

And they will call him Immanuel

REVEREND MARTIN ADHIKARY

OUT of the hundred and one names and titles of Jesus Christ that could be found in the Bible 'Immanuel' is one. This name is a combination of three ancient Hebrew words meaning 'God with us'.



God did not send messages only for solving the human predicament arising out of sin, but He incarnated that message supremely. For God chose to be clothed Himself in human nature and became a man to experience the pangs of sin so that man's life is changed and made whole.

with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). This verse is quoted by the evangelist Matthew in his Gospel in the New Testament (Mt. 1:23) with regard to Jesus, who was born of the Virgin Mary.

Firstly, God wants to be with his people, specially people who are afflicted by worldly powers and unjust people, with even sinful people because of his saving grace and mercy; secondly, people ought to believe in him and not only believe in him, but also trust him and obey his commandments each of which has great significance in both individual and corporate lives.

It is useful to note that as we might know, Old Testament prophecy had double implications. It had a contemporary meaning and also a meaning of fulfilment in the future. This particular prophecy about 'Immanuel' came to be fulfilled in the birth of Jesus on Christmas day in the long run.

who fashioned and made the earth he found it; he did not create it in vain, but formed it to dwell in it." In the birth of His Son as a human person God made it most explicit that He is with His creation. God gave Himself to the world.

God is holy, loving and just. In Biblical teaching God is righteous because He is just. Without justice there is no righteousness in biblical theology. The Hebrew word 'tsedek' means both. These are his attributes stemming out of his very nature. Both justice and righteousness unfold to us the very nature of God's love.

We know God's justice by looking at what he does in history. The Bible is a great record of this. He is the God who is on the side of the poor and the oppressed, the neglected and the sinned-against ones, the captives, the weak and the vulnerable ones in any society. God brings down the mighty and haughty ones and lifts up and vindicates the lowly and weak.

unjust system or structures.

God created human beings in his own image and likeness, so the Bible records. Man is His crown of creation; all mankind rich or poor, high or low, black or white. To mankind He has given the dominion and faithful stewardship of all his creation. All of God's creation belongs to man. So God gives man the intelligence and mastery over all that is there to be used for man's good and ultimate glory to God himself.

According to the Bible man is created in the image and likeness of God which implies that man ought to reflect God's attributes of love, holiness, justice and righteousness. That's why Christ came to live with man and showed the way for true manhood. God spoke to people in history and He is still speaking in events in cultures and histories.

Today we live in a world where about 30,000 children die of hunger or malnutrition, about 700 people

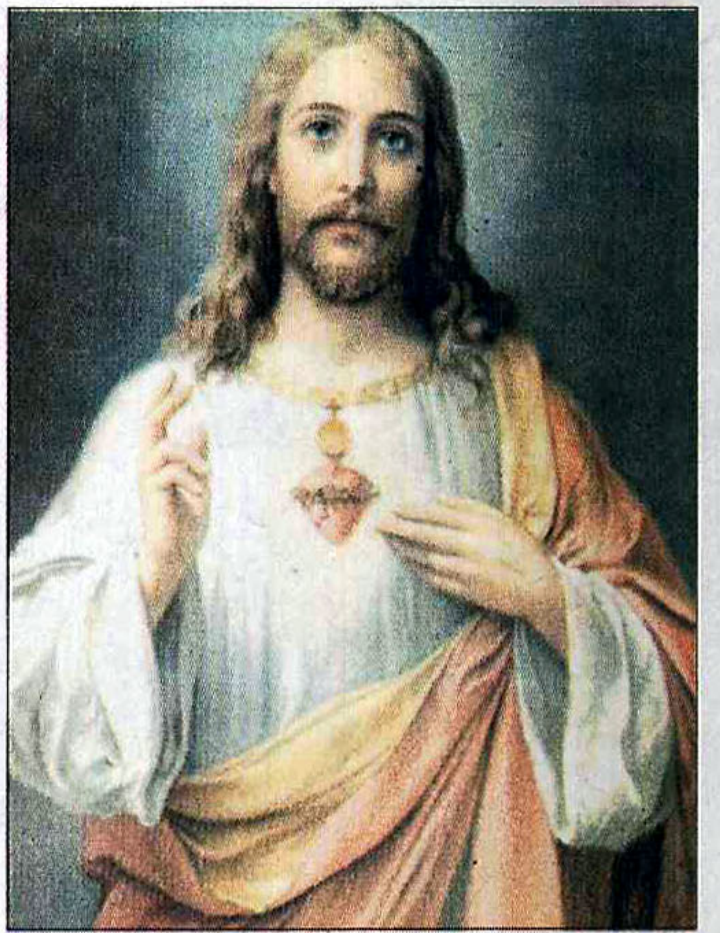
are affected with leprosy, more than 10,000 people are affected with HIV, and thousands of people are rendered homeless every day. 94 per cent of the world's income is used up by 40 per cent people and, therefore, 60 per cent of world's population lives on the remaining fraction of 6 per cent of world's income. A half of the world's population has to live on less than 2 US dollars a day. Professor Yunus aptly said in his speech in his Nobel Peace prize receiving ceremony that the poor people are like bonsai trees. There is poverty, alienation, oppression of people by people because of greed for undue privileges for some people and lust of power. In such a world God came to mankind in human form and showed the ideal of perfect human life so that man can turn away from wayward and sinful life and enjoy the life of abundance, life of peace and harmony with all from whom he has been alienated because of sin.

