

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

Newborn Might and Strength Everlasting

A Christmas Lecture

GA 150

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It might seem as if our world conception, based on spiritual science, could impair that simple joy, so full of love, that filled many hundreds of hearts throughout the ages whenever one of the old plays, such as the one we have just seen, portraying the Heavenly Child and His earthly destiny was performed for them. (>See *Christmas Plays from Oberufer*, translated by A.C Harwood. Available from Anthroposophic Press. Spring Valley, N.Y.) It really seems as if that simple, loving joy could be impaired by our teachings concerning Jesus Christ that encompass such a wealth of things and that are apparently so complicated. Yet, we must strive to understand them in accordance with the impulses streaming through our world conception. Indeed, every heart and soul will be filled with joy because such a play can make us realize again how the souls of men, whether they had undergone a certain experience in spiritual life or had lived a simple country life, whether they came from large cities or the loneliest hamlets, felt themselves drawn to the Heavenly Child. In him they felt the strength that had once entered the evolution of mankind, and that had saved it from the spiritual death it otherwise, because of the eternal laws of the universe, could not have escaped.

Nevertheless, it is an illusion to think that our more complicated way of approaching the miracle of Bethlehem with our understanding impairs the spontaneous warmth of this elementary feeling. Let me repeat that it is looking at things in an unreal way if this is thought to be the case. Actually, today we face another world, a world that will become increasingly removed from past centuries. In the past, plays like the one we have just seen, were performed for people who could experience them directly, not only through memory as we do. On the contrary, our complicated age needs another kind of soul impulse that will enable us to look up again to the Heavenly Child who brought the greatest of all impulses into man's evolution.

Our teachings concerning the two Jesus boys, the Solomon child and the Nathan child, only *appear* to be more complicated. In the Nathan Jesus boy we see the Child of Humanity, the Being of mankind who was left behind when humanity descended into earthly incarnations before the approach of the Tempter or Luciferic principle. He was the Child who was left behind in the spiritual world, remaining, as it were, in the childhood stage of mankind until the time had come for his birth as that exceptional human being, the Nathan Jesus. He appeared then for the first time as a human being in an earthly body, and soon after birth addressed his mother in a language that could be understood only by her. Considering the different way things are understood today, it will be gradually realized how necessary it is to look up to the Heavenly Child who is worshiped in the Nathan Jesus boy. It was he who had remained behind with all the primal qualities man possessed before the

Temptation, and it was he who entered the world endowed with all these qualities. In him, we can see mankind as a whole as it was in its childhood. We must bear this in mind if we wish to understand what simple folk felt when they saw the Heavenly Child glorified in such a play.

What appeals to us most of all in this play is the Child's divine innocence contrasted with the Tempter's evil work. The contrast between Herod, who is led astray and carried off by the devil, and the Child of Humanity, who safeguards man's principle of innocence, is deeply moving, even though the images of such a play proceed from a knowledge based on feeling. Throughout the Middle Ages city people and simple folk of mountain and grove alike had an inkling of the deepest secrets of the universe. Although it was only a vague notion, they nevertheless knew of such things. They approached these secrets in another way, however, and not as we would when we try to find them again today.

It is easy to turn from a play like this to the representations of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which present with the highest art the mystery of human evolution on earth and the relationship of the human soul with all that lives in it as the eternally divine. So now I should like to turn your attention away from this play to a wonderful painting. In it we can admire fundamental elements expressing the loftiest feelings, which could also give rise to something as simple as this play.

At Pisa in Western Italy there is a famous cathedral where Galileo silently observed the swinging lamp that led him to discover the laws without which modern physics would be unthinkable. Annexed to this cathedral is the famous churchyard, the Campo Santo, enclosed by high walls. It contains a wealth of medieval art and other material concerning medieval notions of divine secrets and man's relation to them. The walls of the cemetery were covered with paintings that expressed this, and the earth had been brought from the Holy Land by the Crusaders to be strewn on the cemetery, which was considered to be specially sacred.



