk a little way,
We need but see a latch undone...)
The Child that played with moon and sun
Is playing with a little hay.

The house from which the heavens are fed,
The old strange house that is our own,
Where tricks of words are never said,
And Mercy is as plain as bread,
And honour is as hard as stone.

Go humbly, humble are the skies,
And low and large and fierce the Star;
So very near the Manger lies
That we may travel far.

Hark! Laughter like the lion wakes
To roar to the resounding plain,
And the whole heaven shouts and shakes,
For God Himself is born again,
And we are little children walking
Through the snow and rain.

FROM POEMS OF MIDDLE LIFE: 1900 – 1914

THE HOUSE OF CHRISTMAS

- *A Chesterton Calendar*, Paul Kegan, 1911

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
In a place where no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

A SONG OF GIFTS TO GOD

- *The Pall Mall Magazine*, Dec., 1913

When the first Christmas presents came, the straw where Christ was rolled
Smelt sweeter than their frankincense, burnt brighter than their gold,
And a wise man said, 'We will not give; the thanks would be but cold.'

'Nay,' said the next. 'To all new gifts, to this gift or another,
Bends the high gratitude of God; even as He now, my brother,
Who had a Father for all time, yet thanks Him for a Mother.

'Yet scarce for Him this yellow stone or prickly smells and sparse,
Who holds the gold heart of the sun that fed these timber Bars,
Nor any scentless lily lives for One that smells the stars.'

Then spake the third of the Wise Men, the wisest of the three:
'We may not with the widest lives enlarge His liberty,
Whose wings are wider than the world. It is not He, but we.

'We say not He has more to gain, but we have more to lose.
Less gold shall go astray, we say, less gold, if thus we choose,
Go to make harlots of the Greeks and hucksters of the Jews.

'Less clouds before colossal feet redden in the underlight,
To the blind gods from Babylon less incense burn tonight,
To the high beasts of Babylon, whose mouths make mock of right.'

Babe of the thousand birthdays, we that are young, yet grey,
White with the centuries, still can find no better thing to say,
We that with sects and whims and wars have wasted Christmas Day.

Light Thou Thy censer, to Thyself, for all our fires are dim,
Stamp Thou Thine image on our coins, for Caesar's face grow grim,
And a dumb devil of pride and greed has taken hold of him.

We bring Thee back great Christendom, churches and towns and towers,
And if our hands are glad, O God, to cast them down like flowers,
Tis not that they enrich Thine hands, but they are saved from ours.

THE THEOLOGY OF CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

- *The Contemporary Review*, Jan. 1910

Those modern theologians who insist that Christianity is not in doctrines, but in spirit, commonly fail to notice that they are exposing themselves to a test more abrupt and severe than that of doctrine itself. Some legal preliminaries at least are necessary before a man can be burned for his opinions; but without any preliminaries at all a man can be shot for his tone of voice. The old-fashioned Christian may be even more rapid in his decision that certain new views are unsympathetic than in his decision that they are unorthodox. It is much easier to detect and dislike the smell of a heresy than to trace it to its chemical ingredients. And when the new theologian throws over history and exact metaphysics, and simply says: 'Stripped of its formalities, this is Christianity,' he lies more open than the old theologian to the purely personal answer of the man in the street, 'If that is Christianity, take it away.'

One may consider gunpowder as a thing composed of charcoal, sulphur and saltpeter: or one may consider gunpowder (as does the more direct intellect of the maiden aunt) as a thing that ends in a bang. But if the philosopher of innovation boasts of bringing no salt, sulphur or charcoal, we do expect at least a bang, and a good one. If he can blow up Parliament with mild, salad oil and fine sawdust, let him. But parliament must be blown up; that, we shall all agree, is the essential. Now Christianity, whatever else it is, is an explosion. Whether or not it consists of the Fall, the Incarnation, The Resurrection, it does certainly consist of thunder, of prodigy, and of fire. Unless it is sensational there is simply no sense in it. Unless the Gospel sounds like a gun going off it has not been uttered at all. And if the new theologies sound like steam slowly escaping from a leaky kettle, then even the untrained ear of the ordinary layman (who knows neither chemistry nor theology) can detect the difference between that sound and an explosion. It is vain for such reformers to say that they go, not by the letter, but by the spirit. For they are even more plainly opposed to the spirit than they are to the letter.

