

"CAN IT REALLY BE CHRISTMAS IN MAY?"
May 29, 1988

TEXT: Matthew 2:9 "When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was."

"Can it really be Christmas in May?" What kind of a question is that? And, more particularly, what kind of a sermon title? Especially on this last Sunday in May, which everyone knows is Memorial Sunday? Well, I certainly do not want to slight Memorial Day. Like the rest of you I have very dear and precious memories of loved ones. Memories I need to affirm -- affirm here in church as well as elsewhere. I have tried to honor those memories --and yours-- in my prayer and in the hymn we just sang together.

But, for a moment, let us try very hard to assume that I may not have lost my mind completely. That there just may be, as they say, "a method to my madness." For a few minutes, at least, let us take very seriously the question in this morning's sermon title, "Can It Really Be Christmas in May?"

The first answer, and also the easiest, is, "Of course, it can." Hard historical facts regarding Jesus' birth are almost non-existent. It might be nice if we had copies of his birth certificate, his baptismal record, or some of the other documents which so delight historians. But the plain truth is that we do not. We have so little hard evidence, in fact, that many Bible scholars freely admit we may never have a truly historical picture of Jesus. We may have to settle for the Christ of faith as we find him portrayed in the Bible.

But, since the Bible does not say when Jesus was born, it could have been any time. So far as we know, December 25th was chosen for Christmas, not because Jesus was actually born on that day, but because it was the date of a very popular Roman festival. Instead of trying to take that celebration away, the early Church just gave it a new name and a Christian meaning. So, in answer to this morning's question, "Yes, it really could be May."

And, more importantly, it probably was. As a matter of fact, it was probably nineteen-hundred-ninety-five years ago this very day, on Saturday, May 29th, in the year 7 B.C. And that is

why I wanted to preach this sermon now. Of course, it is all conjecture; I just told you that hard facts are lacking. But it is reasonable conjecture just the same. All it takes is to put together the various gospel accounts.

First, let us dispose of the most obvious objection. Since B.C. means before Christ, how could Jesus have been born in any year B.C.? The answer is really very simple. The division of history into B.C. and A.D. did not take place right away. It was not till the middle of the 6th century that a Roman monk named Dionysius Exiguus, suggested it. And when he made the necessary calculations, he simply made a mistake. We know that because we have information that he did not have.

For instance, in our scripture lesson this morning, we read ". . . when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews for we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." But we know what Exiguus did not, that Herod died in 4 B.C.

And, then, there is also the matter of the star, the one the wise men saw, followed, lost for a while, and finally saw again? How could a star appear out of nowhere, then disappear only to return again. Well, modern astronomical data shows that in the year 7 B.C. there was a triple conjunction of the planets, Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation, Pisces. That might not seem very important, but it becomes more significant when you recall that the Magi were, among other things, astrologers. Since Jupiter is the planet of kings and Saturn and Pisces are both identified with Israel, the Magi would naturally have seen such a conjunction as announcing the birth of Christ. And, as you may have guessed by now, that conjunction first appeared on May 29th.

The whole story is much more complicated than that, but the conclusion remains the same. Of all the suggested dates for the birth of Christ, the most likely seems to be May 29th, 7 B.C. "Can it really be Christmas in May?" It not only can; it probably was.

But more important still, it had better be Christmas in May! For what is Christmas if it lasts just a day or even a few weeks? A pleasant time, perhaps, a time for family and memories, but so what? If it can not be Christmas in May, or in August --or October, for that matter, it does not really matter whether there is Christmas at all. Christmas is so much more than just a celebration. Or at least it should be. Christmas, properly understood, is a time of birth, not just for Jesus but for us as well. In a few minutes we shall be singing Phillips Brooks' beloved carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." a hymn I chose for this closing verse:

"O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in;
Be born in us today.

"We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!"

That is what Christmas is. Not just a day in December when most of us get off work, exchange presents, and eat too much turkey and dressing. But any time when Christ is born anew, within our hearts and lives. And that had better be more than just one day a year. If Christmas means anything at all, it means He not only comes to us, but abides in us. That He remains at the very center of our lives and of all that life means. Our goals, our hopes, our daily living. The way we see others, and the way we treat them, not only in the last couple of weeks in December, but, yes, in May, and all through the year. If it does not mean that it does not mean anything.

And, surprisingly enough, that brings us back to Memorial Day, which, you see, I really have not forgotten after all. For many people this is the time for Memorial Day, just as December 25th is the time for Christmas. And they may make an honest effort to celebrate it. But unless they live so as to honor their cherished dead what good is it. Do we really think that it makes any difference if we take the day off and barbecue a few hamburgers over the backyard grill. We call it Memorial Day, but the real memorial is not in backyard picnics, or even in parades or fancy speeches. The real memorial is how we live. And not just in May 30th, but in February, and October, and, yes, even on December 25th.

In the 14th chapter of Revelation we read these words, words often used as part of the burial service. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth; Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, and their works do follow them." Noble words, indeed. Impressive words! But what in the world do they mean? How do "their works do follow them." Not just in memory, but in the hearts and lives of those who love them. And not just on the last week-end in May, but every day of the year.

In his famous Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln pointed that out so beautifully when he said,

"The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us --that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to

the cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion-- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain --that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom-- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

That is what real memorials are. And, like Christmas, they can not be limited to just one day. If they mean anything at all, like Christmas, they abide in our hearts all through the year, to govern every thought and deed. It is far too easy, cheap may be a better word, to celebrate these days only for the moment and, then, to forget them for another year. But whether we speak of the birth of Christ or the virtues of our honored dead, Phillips Brooks was oh so right. They must abide in us, now and always.