

A Prophet
named
SHINING
SHIRT



Just as the great Hebrew prophets prepared the tribes of Israel for the coming of the messiah. So too, among the First Nations people, there were men to whom God revealed the coming of the gospel of Christ.

This is the story of one of them, a man named Shining Shirt, and how his strange prophecy came to pass.

Shining Shirt was a chief and a medicine man of the Kalispel tribe in what is now Montana. His influence was also important among the neighboring Flathead people. The old men of the Kalispel agree that he died long before their people had ever heard of the whiteman and even before there were horses.

The story is told that when he was a grown man, and given the task of guiding his people, a Power revealed great things to him.

THE VISION OF SHINING SHIRT

The Power told him of the Creator, and how the Creator wished them to live. This Being also showed him things which would come to pass in a future time. Shining Shirt was told that one day men with fair skins and black skirts would come to them. These men would reveal to the people important truths which were now hidden from them.

Their lives would be changed in ways they could hardly imagine. When that time came, these black robes would teach them new spiritual ways, and give them laws to follow, and new names.

The Power also gave Shining Shirt a sacred sign. It was piece of metal inscribed with a cross. He was told it was a sign of tremendous strength. It was probably from this that he got his name.

TEACHING A NEW WAY

Shining Shirt immediately called the people together. He told them of his vision and showed them the sacred sign he had been given.

He taught them about God, but he did not know his name. Till they learned his true name they would call him Amotkan, He-who-lives-on-high. The world and all the people were made by Amotkan, and those who lived good lives would return to him. To him also, it was their duty to pray.

From 1831 to 1837 two more expeditions were mounted which also ended in failure. The last of these groups was led by old Ignace himself. They were attacked and killed by a Sioux war party at Hollow Ash, Nebraska.

About this time, in 1833, a Protestant missionary showed up and offered to teach them. The story is told that.... 'a big Iroquois walked over to him without saying anything and emptied his pockets on the ground. The missionary was frightened, thinking that he was being robbed. But no, the Iroquois was looking for rosary beads in the man's pockets.' When none were found, they declined his services.

LITTLE MARY'S VISION

After the failure of their expeditions to the Black Robes, a strange incident took place. A twelve year old girl lay dying in her lodge. She asked for and received baptism from an Iroquois named Pierre. He gave her the name Mary.

Before she died the girl exclaimed, "*O how beautiful! I see Mary, my mother.*" She told those present that she saw a lady come into the tepee and fill it with light. "*The lady came and stood right by my bed. She had an infant in her arms. This child was awfully bright and gave more brightness to our tepee. Then she told me her name, 'Mary'. She says, 'I am coming for you and I want you to be with me where I come from....This little child I am holding in my arms is my son which is called the Son of God. I want to tell you that those for whom you wait are the true Black Robes. You must listen to them.'*"

The vision also indicated to little Mary that near the place where her tepee stood would be built a house and... 'this house is called the House of God.'

It was a promise that was fulfilled in 1866 when St. Mary's church in the Bitterroot Valley was built. This story is recorded in the entrance of that church. It is still used for services.

THE CATHOLIC IROQUOIS

It was not until the arrival of Christian Iroquois traders from Caughnawaga in the early 1800's, long after Shining Shirt had died, that his prophesy began to come true. These Iroquois were devout Catholics and among them was a catechist named Big Ignace who had been trained in teaching the Gospel.

From them, the Kalispel and Flatheads learned about the existence of the Black Robes whom they had so long awaited. They also discovered the true significance of the symbol which the Power had given to Shining Shirt.

A small Christian community was soon formed. They met together daily for prayers, observed Sundays, baptised their children and marked the graves of their dead with a cross. Every evening they sang the prayers of the rosary. These Flatheads brought the Sioux and other plains tribes their first knowledge of Christianity.

Years ago Thomas Main, a leader of the Gros Ventre Tribe remembered, *"The people of my tribe first heard of the Christian religion from the Flatheads. They came on the buffalo grounds with crosses painted on their teepee doors. My ancestors used to used to like to stand around their teepees at night to hear them sing hymns, the first they ever heard. This was long before anyone had ever seen a priest"*.

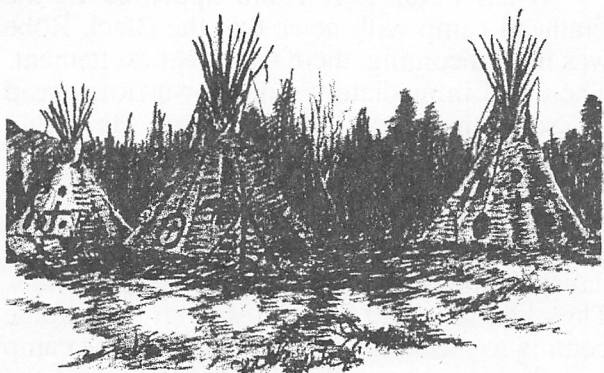
THE SEARCH FOR THE BLACK ROBES

Big Ignace settled among the people and taught them about Christ and the Catholic faith as best he could. But he told them, *"The words I speak are nothing. They are like dry buffalo bones with no meat on them, compared with what the Black Robes know."*

Chief Big Face of the Flatheads decided they must send warriors on the dangerous 1600 mile journey to fetch the Black Robes. Four men were sent. They were never seen again.

There is also an evil being named Emtep to whom they must not pray. Instead, this evil one is to be feared and avoided. Whoever lives an evil life will go to Emteps' land under the trees.

Some of his teaching was difficult to accept. It was their tribal custom that when a man married the eldest sister of a family, all the younger ones also became his wives. The Power had said this was very wrong. All men must stick with only one wife and put the others away. Shining Shirt led the way by giving up the younger of his two wives.



THE PROPHECIES

Shining Shirt told the people to watch for the Black Robes who would come. These would teach them ways to make a living of which they now knew nothing. They would also be given a new moral law to follow. The people should do their best to learn and live by these teachings.

The tribal wars would come to an end, but hard times would soon follow. The country would be overrun by other whitemen. They must not resist, as this would bring useless bloodshed.

The people had faith in Shining Shirt and accepted his prophecies and teaching. His power was respected by all. Before battles he would always make the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the warriors. They suffered few losses with him as their leader.

THE COMING OF THE BLACK ROBES

The Flathead tribal council decided to send yet a fourth delegation to seek out the Black Robes. Two young men offered to go and after a long and perilous journey, at Council Bluffs in Iowa, they met Father Pierre DeSmet.

Fr. DeSmet obtained permission from his superior and volunteered to return with them in the spring. One young man agreed to stay and serve as a guide. The other, named Peter Left Hand, set out at once to carry back the news.

When Peter Left Hand appeared in the Flathead camp with news that the Black Robe was indeed coming, there was great excitement. The Chief immediately sent ten warriors ahead to escort the priest into the camp. He would follow with the rest of the people.

Three months later, Fr. DeSmet met the advance party. After a voyage of eight more days, he met the main body of 1600 Indians. They had travelled 800 miles from their home coming to meet him. When he entered the camp and the people saw his black robes, and the Cross he was wearing, they went wild with joy.

Father DeSmet writes that surrounded by the leading men and warriors of the nation, Chief Big Face told him:

"This day the Great Spirit has accomplished our wishes and our hearts are swelled with joy. Our desire to be instructed was so great that three times we sent our people to obtain priests. Now, Father, speak and we'll comply with all that you tell us. Show us the way we have to go to the home of the Great Spirit."

Thus was fulfilled the prophesy of Shining Shirt.

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