Back on the wall of the cemetery after having been absent for restoration for 70 years, severely damaged during World War II bombings in 1944



Photograph of the painting prior to World War II bombing

Among the paintings in the Campo Santo is one that was mentioned for the first time in 1705 as "The Triumph of Death." (see above) Before that it was known as "Purgatory." Undoubtedly, a heaven and hell are to be found depicted on these walls. This Purgatory painting expresses in the deepest way how the medieval mind imagined the relationship between man's evolution and the primal element in man's soul. Today much of it is damaged but it is still possible to distinguish what this unknown painter wished to present in connection with the profound secrets of human evolution.



Detail from a copy (?)

This painting depicts a train of kings and queens on horseback emerging from a cavern in a stately procession. They are fully self-conscious and aware of what their rank on earth implies. The procession emerging from the cavern finds three coffins guarded by a hermit. There are characteristic differences in the contents of the three coffins. In one there is a skeleton; in another, a corpse,

already food for worms; in the third, a body not long dead and just beginning to decay. The procession halts before these three coffins. A hermit sits above them and his gesture seems to say, "Behold in this reminder of death what you really are as human beings." Higher up, we see some hermits sitting on a hill. Some are gathering food, others are bending over their books, meditating the secrets of existence. These hermits portray the peace of those who can receive into their souls the connection between the human soul and the forms of the eternal. Further on, we see numerous invalids and all kinds of suffering. They adjoin the hunting party, which is standing before the reminder of death, the three coffins. At a greater distance, some people are listening to music. Behind them is a figure with a finger on his lips. Spread over the whole, we see a host of angelic beings on one side, and devilish beings on the other. On the extreme right, angels are bending down to the human beings who are listening to the music. Between them and a mountain that is emitting flames as if from a crater we can see the forms of the flying devils.

When one looks at all this more closely and deeply, it offers an insight into the most profound human secrets. What does it represent? There is a characteristic connection between medieval science and what we are again striving to attain in spiritual science. The hunting party halts before three corpses. It is the theme of the three corpses that is so often to be found in the work of the Middle Ages. We ask why the people come out of the mountain because, in reality, they are also dead. "These are the bodies you possess," is what they hear. The physical body is represented by the skeleton; the etheric body by the corpse half eaten by worms; the astral body by the recently deceased. "Remember, you living ones, the secrets of existence that must be contemplated after death." This is what is expressed in the painting. Thus we find in a painting of the Middle Ages the mystery of the three members of man. In the whole gesture of the hermit sitting above the three coffins, we find that we must, indeed, penetrate the secrets that show us how our existence is bound up with the eternal fount of life. The hermits above, immersed in peaceful contemplation and in the life of nature, show how a relationship can be established between man's soul and the eternal.

"Purgatory" (kamaloka) is the correct name for this painting, not "The Triumph of Death." The people depicted in it are already dead, even those of the hunting party who see what becomes of the body. When you look carefully at the angels and devils, you will note that each devil seizes a soul in its claws to carry off, and every angel bears away a soul under its wings. There are different kinds of souls. This is what I wish to tell you now that Christmas is with us. The souls that are carried off by devils have the aspect of older people, whereas the souls that are borne away by angels have been depicted by the artist as children. Here we find a conception that was prevalent in the Middle Ages. Men used to think that some people preserved a childlike innocence in their feelings and sentiments throughout life, no matter how old they grew, and that there were others who grew old not only physically but also in their souls. This could happen only through sin, which led man away from the eternal and from the holy things of heaven. So, for this reason, the sinful souls look like old people, and the souls of those who have preserved their connection with the spiritual world keep their childish form.