God's heart is in pain when man has sufferings of any kind. At Christmas God's eternal and life giving word became incarnated in the person of the baby Jesus, who showed God's perfect love, holiness and righteousness. He was sinned against, though he did not know sin; he was reviled and tortured to death, but he did not take revenge, he was utterly humiliated, but he remained faithful to his mission of saving the lives of the sinners. Jesus, the only Perfect man for others, is the one "in whom all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). John,

the writer of the fourth Gospel gives the perfect testimony to him as he says in the Prologue to the same, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; and all things were made through Him apart from him nothing was made that became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

We cannot comprehend the true significance of this mystery by any logic or reasoning. We can attempt to fathom the depth, height, the width and breadth of God's supreme sacrifice in grace and truth only in genuine faith. And that faith needs to be incarnated in the transformation of our attitude to life and to the world around us. Most of our religious activities are mere lip-service. It does no good to any. We need to conform to God's holy will for us. We need to identify with God in his pain by practically identifying with the people who suffer.

I like these words of Dr Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, the largest privately funded child-sponsoring charitable organisation in the world: "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." God did not send messages only for solving the human predicament arising out of sin, but He incarnated that message supremely. For God chose to be clothed Himself in human nature and became a man to experience the pangs of sin so that man's life is changed and made whole. Christmas points our whole being to God lying in a manger, completely human, yet completely divine. So shall this be the message for Christmas for us: God is with us. Let us be with him!



Into the depths of Christmas...

SUNTA D' COSTA

Christmas is recognition of every moment's joy Realisation in a grown-up, to a child a toy Kindness to the distressed -- a glimmer of hope A little sympathy from the sinner or the pope

For Christmas knows no sinner nor saint Christmas is colourless, devoid of paint Christmas is a gift having neither touch nor smell Christmas is beyond the measures of heaven or hell

Within everyone of us is where Christmas lies In the heart of each soul is where it abides Forever chiming sweet music, as if to say Peace to all, it's Christmas Day.



Christmas love

MIRIAM ROY (JUI)

The birth of love is not quite known, Although I know it was born all alone; The relation it creates is not quite definable, But I can assure it is quite reliable, The desire of one to live is love for life itself. The husbands toil to assure their love to the wives. The mother scolds her little one to show her love for the child, Love can be seen in one's eyes It is something one can never hide. To get a true love people do strive, For it is something limitless wide, Across the oceans it can take you merely in a while It is longer than the sky And sweeter than a glass full of wine. The value of love is known to few, But you yourself won't know when it Happens to you. And if you ever come to know Think yourself to be blessed. Because Jesus is born To give all the love he has To all the people in this world Cupid, the God of love Will handle the rest.

