

Budget 2003 – downturn or upturn? The innocent suffering and death of Christ

SAGAR CHAUDHURY

AMONG the readers of London Letter there are, I am sure, some students of political history who may recall the words of Enver Hoxha as he delivered his New Year message to the people of Albania in 1967: "This year will be harder than last year," he warned and then, as if reassuring the people that the immediate future was not absolutely dark and dismal, he continued: "It will, however, be easier than next year." I read these words in an excerpt from a book several years ago; unfortunately I cannot remember the name of the book or its author now, but the words have somehow managed to remain unforgotten in a corner of my mind, probably because of their extraordinary ambiguity, because of their being a remarkable example of saying something with apparent candour and conviction while making it very difficult to catch its nuance. I certainly don't mean to imply that the current fiscal year's Budget presented by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Mr Gordon Brown on 9th April reminded me of Hoxha's words, but it is indeed a strange coincidence that suddenly, after all these years, I remembered them while reading about the Budget in the next morning's newspaper. Mr Brown's Budget met with mixed reactions from various quarters -- businesses, consumers, financial experts and politicians. Predictably, his colleagues in the Government hailed the Budget as a blueprint for a "dynamic and enterprising" Britain, whereas, also predictably, the Tories and the Lib Dems were much less impressed by the Chancellor's 59-minute Budget speech. Any Budget, presented by any Government anywhere in the world, is never universally popular, and Mr Brown's projected Government borrowing of £27 billion in 2003-4 and £24 billion in 2004-5 will certainly not add to his Budget's popularity. The Tory leader Ian Duncan Smith accused Mr Brown of inflicting "pain today" and "more pain tomorrow" with higher taxes and higher borrowing. "Over the past six

years we have come to learn," said Mr Smith: "that the Chancellor's Budget speeches are characterised as much by what they conceal as what they reveal.... The Chancellor who promised us prudence has now given us higher borrowing and higher taxes at the same time." The Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy's response to the Budget was also along similar lines. "Britain's economic growth is being borrowed --" Mr Kennedy remarked: "borrowed by consumers, and borrowed by the Government. But that cannot go on for ever. Britain is failing to earn the money needed for health and education. The Chancellor's

future, for each new-born child, an initial endowment of at least £250 for all, rising to £500 for the poorest one-third of children." The scheme has been welcomed by many financial and social analysts. The Institute for Public Policy Research, which helped develop the scheme, said that it would give children a better start in life by providing the financial buffer that would allow the poorer section of the community to fulfil their full potential, and a specialist provider in long-term savings for children said that the scheme was the catalyst that would mean "that every child born is going to have a savings account, and that's

staying in hospital for six weeks or more have had their State pension cut by £28.60, but from now on all OAPs will carry on getting their full pension for stays of up to fifty-two weeks, while the £100 boost in the winter fuel payment for the over 80s will benefit almost two million OAPs, bringing their total winter allowance to £300. Leading charities like Age Concern and Help the Aged applauded these measures scrapping what they called the "cruel anomaly" of tens of thousands of older people being made to suffer "when they are at their most vulnerable." And from October this year around half of all pensioners will be better off under the new Pension Credit regulations which will raise their weekly income by up to 33 per cent. The Lib Dems, however, criticised the new pension Credit as "eye-wateringly complex", calling the scheme "well-intentioned but something of a bureaucratic nightmare" which will result in at least one million pensioners failing to claim it.

