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PAPERS (3014)**

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**THE CHRISTMAS
METAPHOR**

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THE CHHRTISTMAS METAPHOR

'HOME FOR CHRISTMAS.' DOESN'T THAT HAVE A WARM AND PLEASANT RING? WE ALL HAVE A NOSTALGIC YEARNING TO RETURN TO THE PLACE WHERE WE HAVE ROOTS, TO SHARE A RENEWED FELLOWSHIP WITH FAMILY, TO SIT AROUND THE WARM AND FRIENDLY TABLE, TO GATHER AROUND THE HEARTH OF A FIREPLACE CRACKLING WITH SPARK AND SPIRIT.

'HOME FOR CHRISTMAS' TO MANY PERSONS THIS MAY MEAN GATHERING WITH THOSE WITH WHOM WE SHARE COMMON IDEALS AND VALUES...SUCH AS THIS SUNDAY EXPER.IENCE. MANY PERSONS TELL US THAT THEY HAVE A FEELING OF COMING HOME EACH TIME THEY JOIN US HERE ON SUNDAY. WE ARE GLAD ABOUT THAT.

WELL, IT'S SIX MORE DAYS TILL CHRISTMAS AND COUNTING. SIX MORE DAYS OF MISTLETOE AND SANTA CLAUS, TREE-TRIMMING AND CHRISTMAS CRECHES.. IT'S A MAGIC TIME, BUT LIKE ALL MAGIC THERE IS ILLUSION AND SLEIGHT OF HAND INVOLVED.

FOR THE MISTLETOE IS PLASTIC, THE SANTA CLAUS BEARD IS FALSE, AND THE FIGURES OF THE CRECHE ARE PLASTER-OF-PARIS...ALL A PART OF A COMMUNITY-WIDE FACADE THAT IS ERECTED EVERY YEAR LIKE A HOLLYWOOD SET. "TIS THE SEASON TO BE MERRY', THE CAROL SINGS. AND FOR SOME, TO BE ENDURED...FOR BEHIND THE FACADE THERE IS WIDESPREAD LONELINESS AND EMPTINESS...AND THE CHARADE OF GIFT-EXHANGING UNDER AN OFTEN MISGUIDED LOVE, THE PRESSURE OF CONFORMITY, AND THE BURDEN OF GUILT. AND HERE AND THERE MAY BE HEARD AN OCCASIONAL "BAH, HUMBUG."

WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT? THE AVERAGE PERSON, IF HE CAN BRING HIMSELF TO SEE BEYOND THE SANTA CLAUS SYNDROME, WOULD SAY IT IS THE BIRTHDAY OF JESUS. BUT IF THERE IS ONE THING DEC. 25TH IS NOT IT IS THE DAY JESUS WAS BORN. THERE IS NO HISTORY OF THE EARLY LIFE OF JESUS - ONLY A VARIETY OF CONFLICTING LEGENDS.THE DECEMBER 25TH DATE WAS SET BY A NOW OBSCURE CHURCH HISTORIAN...NO DOUBT INFLUENCED BY THE ROMAN FEAST OF SATURNALIA.

ACTUALLY, CHRISTMAS HAS THREE DIMENSIONS - AND THE

AVERAGE PERSON TOUCHES IT ONLY AT THE SURFACE.

IT IS THE DATE, DECEMBER 25TH, THE DAY OFF WORK, FAMILY GATHERINGS, TREE TRIMMING, THE SINGING OF CAROLS, THE EXCHANGING OF GIFTS...THINGS THAT CAN ONLY BE UNDERSTOOD ON A DEEPER LEVEL. BUT EVEN OF ITSELF THE OUTER FESTIVITY IS A LOVELY THING IF WE CAN GET INTO THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT.

BUT OF COURSE THERE IS SO MUCH MORE. HOW EASILY WE CAN PACK THE PARAPHERNALIA BACK INTO THE ATTIC FOR ANOTHER YEAR. HOW QUICKLY THE STORES CAN CHANGE THEIR DISPLAYS TO JANUARY WHITE SALES. HOW SOON THE STREET SANTA DOFFS HIS BEARD AND RED COAT AND RETURNS TO HIS PLACE IN LINE AT THE UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION OFFICE.