Let us take one instance out of many of this principle in operation; the case of Christmas presents. A little while ago I saw a statement by Mrs. Eddy on this subject, in which she said that she did not give presents in a gross, sensuous, terrestrial sense, but sat still and thought about Truth and Purity till all her friends were much better for it. Now I do not say that this plan is either superstitious or impossible, and no doubt it has an economic charm. I say it is un-Christian in the same solid and prosaic sense that playing a tune backwards is unmusical or saying 'ain't' is ungrammatical. I do not know that there is any Scriptural text or Church Council that condemns Mrs Eddy's theory of Christmas presents: but Christianity condemns it, as soldiering condemns running away. The two attitudes are antagonistic not only in their theology, not only in their thought, but in their state of soul before they ever begin to think. The idea of embodying goodwill – that is, of putting it into a body – is the huge and primal idea of the Incarnation. A gift of God that can be seen and touches is the whole

point of the epigram of the creed. Christ Himself was a Christmas present. The note of material Christmas presents is struck even before He is born in the first movements of the sages and the star. The Three Kings came to Bethlehem bringing gold and frankincense and myrrh. If they had only brought Truth and Purity and Love there would have been no Christian art and no Christian civilization.

Many sermons must have been preached upon those three gifts; but there is one aspect of them that has hardly received due attention. It is odd that our European sceptics, while borrowing from Oriental philosophers so much of their determinism and their despair, are perpetually sneering at the one Oriental element which Christianity eagerly incorporated, the one Oriental element which is really simple and delightful. I mean the Oriental love of gay colours and an infantile excitement about luxury. Sceptic after sceptic has called the New Jerusalem of St John a lump of vulgar jewellery. Sceptic after sceptic has denounced the rites of the Church as parades of sensual purple and tawdry gold. But in this selection, indeed, the Church was wiser than either Europe or Asia. She saw that the Eastern appetite for scarlet and silver and gold and green was in itself innocent and ardent, though wasted by the lower civilizations upon the pampering of the idleness and tyranny. She saw that the stoic plainness of the Roman had in it a peril of stiffness and pride, though this was allied with the equality and public spirit of the highest civilization then extant. The Church took all the labyrinthine gold and crawling colours which had adorned so many erotic poems and cruel romances in the East, and she lit those motley flames to illuminate gigantic humility and the greater intensities of innocence. She took the colours from the serpent's back: but she left the serpent. The European peoples have, upon the whole, followed in this the lead of Christian instinct and Christian art. Nothing is healthier in our popular tradition than the fact that we regard the East as a mass of quaint shapes and colours rather than a rival philosophical system. Though it is in fact a temple of hoary cosmologies, we treat it as a big bazaar – that is, as an enormous toy-shop. The real people remember the Near East, not by the Arabian prophet, but by the 'Arabian Nights.' Constantinople was captured by a Saracen culture scarce inferior, at the time, to ours. But we do not trouble about Turkish culture, but rather about Turkey carpets. The Celestial Empire has been filled for ages with an ironical agnosticism. But we Europeans do not ask for Chinese enigmas, but rather for Chinese puzzles. We regard the East as a great Gamage's; and we do well. This is the heartiest and most human thing in the East, what is called the violence of its colouring and the vulgarity of its gems. How evil are other Eastern things, the wheels of mental destiny and the wastes of mental doubt, we can only know from the modern skeptics themselves, who give us the dreary Eastern attitude combined with the dreary Western costume. Schopenhauer shows us the poison of the snake without its glitter, as the early Church showed us the glitter without the poison. It was the glitter that Christendom took out of the tangle of Eastern things. Gold ran like fire in a forest round every script and statute and clung to the head of every king and saint. But

it all came from the one lump of gold that Melchior bore in his hand when he went across the deserts to Bethlehem.