Community-friendly

There is also going to be some significant relief for a sizeable section of the British ethnic minority communities, namely, the Muslims, as the Budget proposes to abolish the practice of making property buyers pay Stamp Duty twice on so-called "Islamic mortgages." Under Sharia law, payment or receipt of interest is strictly forbidden for Muslims which means that conventional mortgages are unsuitable for them. An alternative system is therefore used to enable Muslims to buy houses without violating the edict of Sharia. A bank or building society buys a property on behalf of a customer and then offers it to the customer at a price which includes an additional lump sum on top of the asking price. Thus the customer does not pay any interest, thereby avoiding violation of Sharia. But because the property is being bought and sold twice, the customer ends up by paying Stamp Duty charged on each transaction and as both sums are added to the total price finally payable by the buyer, Islamic mortgages turn out to be quite expensive. According to the amendment proposed in the Budget, Muslims buying property under this alternative system will be required to pay Stamp Duty only once, thus enabling them to save a tidy sum of money. The proposal has received widespread approval from the Muslim community as well as banks and building societies. The Council of Mortgage Lenders feels this will ensure a wider choice of mortgages and a fairer system for Muslims, and the Muslim Council of Britain has also expressed pleasure that the new arrangements will be in force from later this year, thus benefiting nearly three hundred-fifty thousand Muslim families living in this country.

something to build on." A £500 endowment on its own will grow to around £1,500 over 18 years and if parents are able to contribute just £10 per month that figure will grow to £5,210. And taking the maximum £1,000 a year top-up into account, the poorest children banking an initial £500 will be able to collect a total of £19,795 in 18 years. According to the Treasury Minister Ruth Kelly, the Child Trust Fund is a scheme which is "based around the government's belief in progressive universalism -- benefiting every child while offering more help to those in most need."

The Budget also contains two dramatic boosts for the elderly -- the immediate scrapping of hospital charges for food and accommodation levied on old age pensioners (OAPs) and an extra £100 winter fuel payments for over 80s. Until now elderly people

Postscript

This time -- thanks to Chancellor Brown and his Budget -- I have managed to do what I could not do the last time I sat down to write London Letter -- forget the Iraq war for a few minutes. But there is no way you can ignore it for long -- not yet -- although, hopefully, there will be a time in the not-too-distant future when the war will have become a bad dream from which we will wake up in the light of a new dawn of promises and peace. Before announcing the Budget, Mr Brown had already earmarked £3 billion out of the exchequer to meet the cost of the conflict. In his Budget speech he pledged just £240 million in aid and £64 million for re-building the Iraqi economy. Quite expectedly, Opposition MPs condemned Mr Brown over the "paltry" sum he was willing to allocate for combating post-war poverty in Iraq. A Lib Dem MP said that reconstruction of a free Iraq would cost between £1 billion and £4 billion a month and warned: "A hole may be opening up in Mr Brown's sums." Well, that must be the understatement of the Decade!

REV. MARTIN ADHIKARY

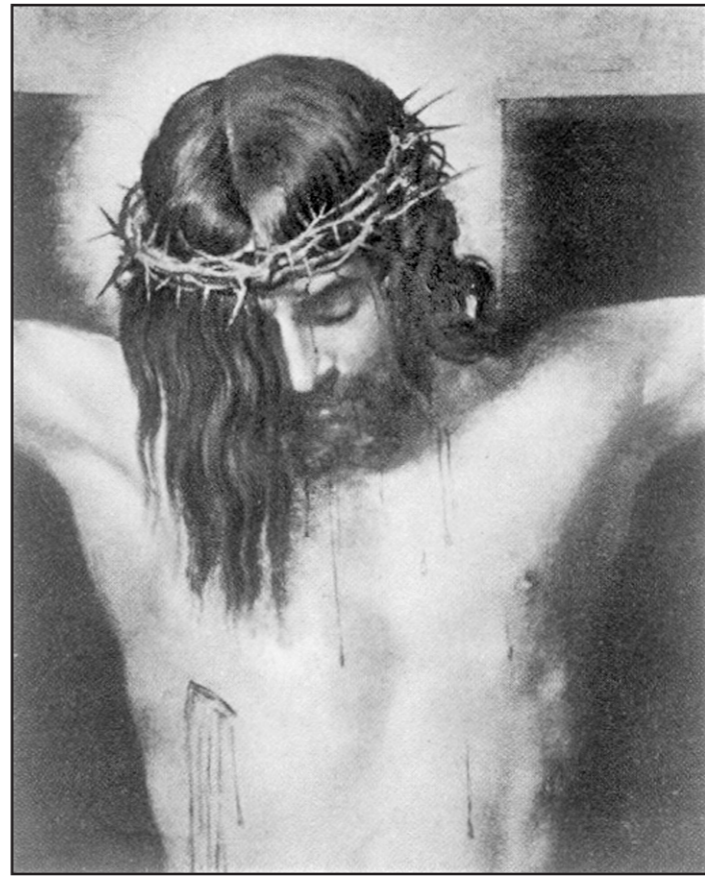
THERE has been no time in human history when there was no innocent suffering of people. From the time of Abel up to right now this has been perhaps the hardest reality and irony of fate in human society. However, it appears that today innocent sufferings know no bound. Especially the war in Iraq is a burning example in our contemporary history. The sufferings, horror, death of innocent people and destruction to property in that ancient cradle of civilization have exceeded records in history. As Christians world over observe Good Friday once again we are reminded of the unique case of the innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ -- the just one suffering unjustly in the hands of the sinful.

