

If Christ Were Here?'

By Lyman Abbott

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Till he come.—1 Corinthians xi., 26.

SUPPOSE He were to come, what sort of a man would he be? What sort of a life would he live? I do not speak of what is called his second coming, in power and glory, with his angels, to sit upon a throne, judging. Suppose in this nineteenth century he were to come to the United States as in the first century he came to Palestine, what sort of a man would he be? What kind of a life would he live? Sometimes the pulpit has asked. How would he be received? Sometimes it has been said that he would be rejected as violently now as then. I do not think so. But that is not the question I want you to consider this morning. Not how he would be received, but what sort of a man would he be, and what kind of a life would he live, suppose he came in this nineteenth century to the United States as he came in the first century to Palestine?

It is probable that he would not be very well known. There would be no insignia of his office, no halo around his head. He would live, for the most part, unrecognized; the newspapers would have little to say about him. To us it seems as though the greatest event of that first century was his teaching, his healing, his suffering; and so it was; but it did not seem the greatest event to the men of his time. The events that seemed great to them have passed into oblivion. A great tower of Siloam fell and killed nearly a score of men. Had there been a daily paper then, that would have been reported in great headlines. We only know it happened because Christ incidentally refers to it. An insurrection of the Jews took place in Jerusalem, and Pilate slew a number of them in the Temple: the newspapers would have been full of that; but we only know of it from an incidental reference to it by Christ. War was declared by the King of Petra against Herod, and the whole land was full of the enthusiasm of the war, and women were weeping because their sons were going forth to battle, and men were hot with wrath; but few of us know or care anything for that war now. These were great events then; now they have drifted out of sight. Meantime, there was a man, son of a carpenter, working at his father's bench until he was thirty years of age, going around among the people, healing their sick, talking to a few companions, sometimes to scores, sometimes to hundreds, sometimes to thousands, as it chanced. Had there been

newspapers, they would have hardly known he existed. So he might be here today somewhere at work in the United States, and none of us know it. None of the marks of a professional religious man would be on him. He would wear no uniform. He would not separate himself from men and live apart from them. He would not go off into the wilderness; nor shut himself up in a cell: nor have an emaciated face; nor fast often. If he made long prayers, the world would not know it, for his prayers would be in secret. He would be a man among men. Have you read Henry van Dyke's poem in the last "Scribner's"? If you have, you will not object to my reading again a few lines from it; if you have not, you will thank me for bringing it to your notice:

Never in a costly palace did I rest on golden bed,
Never in a hermit's cavern have I eaten idle bread.

Born within a lowly stable, where the cattle round Me stood,
Trained a carpenter in Nazareth, I have toiled, and found it good.

They who tread the path of labor follow where My feet have trod;
They who work without complaining do the holy will of God.

Where the many toil together, there am I among My own;
Where the tired workman sleepeth, there am I with him alone.

I, the peace that passeth knowledge, dwell amid the daily strife,
I, the bread of heaven, am broken in the sacrament of life.

He would be a citizen, and would fulfill the duties of citizenship. It is said that he had nothing to do with politics; true! for private citizens could have nothing to do with politics when he lived. He was under a despotic government; a humble citizen could do nothing save through revolution. But once he said, when men brought him a penny with the inscription of the Emperor upon it, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." All the duties which a man owes to his Government he would be found fulfilling. He would not evade taxes; he would not live in one district to make money and in another district to avoid the expenses of government. He would take a part in elections; would share in public affairs; would do what in him lay to make a pure and true and honest government in the nation of which he was a part.

He would be in society; would go to receptions and dinners: he did when he was here before. There is no record of his declining any invitation, and he accepted many. He

would go as readily to the house of the poor as to the house of the rich, and as readily to the house of the rich as to the house of the poor. No class of society could claim him. If rich folk would not have him because he associated with the poor and the lowly, he could stay away from the rich; if poor folk would not have him because he was the friend of the rich, he could stay away from the poor. He would go where men are, rich or poor, high or lowly. He would be a friend of no class, because he would be a friend of all classes.

He would be in industry. He might work with his brain, or with his hands, or might work with both brain and hands, but he would be a workingman. He would be no idler, supported by the toil of other men from whom he inherited fortune or from whom he begged it. He would render the world good service for the support the world gave him. You might find him making furniture in Grand Rapids, or digging coal in Pennsylvania, or hammering on the anvil in the ironmills, or following the plow in its furrow. Or you might find him a man of wealth in the office or the counting-room. But were he a workingman, he would not envy the man of wealth; and were he a man of wealth, his problem would not be how to make one dollar get two more dollars, but how to make one dollar render the largest service that one dollar can. How do I know? Had he wealth? No. Did he use it while he lived? No. But he told men how to use it, and he was not the man to talk in one way and practice another. He said that the only honest way to use wealth was in making the world better and happier, and that men would be judged by the use they made of wealth, not by the amount they possessed. As he taught, so he would live.

