

HOSPITALITY TO THE HIGHEST

"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn!" Luke 2:7.

Little did the occupants of that inn at Bethlehem imagine who it was they were turning away when Joseph and Mary sought admission there. They did not realize, for they did not know, when they were excluding. Practically they were declining to receive, not only the Messiah of their country, but the Saviour of the world. What they did in ignorance, men too often do in wilful and culpable rejection.

Very many there are who have no room for a Saviour because they have no sense of sin. They want to know which of the commandments they have broken. It does not occur to them that they have been owing to their great Creator, to their heavenly Father, to their Divine Friend, ten thousand talents of reverence, gratitude, and obedience.

Of all those who exclude Jesus Christ, the most numerous and perhaps the guiltiest are they who, recognize His claims and His powers, refuse to welcome Him to their hearts. Their lives are so crowded with cares, with the business of the market or the household; or they are so filled up with the pleasures and the prizes of this world; or they are so occupied with pursuits which, if intellectual, are unspiritual, that there is no room for that Divine One who comes to speak of sin and misery and of the life which is eternal, who claims to be trusted and loved and served as the Saviour of the human soul and the Sovereign of the human life.

Alas! of what enlightening truth, of what blessed restfulness of heart, of what nobility of life, of what eternity of glory, do men bereave themselves by crowding out the Lord who loves them, by excluding the Redeemer from the home of their hearts.

Every biographer delights to discover in the infancy or childhood of his hero some event which may be a symbol and foregleam of the hero's subsequent career. But did ever a single incident in any one's infancy suggest so much as is summed up in Luke's saying about Jesus' nativity at Bethlehem: "There was no room for them in the inn."

As one reads the words now, there is foreboding in them. That was to be the Master's experience throughout His ministry ---no room for His teachings in the minds of men, or for His quality of spirit in their lives, no room in the synagogue for His reforming zeal or in the nation for His prophetic message. The crucial difficulty of His life which denied Him the service He longed to render, closed to Him the hearts He longed to change, and brought Him at last to Calvary, was something so simple, so familiar, and so universal among us all, that one almost hesitates to name it -- inhospitality. Inhospitality has been the tragedy of Jesus' life. "He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not." And today, from how many preoccupied lives and embittered human relationships does the Master hear the ancient words, "No room!"

We do lead overcrowded lives. From our limited time and attention the highest is shut out. The loveliest things in life, which hospitably welcomed, would enrich us all, are commonly excluded by preoccupation. Great music is not heard, great books are not read; we are too busy. Many of the wonders and beauties of nature are not enjoyed because we are too busy. We miss enriching friendships and possibilities of happiness; we are preoccupied. We lose so many priceless opportunities -- no room is the explanation.

Perhaps the major enemy of Christianity is the practical crowding out of Christ and everything He stands for. When the hall is filled with immediate and temporal concerns, how can anything else get in? Dull, impenetrable, and over-full lives can say nothing, when Christ comes to them, except -- no room for him.

Behind such practical crowding out of the highest is a deeper spiritual inhospitality to the best, whether in music or books or friendship, or in dealing with Christ Himself, is not mainly due to our being too preoccupied. If at the inn they had known what the Christ Child would become in the world, some of them at least would have found a place for Him. We find places for the things we really care about. They crowded Christ completely out because they never guessed who He would be. But we know. We have no such excuse. We know Jesus. We have come from homes where His spirit made a radiance in the faces we loved best and a fragrance in their lives. We cannot plead that we do not know Jesus. Many questions about Christ and Christianity we cannot answer. But Jesus Himself, the essence of His character, the quality of His spirit, the core of His teaching, we do know. And we know that those areas of life where His spirit has been welcomed and enthroned, as we have seen it in some genuinely Christian lives, are the loveliest results our civilization has to show for its centuries of struggle. So when we cry, No room for Him! it is usually because our souls are of such a quality that they are hospitable to something quite different from Christ.

Oh, how easily the highest can be shut out by a little inhospitality. To be hospitable is an important and self-revealing act. Think of how much of the richness of our lives the comes not from our outward strenuousness but from our inward hospitality.

I am told that before World War II when one went to Dresden, Germany, he found it a busy town. Its streets were thronged, its markets populous, its industry manifold. One could spend laborious and animated days there. Then one could go into a quiet room where Raphael's Sistine Madonna was and sit there silently and try to understand. That memory went deeper, reached higher, lasted longer, and was more significant than anything else one could bring from that city. Our enrichment comes from our hospitalities.

This is as true of the mind as of the spirit. How full our American universities are of strenuous minds and how poor they are in rich minds! The strenuous mind can do many things -- amass facts, learn techniques, develop skills, teach classes, give examinations, write books, and make speeches. How much of our so-called educational life is strenuous but how little of it is rich. To possess richness of mind one must be more than strenuous, one must be hospitable.

This world is bad enough, but there are lovely things here after all. Not only has Christ come and found some lives with room to take Him in, but we also have opportunities for hospitality such as our forefathers never dreamed of. And these gracious and beautiful things come asking us only for a welcome. How much of all that is best in the world belongs to us? That is measured by our hospitality. Poverty-stricken in spirit and poor in mind, some may blame their impoverished estate on circumstance, but most of us cannot. We have had homes too good, friends too loyal, and opportunities too rich to make that excuse. The reason we are so poor is pictured in the story of Bethlehem's inn -- the star over it, the angels singing about it, the Wise Men from afar seeking it, but, as for the inn itself, no room for Him there.

How magical a change a little hospitality can make! A youth turns a corner, runs into a new idea, makes room for it, and lo! his life is utterly changed, or transformed. Peter met Jesus by the lakeside and, though ashamed to welcome so great a spirit into so unworthy a life, he made room for Him and by that not only he but all the world was altered. One of the mysteries of life is a man surprised into unsuspected greatness by a momentary hospitality like Paul's on the Damascus Road, so that afterward he said, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me." And the thrill of preaching lies in the knowledge that this can still happen. When Christ comes to the inn, if there is room for Him, the outcome will be changed.

A mind and spirit that can recognize and welcome the highest when it comes is one of the supreme gifts of man. Next to genius, what is most like it is the power to know and admire it. Next to being great oneself is the capacity to recognize greatness when one sees it, and make room for it.

I am not proposing an easy thing --- to make room for Jesus and let Him in -- but I am proposing a glorious thing. A man's best memories, when life is closing, will be his finest spiritual hospitalities and what came of them. The best things are to be possessed by receptivity, appreciation, insight, responsiveness, and hospitality. With only one life here on earth to live, it is a pity, because of an inhospitable mind and soul, to miss the spiritual values which mean most, reach highest, last longest, and in the end make life rememberable. Above all, make room for Him, fairest among ten thousand and the one altogether beautiful.

However, the real barrier to our welcoming of Christ is not a sophisticated mind but and unworthy life. Sin is the obstacle. There are things in our lives which will have to leave if Christ comes in. That is why the world as a whole rejects Him. Make room for Jesus in your head, your heart, and your habits.