The suffering and violent death of Christ had long been prophesied in the Old Testament before his birth. His great ancestor King David had prophesied a thousand years ago about his fast, his arraignment and condemnation through the instigation of false witnesses, his being scourged, crucified, and buried; and also about his resurrection and ascension into heaven. The 8th century B.C. prophet Isaiah had prophesied most vividly that Christ as the Suffering Servant of God should be despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; he should be wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities; and that his life should be an offering for sin. The chastisement that brought sinners peace was laid upon him. The New Testament writings devote more space on the subject of Jesus' death than on any other subject and clearly testify to the truth of those prophecies.

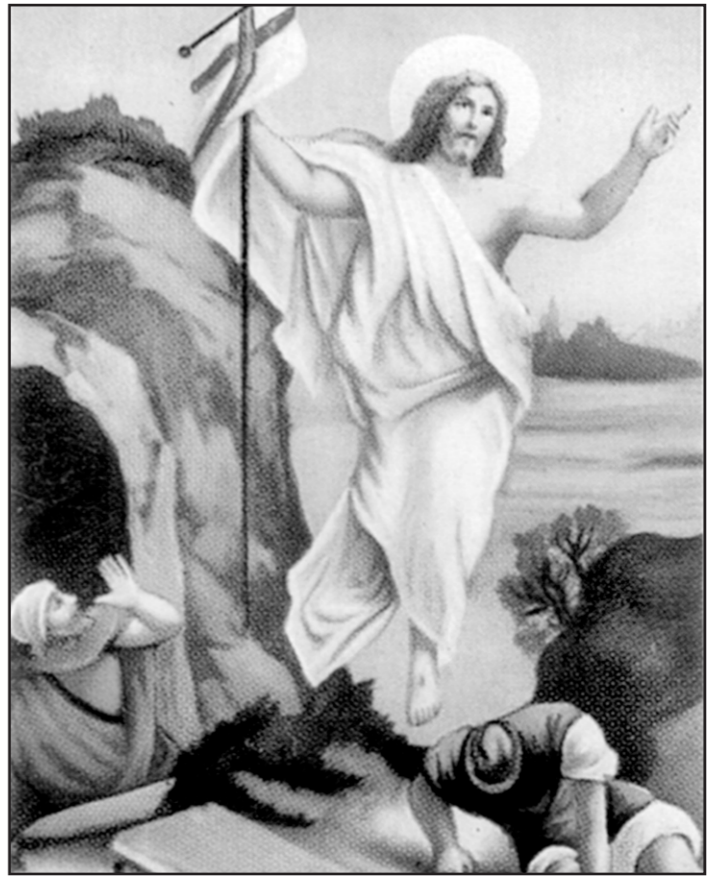
The night when Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples Judas Iscariot in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was praying, it was unusually cold; drops of his sweat mingled with blood started to fall down on the ground as a prelude to his approaching crucifixion. Just before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed to God, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Jesus submitted to God's will for the salvation of mankind. We say the Lord's prayer to God, "...Your will be done", but we do everything we can to make sure that our ego prevails. We feel we must carry out our agenda no matter what it costs to others. Values are glibly preached, but they are rarely incarnated in action.