YES, THERE IS SOMETHING MORE. IT IS THE NATIVITY STORY ITSELF. THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN A MANGER THOSE LONG YEARS AGO. THIS IS AN ASPECT OF CHRISTMAS THAT SEEMS TO GET LOST IN THE SHUFFLE.

A CLASSIC CARTOON: TWO WOMEN LOOKING AT AN ELABERATE CHRISTMAS CRECHE IN A STORE WINDOW.. ONE OF THEM IS SAYING: 'WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT, THE CHURCH IS EVEN TRYING TO TAKE OVER CHRISTMAS.'

THIS IS THE SECOND DIMENSION OF CHRISTMAS: THE PLASTIC CRECHE IS AN INDICATION OF HOW THAT "LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM" ON THAT NIGHT OF NIGHTS HAS BEEN SENTIMENTALIZED AND THUS MADE UNREAL. LIKE A MOVIE THAT WE WATCH FOR AN HOUR...HAVE A GOOD CRY OVER...AND THEN GO OUT INTO LIVES OF DRABNESS AND ROUTINE...NOT THE LEAST BIT CHANGED BY THE EXPERIENCE.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY CANNOT BE APPROACHED AS HISTORY. IT IS NOW BELIEVED THAT THE TWO GOSPELS THAT TELL OF THE LEGENDS OF CHRISTMAS...MATTHEW TELLING OF THE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST...AND LUKE TELLING OF SHEPHERDS OF THE FIELD--WERE WRITTEN A GOOD FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE TIME OF THE BIRTH. THE GOSPEL OF MARK FROM WHICH MATTHEW AND LUKE BORROWED, MAKES NO MENTION OF THESE LEGENDS AT ALL, GIVING NOTHING AT ALL ABOUT JESUS' BIRTH.

LUKE TELLS A STORY OF PASTORAL SIMPLICITY, OF PEOPLE OF FAITH AND VISION. SHEPHERD KEEPING WATCH BY NIGHT OVER THEIR FLOCK, AND OF AN ANGEL STANDING BY FILLING THEM WITH FEAR. AND OF ANGEL VOICES TELLING THEM OF THE BIRTH OF THE

SAVIOR IN A MANGER. AND OF THEIR DETERMINATION TO GO AND SEE AND WORSHIP.

THE MATTHEW STORY IS COLORED WITH GRANDEUR AND REGAL SPLENDOR, A STORY OF AND PEHAPS FOR PEOPLE OF WISDOM, OF INTELLECT. IT TELLS OF THREE KINGS, WHO CAME FROM THE EAST TO JERUSALEM, FOLLOWING A STAR, WHICH WAS MORE LIKELY AN ASTROLOGICAL STAR, THAT LED THEM ALSO TO THE MANGER WHERE THEY PRESENTED THE NEW BORN KING WITH GIFTS OF GOLD AND FRANK INCENSE AND MYRRH.

IT IS HARD TO MISS THE SYMBOLISM THAT INDICATES A MOVEMENT IN CONSCIOUSNESS, A LOVELY METAPHOR FOR THE BIRTH-OF-THE-CHRIST IN HUMAN AWARENESS. THE WISE MEN INDICATING THE AWARENESS COMING THROUGH THE INTELLECT...AND THE SHEPHERDS IN THE FIELD INDICATING THE PERCEPTION COMING THROUGH INTUITION AND FEELING.

EVEN THE STORY OF MARY AND JOSEPH RIDING INTO BETHLEHEM ON A DONKEY..."AND THERE WAS NO ROOM FOR THEM IN THE INN. ...SO SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HER FIRST-BORN SON AND LAID HIM IN A MANGER.' IT IS A HIGHLY ROMANTICIZED LEGEND WITH A BEAUTIFUL PERSONALLY SYMBOLIC MEANING, DEALING WITH THE AWAKENING IN US OF OUR DIVINE DIMENSION.