Christmas and its challenging message

FATHER PATRICK GOMES

TODAY the whole world celebrates with great solemnity the Birth of Jesus, nativity of Jesus. Today is Christmas. This is no season for sadness, this is the birthday of Jesus who is Life -- the life which annihilates the fear of death, and engenders joy, promising immortality. Today, therefore, all over the world as well as in Bangladesh, the Christian community is in joyful mood of celebration. However, Christmas celebration becomes relevant and spiritually fruitbearing only when we reflect the great mystery around which the whole celebration evolves: when we look at the mystery in the context of the contemporary world and its optimistic and pessimistic realities; and by doing this we take up the challenges that the mystery of the celebration demands.

A wonderful exchange: This exchange is between God and man. God becomes man in order to make man endowed with divine values. God comes down on earth in order to lift up man to himself. God who is almighty, who is incomprehensible, the bodiless, comes down taking to himself flesh and blood for the sake of our flesh and blood. The incarnated God is the full revelation of the invisible God. So is he termed as the Son of God. This Son of God took to himself all that is human, except sin. He was conceived by the Virgin Mary who was first purified in body and soul by the Spirit. Mary was immaculate right from her birth; and it is perfectly so, because the most Holy is born in the "temple" of Mary that is most pure, most holy. This new born Jesus who enriches others becomes poor.

First of all he took to himself the poverty of human flesh so that man, might obtain the riches. He who is full empties himself. He who is almighty becomes powerless -- only to make us powerful with his mercy and grace.

And he does it through his words and deeds: teaching, doing to others through many miracles: giving life to the dead, sight to the

blind and many other good deeds and finally through his unconditional forgiving love manifested through his suffering, death and glorious resurrection. A wonderful exchange indeed! Christmas is a celebration of this exchange: God coming to this world in order to bring man to him!

Biblical reference: This birth of Jesus brings tremendous joy to the world because this birth is for the spiritual salvation of the whole world. The world is liberated through this Jesus: his life, his preaching, his examples and finally his redemptive death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. And so at the nativity of Jesus the Angel has this happy announcement to the shepherds, the first guests who came to meet him, "I bring to you a news of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger" (Lk 2: 11-12). And also the multitude of heavenly angels praising God singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is well pleased" (Lk 2: 13-14).

Born to dwell with us as a light: The Bible states that "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). This Word is God Himself that comes to humanity embracing the same human nature in everything but sin. Here we reflect the tremendous love of God for mankind. He comes down from above in order to let mankind find its dignity back and be with the same bond with God. He comes to dwell among us. He dwells only when we are prepared with our holiness in heart and mind, in words and deeds. A person, a family, a nation when renewed spiritually can welcome Jesus to dwell. Jesus is born as a Light. His coming throws off darkness of sin from the world; the world is brightened with new light. Christmas is a feast of light. It calls all men to come out from the darkness of sin and be enlightened with good deeds. The three Magi were led to the place of the birth of Jesus by a lighted star (Cfr. Holy Bible, Gospel of St.

Matthew 2:9). We are called to be guided by the divine Light who is Jesus. Christmas is truly a feast of light. Challenging message: The Bible says that the kingdom that Jesus brings has some challenging characteristics that are expressed in symbolic manner: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Prophet Isaiah 11: 1-8). Again we read in the Bible: "Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training of war" (Isaiah 2:3-4).

This year's Christmas message is therefore not at all soft. It brings us challenge: challenge of telling the truth; challenge of being really patriotic; challenge of not making any double personality; challenge of being truly impartial and neutral; challenge of working with free conscience; challenge of keeping oneself totally free from devil that leads to temptation. No sword but peace and harmony: It is not merely a slogan, because slogans are these days very cheap. It must be a reality. Jesus is born to liberate mankind from the bondage of sins: personal sin, communal sin, national sin etc. Sword brings division, clash, hatred, suspicion, death, injustice, greed for power and misuse of power; and these are personal, social, national sins. Christmas calls everyone to have a reflective glance on the Christmas crib, reflect on the birth of Jesus and be tremendously touched by the values that this nativity embraces and renounce. Following the message of Christmas the result will be a new person, new society -- where