Roman Governor Pilate, though convinced of Jesus' innocence, feared the Jewish mob and their religious leaders, acted against his conscience and consented that he should be crucified. He feared that if he acquitted Jesus the Jewish leadership would complain against him to the Roman emperor for not punishing one accused of treason, although the charge was a mere fabrication on the part of the Jewish religious leaders, whose vested interests were threatened by Jesus' teaching. This was the immediate charge against him. The other charge that they had against him was 'blasphemy'. Jesus came to the world according to divine plan and prophecies made in ancient times to fulfil the demand of Mosaic Law, which no one else could fulfill. This was the will and plan of God the Merciful to satisfy the demand of His justice.

This is a great mystery how God could bruise His sinless and perfectly innocent Son on a cross. As the theological or divine purpose of Christ's suffering we have the Scriptures to say that his life was to be an offering for sin. The very attribute of divine justice tied God's hands. Because God is just and holy He must punish sin and wickedness. His Wisdom dictated what He should do to deal with the sin problem, in the interplay between His loving kindness towards His crown of creation and His disgust



Crucifixion



Resurrection

Message of Good Friday and Easter Sunday

FATHER PATRICK GOMES

GOOD Friday is a day of commemoration of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. The Christian community with a profound spiritual attitude spend the day with prayer, fasting and alms giving. These spiritual exercises in fact began this year from March 5, Wednesday (called Ash Wednesday) when the 40-day fasting or Lenten season began for contrition and penance of the penitent for his/her sin. Good Friday is the final stage of this Lenten season.

Scriptural significance: After humanity (Adam and Eve) committed sins (read the Bible: Book of Genesis chapter 3) God promised to bring salvation (Genesis 3:15) by fulfilling His divine plan that goes from Patriarchal history to the fulfillment of every promise through Jesus Christ. The people of Yahweh suffered terrible slavery in Egypt and through the blood of a lamb their first born sons were saved (we can read the event in the Bible book of Exodus chapter 13). The old testament also speaks of a Suffering Servant who would bring victory through his suffering Book of Isaiah chap. 51, 52, 53). He will take on his shoulder the sins of humanity and the punishment that humanity must receive. Finally through his offering of life victory over sin will be obtained. Here is a quotation from the Bible: "By his sufferings shall my servant justify many, taking their faults on himself. Hence he will grant whole hordes for his tribute, he shall divide the spoil with the mighty, for surrendering himself to death, and letting himself be taken for a sinner, while he was bearing the faults of many and praying all the time for sinners" (Book of Isaiah chapter 53:11b-12).

Fulfillment through Jesus' passion and death: All what is said in the old testament about the unblemished lamb and the figure of the suffering servant is fulfilled in and through the redemptive death of Jesus Christ on the cross and his glorious resurrection. Jesus carries the cross and thus takes up our sins on his shoulder, dies on the cross, thus banishes our sins through his nailing and dying on the cross. So his blood takes away our sins and purifies us and makes us "white as snow" (Psalm 51). Because of this spiritual significance this Friday is called Good Friday.

Liturgy highlights the cross: The devoted Christians attend the Good Friday Liturgy which normally begins at 3 pm in silence. After the reading about the Suffering Servant of Yahweh the passion and death event is read from the Gospel of St John (in New Testament). This brings the whole community to a reflection on the death of the redeemer Jesus -- so as soon as the verse that speaks about the death of Jesus is read the community kneels down with bowing head. The celebrating priest then unveils the cross, shows to the people the crucified Christ and the community chants: "We hail thee, savior and Lord; you Cross ever we adore!" Then the faithful and devoted participants come one by one to pay their homage to the cr

Message and call of Good Friday: On this very significant day, we hear only one call, one message, rather one cry from the Crucified Christ on the cross: *return from sin o mankind; turn away from sin.* Here is a quotation from the Holy Bible that vibrates this call: "Wash, make yourselves clean, take you wrong-doing out of my sight. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed, be just to the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us talk this over, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isaiah 1:16-18).