OUT OF THE HUMAN TENDENCY TOWARD "SCAPE-GOAT-ISM", MANY SERMONS HAVE BEEN PREACHED ABOUT THE EVIL INNKEEPER, THE CLASSIC SYMBOL OF THE CRUEL AND HARD-HEARTED MATERIALISTIC MERCHANT, WHO COULDN'T FIND ROOM FOR 'THE BIRTH OF A KING,'

ACTUALLY THAT SUPPOSED INN WAS NOT A HOWARD JOHNSON MOTEL WITH A PUB FILLED WITH LOUD AND BOISTEROUS REVELERS. IT WAS LITTLE MORE THAN A PROTECTIVE ENCLAVE WHERE TRAVELERS COULD FIND REFUGE FROM PERILS OF WILD ANIMALS AND THIEVES. IT WAS MUCH LIKE A WESTERN CARAVAN CIRCLING THE WAGONS...WHERE THE PEOPLE SAT AROUND THE FIRE AND SLEPT ON THE GROUND...STILL VERY MUCH EXPOSED TO THE ELEMENTS.

ACTUALLY, TRADITION TO THE CONTRARY NOTWITHSTANDING, JOSEPH AND MARY FOUND REFUGE IN A CAVE OF THE NEARBY HILLS, WHERE THEY WERE QUITE WARM AND COMFORTABLE, QUITE POSSIBLY LED THERE BY THE VERY INNKEEPER WHO HAS BEEN FOR SO LONG PILLORIED AS THE 'SCROOGE' OF BETHLEHEM.

SO YOU SEE, WE KNOW VERY LITTLE ABOUT JESUS' BIRTH...BUT WHEN WE UNDERSTAND HIS MISSION, IT IS REALLY NOT ALL THAT IMPORTANT. IF WE PROBE INTO THE THIRD DIMENSION OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY, WE FIND THAT JESUS' BIRTH HAD IMPLICATIONS FAR BEYOND THE DRAMATIC BEGINNING OF A RELIGION. THE UNIVERSE IS TOO GRAND AND INTELLIGENT TO BE ENCOMPASSED BY ONE SECTARIAN CONCEPT, OR LIMITED TO ONE "BIRTHDAY OF A KING."

JESUS DID NOT INTEND TO ESTABLISH A NEW RELIGION. HE CERTAINLY HAD NO INTENTION OF BECOMING THE OBJECT OF WORSHIP, THE KIND THAT IS USUALLY INVOLVED IN CHRISTMAS RITUAL. HE DID NOT COME TO TELL US OF HIS DIVINITY MAKING HIM THE GREAT EXCEPTION...BUT TO TELL US OF OUR DIVINITY, AND TO SHOW IN HIS OVERCOMING THE GREAT EXAMPLE OF THE "I AM" REACHING ITS FULL PERSONAL EXPRESSION IN EVERY PERSON.

THE GREAT EVENT IN THE LIFE OF JESUS WAS NOT HIS BIRTH...OR EVEN LATER THE MANNER OF HIS DEATH. IT WAS THE AWAKENING THAT TOOK PLACE WITHIN HIM DURING THE YEARS OF HIS GROWTH...THE DISCOVERY OF THE DIVINE DIMENSION IN HIMSELF...AND IN YOU AND ME.

SO, YOU SEE, IT IS THE THIRD DIMENSION THAT CONTAINS THE VITAL LESSON FOR US TODAY. AND IF WE MISS THIS LESSON, THE REST IS JUST AN ANNUAL CHARADE WE PLAY. "THOUGH CHRIST A THOUSAND TIMES IN BETHLEHEM BE BORN, IF HE'S NOT BORN IN THEE, THY SOUL IS ALL FORLORN."

IT IS OFTEN SAID, 'CHRISTMAS IS FOR CHILDREN.' BUT THIS IS NORMALLY AN EXCUSE FOR AN UNWILLINGNESS TO LET THE LIGHT OF THE CHRISTMAS STAR TO SHINE ON EACH OF US WITH ITS REVEALING, HEALING MESSAGE.