The other two gifts are marked even more by the great Christian note – the note of the sensuous and the material. There is even something brazenly carnal about the appeal to the sense of smell in frankincense and myrrh. The nose is not left out of the divine human body. An organ which to the modern mind seems as comic as an elephant's trunk is familiarly recognized in such Oriental imagery. But, to insist on the other side in turn, this Asiatic luxury is in the Christian mystery only admitted in order to be subordinate to a higher simplicity and sanity. The gold is brought to a stable; the kings go seeking a carpenter. The wise men are on the march, not to find wisdom, but rather a strong and sacred ignorance. The wise men came from the East; but they went Westward to find God.

Besides this bodily and incarnate quality which makes Christmas presents so Christian, there is another element with a similar spiritual effect: I mean what may be called their particularism. On this, again, the new theories (of which Christian science is the largest and most lucid) strike a note startlingly dissimilar and opposite. Modern theology will tell us that the Child of Bethlehem is only an abstraction of all children; that the mother from Nazareth is a metaphysical symbol of motherhood. The truth is that it is only because the Nativity is a narrative of one lonely and literal mother and child that it is universal at all. If Bethlehem were not particular it would not be popular. In the same way a love-song to a scornful woman might be so piercing and mortal that all men sang it more and even, the hind at the plough and the prince in the saddle. But they would all stop singing suddenly if you told them that the song was not made about one woman, but only about women in the abstract. Christmas, down to its most homely and even comic observances of stockings and boxes, is penetrated with this personal idea of a secret between God and man – a divine cap that fits the particular human head. The cosmos is conceived as a central and celestial post-office. The postal system is, indeed, vast and rapid, but the parcels are all addressed, sealed and inviolate. A pillar-box is only public in order that a letter may be private. Christmas presents are a standing protest on behalf of giving as distinct from that mere sharing that modern moralities offer as equivalent or superior. Christmas stands for this superb and sacred paradox: that it is a higher spiritual transaction for Tommy and Molly each to give each other sixpence than for both equally to share a shilling. Christmas is something better than a thing for all; it is a thing for everybody. And, if anyone finds such phrases aimless or fantastic, or thinks that the distinction has no existence except in a refinement of words, the only test is that I have indicated already – the permanent test of the popular. Take any hundred girls from a board school and see whether they do not make a distinction between a flower for each and a garden for all. If therefore new spiritual schools are concerned to prove that they have the spirit and secret of the Christian festival, they must prove it, not by abstract affirmations, but by things that have a special and unmistakable smack, by hitting one pungent tinge

of taste, by being able to write a Christmas carol, or even to make a Christmas pie.

The Winter Feast

- *GK's Weekly*, Jan. 2, 1936

It is the greatest glory of the Christian tradition that it has incorporated so many Pagan traditions. But it is most glorious of all, to my mind, when they are popular traditions. And the best and most obvious example is the way in which Christianity did incorporate, in so far as it did incorporate, the old human and heathen conception of the Winter Feast. There are, indeed, two profound and mysterious truths to be balanced here. The first is that what was then heathen was still human; that is, it was both mystical and material; it expressed itself in sacred substances and sacramental acts; it understood the mystery of trees and waters and the holy flame. And the other, which will be a much more tactless and irritating assertion is that while a thing is heathen it is not yet completely human. But the point here is that the Pagan element in Christmas came quite natural to Christians, because it was not in fact very far from Christianity.

Take, for example, the whole fundamental idea of a Winter Feast. There is a perfectly natural parallel between a religion that defies the world and a ritual that defies the weather. Heathenism in the sense of hedonism, the concentration of the mind on pure pleasure as such, would chiefly concentrate on the conception of a Summer Feast. But in winter even a rich man receives some faint hint of the problem of a poor man; he may avoid being hungry, but he cannot always avoid being cold. To choose that moment of common freezing for the assertion of common fraternity is, in its own intrinsic nature, a foreshadowing of what we call the Christian idea. It involves the suggestion that joy comes from within and not from without. It involves the suggestion that peril and the potentiality of pain are themselves a ground of gratitude and rejoicing. It involves the suggestion that even when we are merely Pagans, we are not merely Pantheists. We are not merely Nature-worshippers; because Man smiles when Nature frowns. It has always involved, under varying limitations in varying societies, the idea of hospitality; especially hospitality to the stranger and generally to the poor. Of course, there are perfectly natural reasons for wanting to drink wine or warm ourselves at the fire in winter; but that is not an answer, except to those who already have the ill-informed prejudice that Christianity must be opposed to things merely because they are natural. The point is in making a point of it; the special interest is in the special occasion; in the fact that during the Winter Feast, whether Pagan or Christian, there always was, in some degree, the idea of extending the enjoyment to others; of passing round the wine or seating the wanderer by the hearth. It is no controversial point against the Christians that they felt they could take up and continue such traditions among the Pagan; it only shows that the Christians knew a Christian thing when they saw it.