Hope of forgiveness: Let the whole world hear this call particularly today. The innumerable sins of mankind can be forgiven by God through the redemptive death of Jesus only if the humanity returns from sin through conversion of heart. The sins like terrorism, war, theft, sexual abuse, social injustice, bribery and many other present day sins are being injected in the people of the modern world. Jesus is being "crucified" through these sins. Our God has given soul and its holiness is made dirty and smeared through these sins. However, the death of Jesus bring the world hope of redemption. Each one of us needs redemption from sin. Transformation from sins to holiness.

Good Friday certainly brings us the awareness and consciousness of our sinful

for sin. Because God is love He gave His only begotten Son to suffer the cruel and innocent death on the cross. God gave Himself to man. Christ suffered as our substitute, and in our stead; the punishment, which we deserved for our sin, was transferred on him. That is what Paul meant when he said to the Corinthian Christians, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God."

So from the anthropological perspective man needs to examine himself vis-à-vis the innocent death of human Christ. The dreadful anguish and suffering that the immaculate Christ suffered on the cross was total suffering; he suffered in body, in mind and in his soul. It affected his total being and personality causing a total separation from God the Father. That is why the cry of dereliction from the cross came "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But he knew that that was how he should accomplish his mission for man's salvation. The Bible records that one of the miraculous things that happened as Jesus breathed his last was that the veil of apartheid that was within the Jerusalem temple was rent. This signified that the Old Testament way of dealing with the sin problem came to an end since Christ made the full and final payment of the ransom price for man's sin by the sacrifice of his sinless life.