IT IS TRUE THAT CHILDREN ARE NORMALLY THE FOCUS OF MOST OF OUR PLANS AND PREPARATIONS. BUT THERE IS SO MUCH MORE. THE CHRISTMAS CONSCIOUSNESS IS THE RESURGENT YEARNING FOR GROWTH, FOR CHANGE. IT IS A TIME OF CELEBRATION OF THE "I AM" SELF AT THE HEART OF YOU. IN A WAY IT IS FOR CHILDREN, FOR IT DEALS WITH YOUR OWN INNER CHILD OF POTENTIAL GROWTH. WHEN WE WORSHIP A CHILD AS WE DO AT CHRISTMAS WE WORSHIP THE FUTURE, WE CELEBRATE NEW DREAMS, NEW HOPES, AND NEW HORIZONS.

THIS IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SHEPHERDS AND WISE MEN WHO CAME TOWORSSHIP THE CHILD. THEY WERE CAPTIVATED BY AN

IDEA. CAN YOU STILL BECOME ENTHUSED ABOUT THE CHRIST CHILD WITHIN? THE GREATEST THING ABOUT LIFE IS LIVING, AND TO LIVE IS TO KEEP ALIVE THE SENSE OF WONDER, ROMANCE, AND EXPECTANCY. THE SHEPHERDS AND WISE MEN HAD THE WONDER AND AWE OF A CHILD. THE SHEPHERDS, "LET US GO AND SEE THIS THING THAT HAS COME TO PASS." AND THE WISE MEN WERE STILL CHASING STARS AT SEVENTY.

JOHN RUSKIN, 'I WOULD RATHER LIVE IN A COTTAGE AND WONDER AT EVERYTHING, THAN LIVE IN WARWICK CASTLE AND WONDER AT NOTHING.'

WE NEED TO CULTIVATE THE 'WOW!' FEELING. INSTEAD OF THE DREARY 'LOOK WHAT THE WORLD IS COMING TO' -- YOU SAY, 'LOOK WHAT IS COMING INTO THE WORLD!'

CHRISTMAS CALLS TO THE DIVINE POTENTIAL WITHIN YOU, THE GREAT TRUTH THAT WITHIN YOU IS THE UNBORN POSSIBILITY OF LIMITLESS LIVING. AND WITHIN YOU, IN THE MANGER OF YOUR HEART - YOU CAN GIVE BIRTH TO IT...IN A NEW LIFE OF OVERCOMING AND TRANSCENDANCE.

THIS IS REALLY THE MESSAGE OF CHARLES DICKENS' 'A CHRISTMAS CAROL' WHICH IS OFTEN DRAMATIZED AT THIS SEASON. THE SAD THING IS: THE REAL MESSAGE OF THE CAROL IS NORMALLY MISSED, AS WE FOCUS ON SCROOGE AS THE VILLAIN OF CHRISTMAS. YOU SEE THE CAROL IS NOT JUST THE STORY OF BOB CRATCHIT AND TINY TIM BEING HARASSED BY MEAN OLD EBENEZER SCROOGE. IT IS A DRAMATIC STORY OF A MARVELOUS METAMORPHOSIS THROUGH THE ACTIVITY OF THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT.

FOR YEARS I HAVE BEEN CONDUCTING A ONE-MAN CAMPAIGN TO RESTORE DIGNITY FOR SCROOGE. HE HAS BEEN GIVEN A 'BUM RAP'. FOR HE HAS BECOME A CLASSIC CARICATURE OF THE MEAN AND SELFISH PERSON, AND WE RIDICULE HIM THROUGH HIS WORDS, "BAH, HUMBUG!"

ACTUALLY, THE CHRISTMAS CAROL IS A STORY OF PERSONAL GROWTH, THE MIRACLE OF CHANGE, AND THE REALITY OF THE DIVINE POTENTIAL THAT IS ALWAYS PRESENT IN EVEN THE MOST DEPRAVED OF PERSONS. IN THE END, AS YOU MAY RECALL, SCROOGE BECAME A SENSITIVE EMPLOYER, AND A SECOND FATHER TO TINY TIM. HE VOICED A STRONG COMMITMENT -- "I WILL HONOR CHHRTIMAS IN MY HEART, AND TRY TO KEEP IT ALL THE YEAR."