He would be a member of the church. What church I do not know. I rather think he would remain a member of whatever church he happened to be born in. He would care very little about the distinctions that separate the churches. He might be a Congregationalist or a Presbyterian or a Baptist or a Methodist or an Episcopalian or a Roman Catholic or a Quaker; he might belong to one or another denomination; but, wherever he was, he would not be denominational. He would not care for questions of sect; he would not talk to people about candles and altar-cloths, about rituals and forms of worship, about methods of government, whether independency or episcopacy; about creeds and philosophies. These would not be the things which would concern him. They did not before, why should they now? There were sects then. The church was divided into contending schools. One said, the important law is the law about ablution; another said, It is the Sabbath law; another said, It is the law of sacrifices; another. It is the law concerning tithes. So men disputed about what was the most important law, and came to him, saying, What denomination do you belong

to? What is your sect? What do you say is the great commandment of the law? And he answered, "Hear, O Israel; the Lord thy God is one God. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength"—that is the first commandment; "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"—that is the second. He went below all the denominational distinctions, and said, Love! He said it then, he would say it now. While poverty knocks at the door, and suffering walks the streets, and war stirs men's hearts with bitterness, and eyes are wet with tears, and hearts are throbbing, he would not be discussing questions of altar-cloths and candles, questions of ecclesiasticism and ritual, questions of sovereignty and free will; he would be dealing with the topics that move men's hearts and touch their real lives.

A member of the church, he would know its faults and its follies. He knew them then. The priesthood in Jerusalem were, for the most part, what we call agnostics, going through their ritual with very little faith in God and almost none in immortality; and the Pharisees, who controlled the synagogues, were often hypocrites and liars, and always more scrupulous about the ritual than about religion. And yet, with hypocrisy in the synagogue and in the Temple, he remained a Jew, and lived and died a Jew. He preached in the synagogue up to the last, and in the Temple almost the very last days of his life. He was identified with the only religious organization there was, because he saw that behind all this garment of falsehood there was a heart of faith; he saw in the synagogue and in the Temple men and women who really loved God, who really desired righteousness. To the church he went to find them, and he would see them there to-day. He would see in the church its hypocrisy, its worldliness, its half-faith, but also he would see in the heart of the Catholic woman who kneels at the crucifix, of the Methodist who is shouting Hallelujah with half animal excitement, and of the Quaker silent in the meeting-house, sometimes thinking of his God and sometimes thinking of something else—in the hearts of them all he would see desire for a higher, a better, a diviner life; and where that desire is, there he would desire to be. He would be a member of the church.

Whether carpenter or blacksmith or merchant or railroad president or lawyer or doctor or preacher or teacher, his one characteristic standing out above all other characteristics and distinguishing him from all other men would be helpfulness. He might be a genius and a great inventor; or he might be a common carpenter. He might be a captain of industry, directing thousands of men; or he might be one of the humble men directed. He might be an eloquent preacher with men thronging to listen to him; or he might be preaching in some little village school-house on the Western prairie unknown to fame. Whatever he was doing, what would strike men most would be, not

his genius, not his greatness, not his power, but his goodness and his helpfulness.

He would help men in their bodies; and sometimes he would put the body first. He did when he was here before; why not again? Do you remember that incident at the Galilean sea? The fishermen have been out all night; they have caught nothing; they are bedraggled and tired and discouraged. In the early morning they see a figure standing on the shore, half seen in the gloom, and he calls out to them, "Boys, have you caught any fish?" They answer, "No." He says, "Cast your nets on the right side of the ship," and they cast their nets and bring them up full of fish. And John says, "It is the Lord." and Peter says, "Is it?" and girds his cloak about him and springs overboard and swims to shore. And there on the shore of the Sea of Galilee is a little fire burning and a loaf or two of bread; and when the fishermen come ashore Christ takes a fish or two and broils them himself—not above being cook—and breaks the bread and passes the fish, and gives them some breakfast before he talks religion to them.

So he who healed the sick and fed the hungry in the first century would go where the sick and the hungry are, and this would be a part of his service. But his ministry to the spirit would be the greater ministry. He would always and everywhere see that man is more than a machine, more than an animal, and that he cannot be made happy by merely feeding and clothing him. From a pulpit, or in a Sunday-school, or at a reception, or at the bench, or in the counting-room, by his life, by his lips, in some way or other, he would be impressing on men a very simple message, something like this: The good God above is Father of you all; he loves you all; you can trust him. Are you hungry, pray to him day by day for your daily bread; are you in perplexity, ask him to guide you; are you tempted "above that you are able," ask him to deliver you from temptation. And because he loves you and you can trust him, love him; and because he is your Father and you love him, see in every man your brother and love one another.