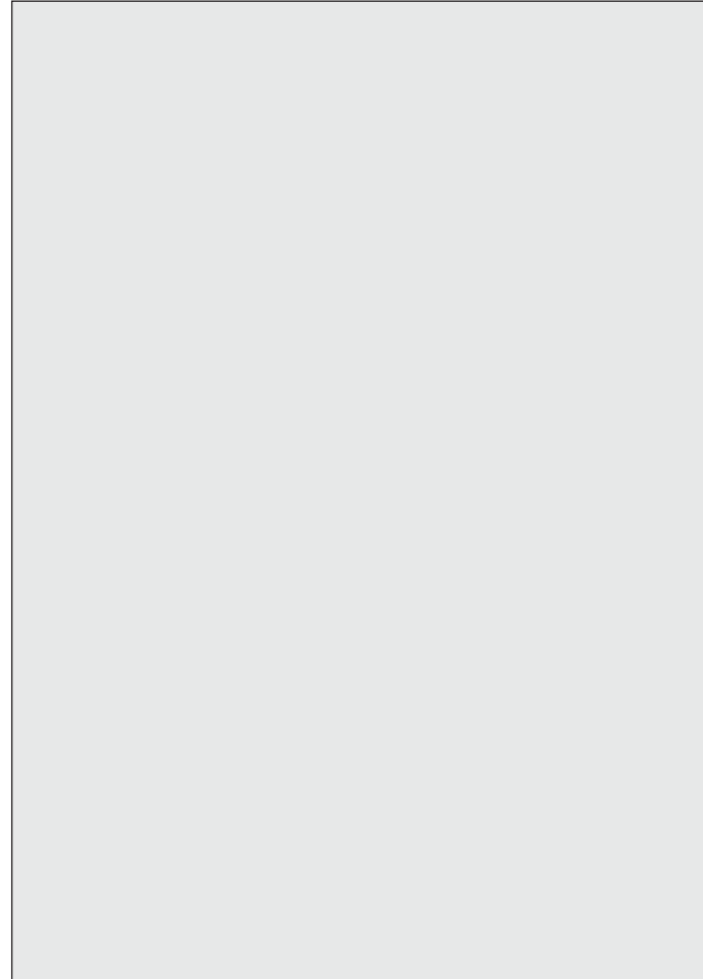
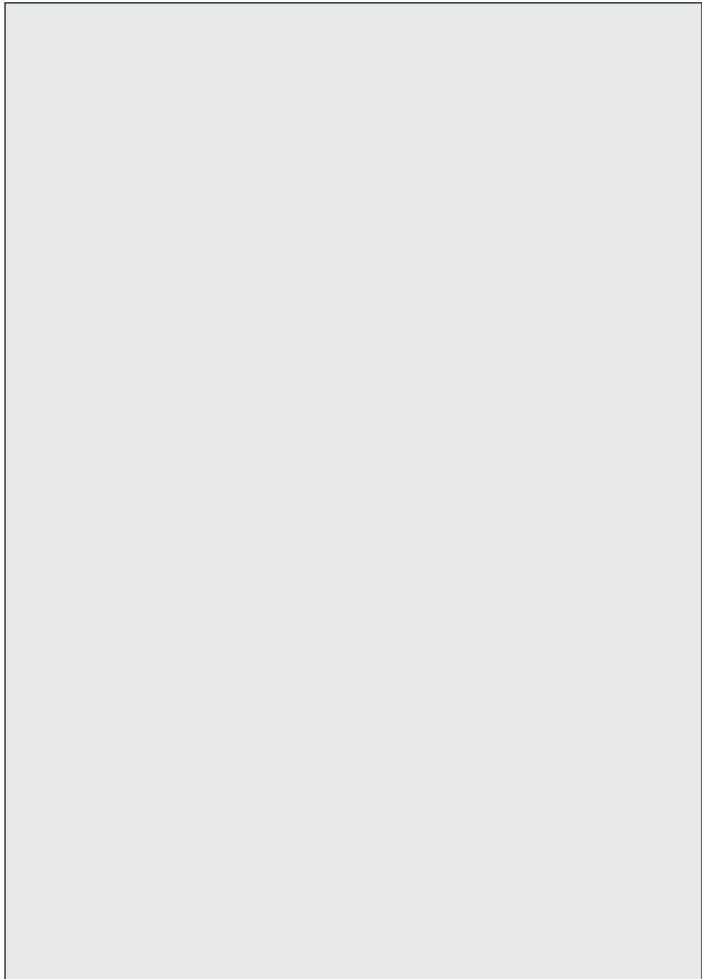
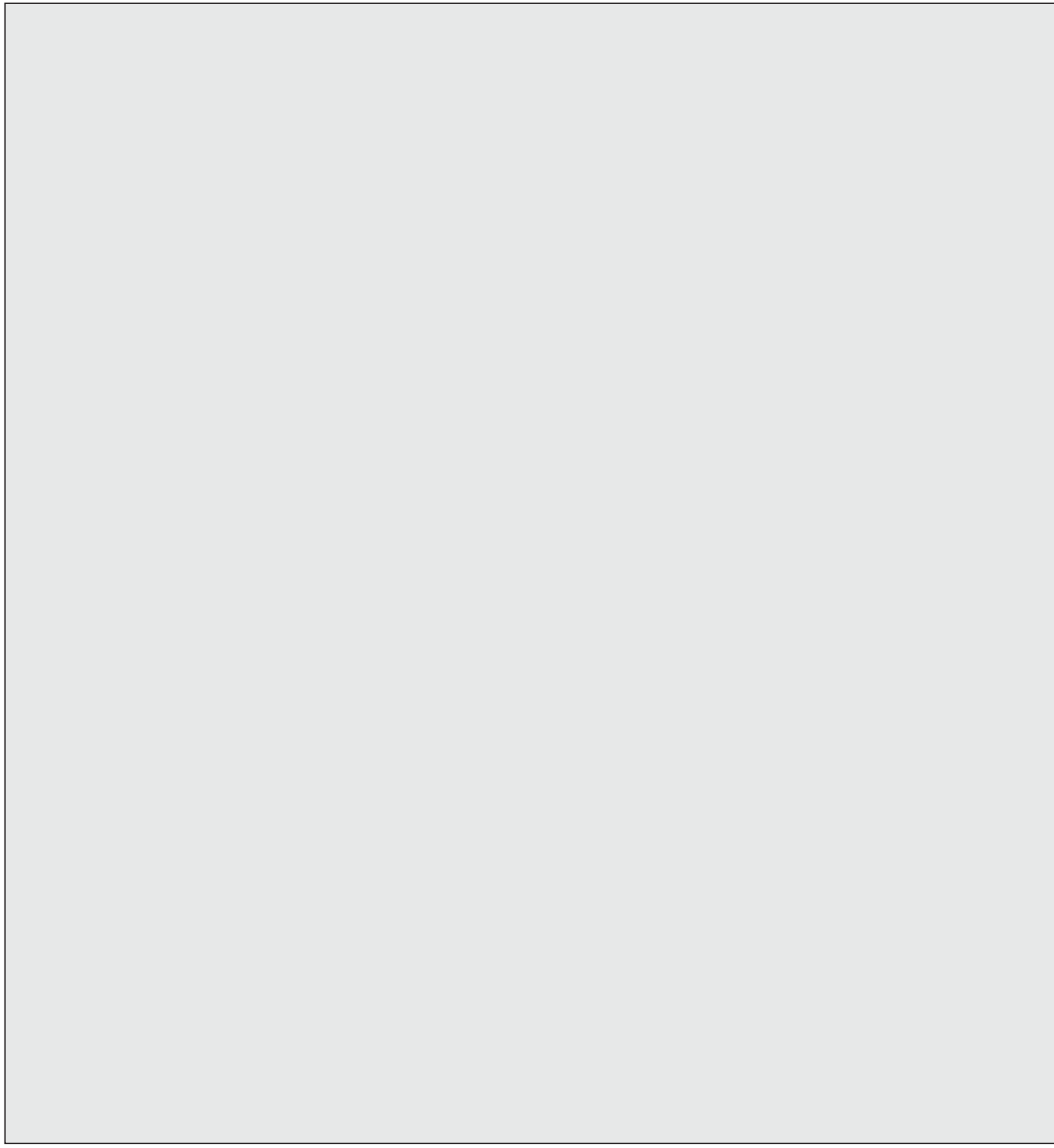
Christ died as a substitute for man so that man is saved from the bondage of sin. By believing in this efficacy of Christ's death man surrenders his life to God, Who makes him an entirely new person by the power of the Holy Spirit. Man is now reconciled with his creator and dies to his sinful self, sinful ego. So sin does not have mastery over him any more. His entire life and attitude to the world, to fellowman is transformed. This is the ideal.

Much of human history is being written with the innocent blood of people as direct social consequences of sin: pride, greed and arrogance. Human civilization is passing through a very critical stage at this moment.

There is unprecedented amount of restlessness all over the world, especially over the war in Iraq. The world has never witnessed such dimensions of protests and agitation against this worst human tragedy unleashed by some power-hungry people. Our earnest longing is that there will soon be peace in that region. But peace will not come without sincere efforts on the part of those who make decisions for millions.

Jesus Christ came to a world of hatred, greed, pride and injustice. He became an innocent victim to these. He pre-paid the price for the peace. He exhorted his hearers and said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." We love peace, love to talk about peace, make treaties for peace. But need to be also ready to pay the price for peace. Peace is always pre-paid. We all need repentance and a change of our hearts. The exercise of any worldly power does not and will not create any true peace anywhere. Jesus knew this, and he surrendered to the holy will of God for all humanity saying, "Not my will, but your will be done." He did not exercise his physical or material power, neither did he perform any miracle to avoid or escape the reality that was upon him. If we want to do good for any people, the only way is love-- love that pays, love that soothes and heals.

Rev. Martin Adhikary is a community activist.



Father Patrick Gomes is a catholic priest.