SO INSTEAD OF BEING THE VILLAIN OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY, SCROOGE SHOULD BE THE HERO...MUCH IN THE SENSE THAT PAUL TRANSCENDED HIS PAST AND BECAME THE MOST IMPORTANT FIGURE IN THE CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT. UNLESS WHAT HAPPENED TO SCROOGE HAPPENS TO EACH ONE OF US, WE CANNOT RIGHTLY SAY WE ARE KEEPING CHRISTMAS.

WE DO A LOT OF GIVING AT CHRISTMAS. IT IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTMAS. I DON'T MEAN THE CONFORMITY-RIDDEN, OBLIGATION-IMPELLED, STATUS-SEEKING, AND GUILT-PROMPTED GIVING THAT DRAINS OUR ENERGY AS WELL AS OUR FUNDS. I AM TALKING ABOUT THE GIVING OF OURSELVES. WE ARE CALLED TO BECOME AWARE OF AND TO GIVE BIRTH TO THE CHRIST OF OUR NATURE, SYMBOLIZED BY THE NATIVITY - JESUS BORN IN A MANGER.

WHATEVER MAY BE YOUR PERCEPTION OF THE "GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD," IT IS THE STORY OF THE GREATEST GIFT EVER GIVEN. (JOHN 3:16) "GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON...AND THAT WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH ON HIM SHALL NOT DIE BUT SHALL HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE."

THIS HAS BEEN MISREPRESENTED, AS GOD SAYING JESUS IS HIS ONLY SON, AND THAT ONLY BY BELIEVING ON HIM CAN YOU BE SAVED. BUT THE GREAT GIFT IS GOD INCARNATING HIMSELF IN AND AS PEOPLE. SALVATION COMES BY BELIEVING ON THIS GOD-SELF OR CHRIST SELF WITHIN.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE YOU. AND HE GAVE HIMSELF AS A LIVING, LOVING PRESENCE. AND YOUR LIFE IS INTENDED TO BE A GIVING EXPERIENCE.

BECOME A PART OF THE SOLUTION OF SOCIETY'S PROBLEMS. BECOME A LIGHT BRINGER INSTEAD OF A CREPE HANGER. STORY OF MAN WHO WENT TO A QUAKER MEETINGHOUSE, NOT KNOWING ANYTHING ABOUT THEIR UNIQUE STYLE OF MEETING. THE CONGREGATION SAT IN SILENCE FOR A LONG TIME. THE MAN WAS PUZZLED, AND WHISPERED TO THE MAN NEXT TO HIM..."WHEN DOES THE SERVICE BEGIN?' THE GENTLEMAN REPLIED, 'WHEN THE MEETING IS OVER.'

AND IT COULD BE SAID THAT THE TRUE CHRISTMAS, THE INNER DIMENSION OF CHRISTMAS BEGINS WHEN THE DAY OF CELEBRATION IS OVER. THERE IS SLEEVES-ROLLED-UP WORK TO BE DONE, THE NEW CONSCIOUSNESS TO REVEAL, A NEW LIGHT TO SHINE.

TOO VISIONARY? YET A SOCIETY THAT CAN PUT MEN ON THE MOON, AND SEND DRAMATIC PICTURES BACK TO EARTH OF THE RINGS OF SATURN...CERTAINLY SHOULD BE READY TO EXPLORE NEW STEPS IN RELEASING THE 'ADAMIC ENERGY", AND BEGIN TO SEED THE MENTAL ATMOSPHERE OF THE PLANET WITH NEW THOUGHTS OF TRANSCENDENT SIGNIFICANCE.

BE HAPPY THROUGH THIS HOLIDAY SEASON, FOR JOY IS THE OVERFLOW OF THE CHRISTMAS PRESENCE WITHIN YOU. BUT TOO, BE SERIOUS ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY TO BE A LIGHT UNTO THE WORLD.

MAY EVERY 'MERRY CHRISTMAS" OR "HAPPY HANNUKAH" SAY "NAMASKAR!". I SALUTE THE DIVINITY IN YOU. AND MAY WE ALL SAY WITH TINY TIM, "GOD BLESS US EVERYONE."