Is that all? Well, really, I think that is all. God is love; you may trust him, and you may love him, and you may love one another; and if you will trust God and love him and love one another, you will be happy. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, the peacemaker, those that hunger and thirst after righteousness: happiness lies in what you are, not in where you are; what you are, not in what you have; and the secret of happiness is a good God, a trust in him when you cannot understand him. a love for him and a love for one another. Wherever Christ went he would carry that message with him.

He would be variously received. Many men would not care for him. Not that they would dislike him. but they would be too busy about other things, and things that seemed more important to them. Practical men would say. He is a good man, but he is very odd. and quite impracticable, and you cannot live on any such notions as those he teaches; it would not do; if we were all angels, if this were heaven, if the millennium had come, all that might be very well, but it is not possible now. They said it then, they would say it now; in fact, they do say it now. And some would hate him. **They would hate him because his teaching, his ministry, his influence, would run foul of what are called vested rights, but ought to be called vested wrongs. And when a wrong had fastened itself deep in the soil and grown up until it shadowed all underneath it, so that all the grass beneath was faded out and there was no life there, he would put the ax to the root of this great upas-tree; and the men who owned it would be wrathful. It was so then, it would be so now. If there are any vested wrongs, I think he would find them. The same voice that thundered against the traders in the Temple, and against Pharisees who for a pretense made long prayers while they were devouring widows' houses, would thunder again against hypocrisy in the Church, false pretense in society, despotism everywhere; and men would be angry.**

But those who knew him would love him, with a love which they could not themselves comprehend and could not interpret. They would admire him with an admiration transcending utterance. He would seem to them so great?—no! so good. So strong?—no! so pure. They would want to be where he was. They would be willing to leave everything behind them to be with him. Nothing would seem to them so dear as to be his companions. And yet when he said to them, as he did to some of his disciples, You must not follow me, you must go back to your home and live there, they would go without a word: when he sent them on a mission to render some service which it seemed impossible they should render, they would not dispute him: they would say. The Master bids us and we are to go.

He would draw all classes of men to him by the irresistible cords of a great love. They would not know that he was divine; they would hardly think him to be a prophet. But they would want to live where he lived, to go where he went, to do what he was doing. They would love him, and yet they would stand in awe of him. They would see that sometimes he lived in another sphere, that his thought was far above the tumults of this world: they would see the far-away look in his eye, and the resolute expression on his face, and then almost as though there were a halo around his head would be the

radiance of that head; and, standing by, they would talk in whispers to themselves and would follow afar off.

He would put new courage into their hearts. Those who had been longest under the harrow, who were most discouraged, who had come to the belief that life is not worth living, who thought there was nothing for themselves here or hereafter—in their hearts a new courage would begin to spring up, and they would love him for the hope he inspired in them, as we love the mother who takes us to her arms when we have grown discouraged and distraught in life.

They would love him most of all for his own love: for he would not so much talk of love as live it. There would be no sorrow that he would not share, no poverty that he would not enter, no burden that he would not bear, no sin that he would not carry. Men would look at him and say. He hath borne our sins, he hath carried our iniquities; for they would see this burden-bearing in his face and mien. And now and then he would go away to get some refreshment and relief, and come back reinvigorated to take up the burdenbearing again.

I wonder is he here, at some mechanic's bench, in some factory by the loom, in some mine under ground, in some counting-room, at some teacher's desk, in some Christian pulpit? Is he here? And if he were, would you not like to follow him? Would you not like him for a leader? Would you not wish to be with those who love him, adore him, make him their own?" Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the earth." Wherever, at mechanic's bench or merchant's desk, on sailing ship, in army ranks, at schoolteacher's desk, in Christian pulpit—wherever there is any man who has some fellowship with the Eternal, who draws from the Eternal some courage, some hope, some faith, some love, who cares not for the petty distinctions which separate men into sects and classes, but cares only for God. for love and hope and faith—wherever such a man. by hand and heart and eye and voice, ministers to the higher and the better life of men, there is the Christ to-day, still working, still loving, still hoping, still serving. Come, join his fellowship, unite in his body, take up his work, receive his love and the inspiration of his hope and his courage, begin life, following him who still loves and hopes and ministers.

Thou callest us, Follow me! Oh, how often we have to bring that call back and make it our prayer! Inspire us to follow Thee; teach us what it is to follow Thee; give to us the life that will make us follow Thee, in very truth Thy disciples, in very truth Thy followers. And, dear Lord, who dost dwell not only in the hearts of those who love

Thee, but of those who hesitate whether they love Thee or not, who dost not only enter into the open door, but standest and knockest at the door that is closed, if there are any in this great congregation that are questioning with themselves whether they will follow Thee in Thy church, and follow Thee in life, and follow Thee in Thy service and Thy sacrifice and Thy love, and follow Thee through these to Thine eternal activity and Thine immortal life, we beseech Thee that Thou wilt so sanctify the story of Thine own Gospel to them that they may turn unto Thee, to follow Thee and to make themselves Thine. For Christ's sake. Amen.