This painting in the Campo Santo shows in a most wonderful way that human nature contains something we must look upon as the expression of man's eternal being during the first three years of childhood. I have tried to explain this in my book, *The Spiritual Guidance of Man*. In the Middle Ages men felt this close connection between what appears in childhood and the divine spiritual heights, and they tried to express it in this painting in the Campo Santo. Because it is such a wonderful painting it has been ascribed to Giotto and others, but they lived much earlier and it is not possible that they could have done it. It expresses in a monumental and marvelous way the relationship of medieval humanity with the Child. We find it expressed in many ways, and also in the wonderful simplicity of the Christmas plays. We can see how the legend of the Child brought to the knowledge of man his relationship with Christ Jesus. He needs this certainty that this principle, which is able to

rescue the eternal in the human soul, entered his soul through the Child. In the painting the artist has portrayed the human beings who have preserved the eternal in themselves with the forms of children borne by angels into the land of the blessed. In the same way we must see in the form of the innocent child the Being that is brought before the world so magically, uniting himself in his thirtieth year with the divine impulse of the Christ.

So this Campo Santo painting of the Middle Ages expresses all that is connected with simple plays like the one we have seen today even though it was created somewhat later, and with what we are seeking again in another age. Even in the past the attitude toward the Jesus child was not a simple one. In order to understand how man can save the eternal part of his being, our teachings must include the knowledge of the Nathan Jesus boy, who received the ego of Zarathustra in his twelfth year and the Christ in his thirtieth. Medieval man, however, did not need all the knowledge that is conveyed through thoughts and theories. He received it instead in the sublime imagery of the human soul such as that, for instance, that came to expression in the painting I have just described. Ever and again will we find manifest the fact that man may, indeed, cherish a great hope for his soul. Before the Mystery of Golgotha he hoped for the coming of what could then be seen only physically in the sun and planets, and also for the birth in him of its spiritual counterpart.

All our knowledge has always lived deeply in the feelings of men. We see the plants grow out of the soil in springtime, and we see how the sun calls the living plants and other beings from the earth. We also see, however, something else besides the holy order of these events that take place annually. We see it interfering with the regularity of the sun's forces that are active everywhere at the right moment; it belongs to the atmosphere of the earth itself. In the storms that ride over the fields, in the mists that spread out over the earth, we see something that does not possess the holy order of the sun's course. In spring and summer we feel that the sun journeys along triumphantly and is stronger than the changeable influences of the weather on the earth. In spring and summer the holy order of the sun's forces is victorious over what the earth produces out of its egoism as the weather changes. But in winter, the earth and its influences of weather triumph over what descends, full of blessings, from the universe.

He who observes his inner life of thinking, feeling and willing, and the disorderly way in which these impulses of thought, feeling and will arise, can feel that the changing capriciousness of his thinking, feeling and willing resembles the changes of the weather, which become manifest in the elements of water, fire, air and earth, all active as demoniacal forces. They live in what is around us as thunder and lightning and in the atmospheric changes of the weather. Indeed, our thinking, feeling and willing are related only with the changeable influences of weather experienced during winter. With the approach of winter, man always felt the close connection between weather changes and his inner life. "O winter, how deeply you are related to my own inner being," is the feeling that lived in man. When the winter solstice drew near and spring and summer approached, man felt how the sun's forces were always victorious over the egoism of the earth. Then he was filled with strength and courage and could feel that just as he was able to experience outwardly the sun's victory over the forces of the earth when it breaks into the dark night of winter, so he should be able to experience something that was active within him, deep down in his soul, as a spiritual sun that would reign triumphant during the earthly winter solstice.

