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978-1-107-45874-1 - Aspects of the Way: Being Meditations and
Studies in the Life of Jesus Christ

A. D. Martin

Excerpt

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PROLOGUE

ELECT SHEPHERDS

Secret was the garden;
Set i' the pathless awe
Where no star its breath can draw.
Life, that is its warden,
Sits behind the fosse of death. Mine eyes saw not, and
I saw.

FRANCIS THOMPSON.

BLAZING logs threw a golden light upon the faces of the three or four shepherds who had charge of the Temple sheep pasturing near Bethlehem. No ordinary herdsmen were these men, who from afar served the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem. That they were devout is evident not only from their vocation but from their speech and their instant praise of God. Also in their hearts was the national hope.

Many a Hebrew in those days was looking for *the Consolation of Israel*. Many were searching the Scriptures of the prophets to see *what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto*. And the Temple shepherds, as they lay around their fire, talked of the one theme which was then talked of wherever the poor in spirit met together. One, it may be,

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had a scroll from the Book of Isaiah, and, turning its characters towards the firelight, read to his fellows,

The government shall be upon His shoulder: and His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And presently another played on his lute marriage music of the Messianic psalm men called *Shoshannim*, that is *Lilies*, for was it not a music liquid, and as gold set in white, like the canopied flowers of the field? As he played his fellows sang,

*Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever:
A sceptre of equity is the sceptre of Thy kingdom.
Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated wickedness:
Therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee
With the oil of Gladness above Thy fellows.
All Thy garments smell of myrrh, and aloes, and
cassia;
Out of ivory palaces stringed instruments have
made Thee glad.*

Now those who know how to climb the higher paths of prayer sometimes come upon that secret garden of the Lord, which is

Set i' the pathless awe.

They encounter the breath of the Infinite and

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are conscious of a Spiritual Presence multitudinous and yet one. To such it will not appear incredible that God should have granted to the Elect Shepherds an experience never to be repeated, because never again to be enshrined within the same stupendous circumstances. For when Christ was born at Bethlehem the long centuries of preparation reached their end, and once again God made Man with as absolute a new beginning as when, from earlier millenia of preparation, there emerged the first human soul, and a man breathed, and wondered, and worshipped.

The late Sir Ernest Shackleton recorded that in his last Antarctic expedition, when he and two companions were making a forced march of thirty-six hours, through the awful perils of a frozen, unknown land, they all became sure of the presence of a fourth traveller, moving unseen by their side for their strength and stay (*South*, p. 164). So in a yet fuller and more wonderful manner, one after another the Shepherds became aware of a being from another sphere standing just outside their circle, listening. Their drawing together in meditation and song brought them all into the same conviction about him. And at last they saw above

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and around them the Glory of the Lord, in the centre of which the leaping flames of their fire seemed now but sparks. Into their hearts came the tidings of great joy, the news for which they and others like-minded had been waiting so eagerly. It may be the words of the message were all within themselves, and only the thought was transmitted to crown their midnight talk and prayer. But they knew God was speaking to them.

Suddenly there was with the angel, who, it is said, stood by them, a multitude of the heavenly host. As at twilight in an unlighted room a flame will, in a moment, break out from a black coal-fire and illumine ceiling and walls and every furnishing, so the earth seemed suddenly inundated with light. There were heavenly beings all about the Shepherds. Up past the sheep-fold, covering the fields and the hillsides, far away towards the desert and the Jordan valley, they crowded the landscape with their splendour. And they were praising God.

Just what they sang we can hardly tell. One suspects that our English versions, with their several marginal alternatives, transmit an original doubt, lying beyond both Greek and Aramaic. For the angels were singing not to

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men but to God. And what may be the language of worlds higher than ours, who shall say? It must transcend all earthly dialects, as truly as our English speech transcends the chatter of monkeys in a forest. But the central fact is that the Elect Shepherds did overhear for a moment the worship of sinless hosts, and that that worship interpreted itself in their minds as a garment of praise woven of two strands—the Glory of God and the Peace of Man.

So the angels sang, and then ceased, and the Shepherds heard no more. The glory contracted, narrowed into a stream of silver that passed along those hills, and faded into the light of splendid stars, and all the earth was dark and still, except for the leaping fire of the bivouac and the tinkle of a sheep-bell.