This real history of Christmas is very relevant to the real crisis of Christendom. We live in a terrible time of war and rumour of war; with a barbaric danger of the real reaction, that goes back not to the old form but to the old formlessness. International idealism in its effort to hold the world together, in a peace that can resist wars and revolutions, is admittedly weakened and often

disappointed. I should say simply that it does not go deep enough. Christianity could draw life out of the depths of Paganism; but mere Modernism cannot draw on the depths of either. Charity is too much of a manufactured article; and too little of a natural product. The League of nations is too new to be natural. The modern materialistic humanitarianism is too young to be vigorous. If we really wish to make vivid the horrors of destruction and mere disciplined murder, we must see them more simply as attacks on the hearth and the human family; and feel about Hitler as men felt about Herod. If we want to talk about poverty, we must talk about it as the hunger of a human being, a pain as positive as toothache; and not as the fall in wages or the failure of imports, or even the lowering of the economic standard of living. We must say first of the beggar, not that there is insufficient housing accommodation, but that he has nowhere to lay his head. We must say first of the human family, not that there are no jobs for them in the factory, but that there is no room for them in the inn. That is, we must talk of the human family in language as plain and practical and positive as that in which mystics used to talk of the Holy Family. We must learn again to use the naked words that describe a natural thing; and dispense for a moment with all those sociological polysyllables, with which an artificial society has learned to talk of it as an artificial thing. Then we shall draw on the driving force of many thousand years; and call up a real humanitarianism out of the depths of humanity.

A LAST POEM

GLORIA IN PROFUNDIS

- Number five of *The Ariel Poems*, Faber and Gwyer, 1927

There has fallen on earth for a token
A god too great for the sky.
He has burst out of all things and broken
The bounds of eternity:
Into time and the terminal land
He has strayed like a thief or a lover,
For the wine of the world brims over,
Its splendour is spilt on the sand.

Who is proud when the heavens are humble,
Who mounts if the mountains fall,
If the fixed stars topple and tumble
And a deluge of love drowns all –
Who rears up his head for a crown,
Who holds up his will for a warrant,
Who strives with the starry torrent,
When all that is good goes down?

For in dread of such falling and failing
The fallen angels fell
Inverted in insolence, scaling
The hanging mountain of hell:
But unmeasured of plummet and rod
Too deep for their sight to scan,
Outrushing the fall of man
Is the height of the fall of God.

Glory to God in the Lowest
The spout of the stars in spate –
Where the thunderbolt things to be slowest
And the lightning fears to be late:
As men dive for a sunken gem
Pursuing, we hunt and hound it,
The fallen star that has found it
In the cavern of Bethlehem.

A LITTLE LITANY

When God turned back eternity and was young,
Ancient of Days, grown little for your mirth
(As under the low arch the land is bright)
Peered through you, gate of heaven--and saw the earth.

Or shutting out his shining skies awhile
Built you about him for a house of gold
To see in pictured walls his storied world
Return upon him as a tale is told.

Or found his mirror there; the only glass
That would not break with that unbearable light
Till in a corner of the high dark house
God looked on God, as ghosts meet in the night.

Star of his morning; that unfallen star
In that strange starry overturn of space
When earth and sky changed places for an hour
And heaven looked upwards in a human face.

Or young on your strong knees and lifted up
Wisdom cried out, whose voice is in the street,
And more than twilight of twiformed cherubim
Made of his throne indeed a mercy-seat.

Or risen from play at your pale raiment's hem
God, grown adventurous from all time's repose,
Or your tall body climed the ivory tower
And kissed upon your mouth the mystic rose.

— G. K. Chesterton's Works on the Web
(<http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/index.html>)