

The Christmas Tree

In the midst of the Advent Season we set up our Christmas tree, but; whence cometh it unto us? We really do not know, but there are some lovely stories which have come to us down through the centuries. Attached to each of these we find some of the symbolism which this annual tree has for Christians.

Let us hear them together. Travel with me back through the centuries is St. Boniface, The Apostle to Germany. Our story opens late in the year, perhaps 722 A.D., and the dedicated missionary is deep in pagan lands. There has been little success in converting these devotees of warrior gods. But something is about to happen.

On December 24th, St. Boniface hears of a dread pagan ceremony, the sacrifice of a small child, to be held that night under the Thunder Oak, a huge old oak tree dedicated to the pagan god, Thor. The Lord tells him, "Boniface, you go there."

Picture the scene inn your mind. The cold wintry night. Boniface and his companions face the driving, blasting wind to climb the swelling hill, crowned with the great oak. Under its spreading limbs stands the sacrificial alter, and at the foot of the altar, the fire. Its leaping flames shoot bright red sparks into the dark sky and reveal the horrid scene. On either side stand the curved ranks of White-clad warriors, heads high, eyes forward. Facing the altar are the rows of women and children. And there, in the center, the star attraction of the night. At the place where all eyes are fixed stands the grey-haired High Priest. Hammer in hand; he fixes his attention upon one knelling before him – a small child who is to be sacrificed to the great god, Thor, the Hammerer.

The hammer descends; faces tighten, as watchers prepare to take the shock of seeing this familiar and dearly-loved child die under its blow. At that moment, into the circle bursts Boniface, the Apostle. The cross in his had, thrust desperately forward, miraculously diverts the blow. The child is spared.

Shock binds the crowd. Boniface releases the boy, holds him close by his side and speaks; this night shall this tree fall." Taking his axe, he strikes mighty blows at the trunk and the Thunder Oak falls with but a crunching whisper. Then, from the lips of Boniface, this pagan tribe hears the story of the Incarnation of the Son, Jesus the Christ, told simply and directly. They hear how the giving up of sin, not the taking human life, is the sacrifice He asks.

At a crucial moment the apostle turns, his eyes falling upon young fir tree, standing straight and green, with its top pointed to the stars, amid the divided ruins and barren limbs of the fallen oak. "Here," he says, "is the living tree, with no stain of blood upon it that shall be the sign of your new worship. See how it points to the sky. Let us all call it the tree of the Christ-child. Take it up and carry it to the Chieftain's hall, for this is the birth-night of the Savior. You shall go no more into the shadows of the forest to keep your feasts with secret rites of shame. You shall keep them at home with laughter and song and rites of love."

Thus it was that the hour of darkness, the power of winter, of sacrifice, and mighty fear vanished for this German tribe before the glad radiance of redeeming love. Far wand wide spread the story, and it was in Germany that the Christmas tree had its start.

Whether or not this story is true, it does show that the Christmas tree has had truly Christian meaning for many centuries.

An indeed how fitting! There in the cold north countries most trees are bare and brown at Christmas-tide. But the evergreen trees brought inside bear the sight and smell of life – indeed of resurrection. And we should never forget that resurrection is the true promise of the Incarnation, the hope brought to man when that small Baby was born in Bethlehem. Always and ever, and especially this Christmas season, as you look on the green and savor the aroma of your tree, remember the Incarnation and your own resurrection.

The Christmas tree, as we know it today, with its lights and decorations, is first met in Germany, about the time of Martin Luther. A popular legend associates the introduction of the decorated tree with the great reformer himself. We are told that on a certain Christmas Eve he was walking home along a familiar forest path. Above him towered the tops of evergreen trees, encircled with bright shining stars, as he looked, his heart was transported to the heavens and he thought of the glory of creation and of that special night when one amidst the starry host announced the coming of the Savior into the world.

“Oh,” he thought, “that my children might see it – might grasp the significance of His coming as a Baby so long ago, might feel the awe of gazing at the tree, seeing the starry heavens and the promising star.”

So that night Luther set up in his home a tree decorated with many lighted candles – and a very, very special one on the very top. And as his household gathered round, he told once again the story of how the Son came down and was made flesh by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. All the while, the children gazed at those lighted candles, sensing the significance of the heavenly Sign; and yet today that top light reminds us all that the Father gave humanity a Star to herald the coming of the Son. Again, it may not have happened just this way, but the imagery expressed here is very true.

Ah! But what of the decorations on the tree? How do we come by them? Again, we do not know for sure. But in the notes of an unknown citizen of Strasburg, German, in 1605, we read, “At Christmas they set up fir-trees in the parlors at Strasburg and hang thereon roses cut out of may-colored paper, apples, wafers, gold foil, sweets, and other such delights.”

And why? Because generations of Christians have seen in the Christmas tree a symbol, a type, a shadow, of the Tree of Life, once planted in the Garden of Eden, and promised in the Revelation of St. John as part of the New Jerusalem, “And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

So, when we hang brightly colored ornaments of many kinds on our tree, we remember again the promises connected with the Resurrection. Yes, we remember that the whole creation waits and groans in anxious anticipation for the revealing of the son of God. For the Incarnation of the Son promises that all things shall be renewed, that at our resurrection all creation will burst forth in renewed fruitfulness and will bear bright and shining fruit never known to fallen man.