Elect Shepherds these men most evidently were, for our records tell of no one else who saw and heard what was given to them. And yet in that land men often travelled by night. Others at that very hour may have been crossing over those Bethlehem downs and been unaware of anything of unusual spiritual import. It is true that Revelation to us men is always sacramental, and some outward token

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may have been common to a worldly-minded Jew and to the Shepherds: but the inward experience, the miracle, was for the Shepherds alone. Mr Charles Doughty has an entry in his *Wanderings in Arabia* which illustrates the point: “The night closed in darkly over us, with thick clouds and falling weather. It lightened at once upon three sides without thunder. The nomad people said, ‘It is the angels!’—their word made me muse of the nomads’ vision in the field of Bethlehem.”

But our New Testament yields us a better illustration. Once in the last days of the Ministry of our Lord, in a tense moment of Calvary-anticipation, He prayed, *Father, Glorify Thy Name*. And then the evangelist adds, *There came therefore a voice out of heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The multitude therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it had thundered: others said, An angel hath spoken to Him*. What to some was only a peal of thunder, to others was an angel’s cry, while to our Lord, and, perhaps, to His servant John, there was an articulate voice of the Father. For in God’s world every man’s hearing is according to his habits of listening, and only the pure in heart see God.

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In vain shalt thou, or any, call
The spirits from their golden day,
Except, like them, thou too canst say,
My spirit is at peace with all.
They haunt the silence of the breast,
Imaginations calm and fair,
The memory like a cloudless air,
The conscience as a sea at rest :
But when the heart is full of din,
And doubt beside the portal waits,
They can but listen at the gates,
And hear the household jar within.

So had I been travelling to Bethlehem that cold night, while the Shepherds watched, should I have heard anything but some troubling of the winds, or seen anything but some play of lightning over the fields? Had I caught sight of the Shepherds presently running along the hill towards the sleeping town, might I not have said merely: What ails those men? Is it a wolf they are pursuing?

What hinders me now from being of the company of the Elect Shepherds? Nothing but this, that I do not put first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and my own material concerns second. There are many ministering spirits awaiting that indispensable condition of the fulfilment of their ministry to me.

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The Universe is no mere collection of Stars. There is no void anywhere. To think that there is nothing where we see nothing is to convict ourselves of egotism. It is a rational belief which regards the sum of visible things as possessing an invisible counterpart. The same motive which led the Great Father to create mankind, the impulse to fashion happy, living beings, must ever have been filling the heavenly places with races of intelligence and of love. An eminent biologist, the late Professor Laycock, declared as his own firm belief: “Man is at the foot of another scale of beings, the highest of which transcends man at least as far as man transcends the zoophyte.”

To-day, face to face with all the ruin and sorrow which the denial of the Christian Evangel by Europeans has involved, our faith is yet more confident that the higher rule of the Universe is love—love

That moves the sun in heaven and all the stars.

To be of the order of the Elect Shepherds is to serve a better temple and to prepare better sacrifices than, until their vision, the Bethlehem herdsmen knew. It is to minister to those vast numbers of people around us who see so little

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and are capable of seeing so much. It is to
build up for God a nobler earthly Society than
the world has yet seen, while,

*With Angels and Archangels, and with all the
company of heaven, we laud and magnify His glorious
Name; evermore praising Him, and saying, Holy, holy,
holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of
Thy glory. Glory be to Thee, O Lord most High.*

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JESUS CHRIST

I

HIS BOYHOOD

THE boy *Jesus tarried behind*—so, with true insight the English Revised Version renders S. Luke's significant statement concerning our Lord's Passover visit with his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem; the boy, not the child, for surely when you are twelve years old you are entitled to be called either boy or girl. Jesus lived a true life as boy, youth, man. He shewed natural instincts, learning as we learn, growing as we grow, and at last being made *perfect*, that is full grown, *through suffering*.

Milton in his *Paradise Regained* (l. 201 ff.) pictures our Lord looking back upon His boyhood thus,

When I was yet a child, no childish play
To me was pleasing; all my mind was set
Serious to learn and know, and thence to do,
What might be public good.

Milton was probably thinking of his own boyhood. He was certainly wrong about the boyhood of Jesus. We have only this one authentic story concerning those early days of our Lord, but it is given for two purposes—to