Thus, the Mystery of Golgotha was seen to be in man's inner being like the rising of the earthly sun. We realize that the spring and summer of the earth's evolution occurred in the ages before the Mystery of Golgotha. Then man still possessed through his atavistic clairvoyance the inheritance of his link with the divine spiritual worlds. Now we are living in the winter of earthly evolution and undoubtedly the mechanical forces of industrial and commercial life will grow increasingly strong. The earth's winter can be found externally in the world, but also within, because we no longer have the

divine spiritual world of the earth's spring and summer around us. Man used to see in the sun's victory during the winter solstice a symbol for the victory of the spiritual sun in the depths of the human soul. Modern man can experience this again today when he contemplates the Mystery of Golgotha and prepares himself for the approaching Christmas festival. In the past man looked at the Mystery of Golgotha and said, "No matter how wildly and chaotically the winter storms may rage in us, there is one hope that can never be abandoned. The Christ impulse, related to all human life on earth, will assert itself, in contrast to the weather-like changes in the human soul." This can occur because the Child of Humanity, born in the Nathan Jesus boy, entered mankind with all the qualities possessed by the human soul before it descended into its earthly incarnations.

My dear anthroposophical friends, I wished to place thoughts like these before you so that you can gather from them all that can be felt in the contemplation of the child force in man — that force that is also the force of eternity. This was, and can always be felt when we contemplate the Child on Christmas Eve. Although we must acquire other feelings than those expressed, for instance, in the painting I have described, although we must rise to a knowledge concerning the two Jesus boys, nevertheless, it remains necessary that we connect such knowledge with our most sacred feelings and strongest hopes. Then we shall know that, since the Mystery of Golgotha, the aura of our earth contains something to which we shall never turn in vain when we wish to be filled with hope in our earthly suffering, and with strength and courage in all our joys. It is just as necessary for us to remember this as for those men who felt so happy when they could watch a simple Christmas play. Indeed, we, too, feel just as happy when we see such a play because we feel our relationship with those men of the past who enjoyed it so keenly. We, too, can appreciate the bounty that was given to us with the Child that entered mankind.

Through the strength obtained in the contemplation of the Heavenly Child, it has made it possible for man to remain upright during the winter of the earth. We know that the physical sun triumphs over the egoism of the earth in spring. We also know that the spiritual impulse of the sun that flowed into the evolution of the earth will acquire ever greater strength in the depths of the human soul. When we celebrate the Christmas festival, we must be mindful of this impulse. Once, the historical event took place. It is indeed true that the Christ being entered the aura of the earth. True also are the words of Angelus Silesius:

*Were Christ to be born
A thousand times in Bethlehem
And not in you,
Then forever lost you must remain.*

The child born at Bethlehem must be born in ever greater depths of the soul in order that man may take hold of what is expressed in the Campo Santo painting as the childlike soul, borne aloft spiritually by the wings of angels and thus saved from the clutches of Ahriman. It is the earthly destiny of the soul to remain young even though the body may grow old. Man's higher destiny is to preserve this spiritual youth in relation to the Mystery of Golgotha, even when the body grows old. The soul will then feel increasingly sure that no matter how wildly the winter storms may rage within, and no matter how great the temptations, there is one steadfast hope that never fails. The impulse that entered with the Mystery of Golgotha can rise from the depths of the soul. This should live in our memories during the Christmas festival.

I should like to convey in the following words what we should try to experience as Christmas feeling arising from our anthroposophical world conception. Let this stand as a contrast to what men used to experience in the past in a simple and spontaneous way.

In des Menschen Seelengründen
Lebt die Geistes-Sonne siegesicher;
Des Gemütes rechte Kräfte,
Sie vermögen sie zu ahnen
In des Innern Winterleben,
Und des Herzens Hoffnungstrieb:
Er erschaut den Sonnen-Geistes-Sieg
In dem Weihnacht-Segenlichte,
Als dem Sinnbild höchsten Lebens
In des Winters tiefer Nacht
Christabend 1913 Dr. Rudolf Steiner

Rudolf Steiner's own handwriting

The above translated:

*Triumphant in man's deepest soul
Lives the Spirit of the Sun;
Quickened forces, set astir,
Awake the feelings to His presence
In the inner winter life.
Hope, impulse of the heart,
Beholds the Spirit victory of the Sun*

*In the blessed Light of Christmas,
The sign of highest life
In the winter's deepest night.*

Christmas 1913, Dr. Rudolf Steiner

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