The star of Bethlehem

SYED ASHRAF ALI

STARS occupy a very important place in the history of homo sapiens. Although Whitman claims, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars," people in various ages have always believed in the maxim: "The stars rule men, but God rules the stars." Stars indeed have haunted the imagination of saints and seers from time immemorial. To many, stars have been symbols of high ideals and great hopes. Poets have eulogised stars in their poems, patriots have depicted stars on their flags, stars in songs have provided inspiration to the tormented souls of the lovers and the imprisoned. For thousands of years stars have also been used as religious symbols. The ancient Babylonians believed that the stars and the gods were closely related. Ancient writings testify to the fact that the Chinese used to worship the constellations and the whole heavens. The Black-foot Indians of North America believed that every star was a human being. When a person died his spirit rose to the heavens to become a star. From the days of yore, the six-pointed star of the Shield of David has been a symbol of Jewish faith. But it is the Star of Bethlehem, the symbol of the Christian religion, which has the unique distinction of attracting

the attention of people both in the realm of science and in the world of religion.

The Star of Bethlehem is that unique star following the light of which three wise men found Jesus in Bethlehem on Christmas Day. The Christmas Story, as told in the Bible, describes how the wise men from the East followed a bright star to the stable in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. A silver star in the great cathedral in the village has the simple inscription: "Here, of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ was born." And each year, thousands of Christians make a pilgrimage to Bethlehem on Christmas Day and the Silver Star reminds them of the unique Star of Bethlehem which guided the three wise men on the first Christmas Day.

More than two thousand years have shaded themselves with the past since Jesus was born, but the Star of Bethlehem still remains a mystery not only to the devoted followers of Christianity but also to historians and astronomers in this twenty-first century. It seems that the miraculous star was not just a divine apparition. Scientists in various corners of the world have been pondering for years over all known documentation of a supposed number of recorded sightings of the period. As a result many a theory has been put forward. Some claim it to be a regular bright star, others opine in favour of an explod-

ing Nova-Star or a comet. There are still others who advocate in favour of a conjunction of planets.

The only place where the three wise men are mentioned in the Bible is the Apostle according to St. Matthew. It is clearly mentioned that Jesus was born at Bethlehem at the time the three wise men following a star came from the East looking for the newborn King of the Jews. The Star of Bethlehem is shown clearly in famous paintings like Philippe Lippi's in Florence or Jerome Bosch's in the Madrid Prado. But scientists tried to find proof of the existence of the BRIGHT OBJECT in the sky both historically and astronomically.

One hypothesis claimed that it could be an exploding Nova-Star which normally produces unusual brilliance in the sky and overshadows even the Morning or the Evening Stars. But, argues the renowned astronomer Nigel Henbest, "Everyone in the Middle East would have been astounded by such a sight. Yet, according to St. Matthew's gospel, neither King Herod nor his advisers had seen the Star. When the Magi turned up in Jerusalem demanding, 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews?', Herod, with his authority in danger of being undermined, enquired of them diligently what time the Star appeared."

What is more, Chinese astronomers used to record with meticulous

care their own observations of the sky at the time. But they did not report any brilliant supernova. The supernova or the exploding star hypothesis can therefore be ruled out.

Another hypothesis claims that the Star of Bethlehem could have been the famous Haley's Comet which swings close by the sun roughly every 76 years. An unforgettable view of Haley's Comet in 1301 so inspired Giotto di Bondone, the Italian Renaissance painter, that he used it as the model for his 'Star' in a famous Nativity scene. But the records of the Chinese astronomers testify that they saw Haley's Comet in 12 BC, which was undoubtedly too early for the birth of Jesus.

But the Chinese astronomers saw another celestial visitor, which they called 'broom star' in 5 BC, on the borders of the constellations Aquarius and Capricornus. Some astronomers claim that it was a nova -- an explosion of a dwarf star. But Colin Humphreys, a scientist at Cambridge University, firmly believes that it was a comet. He also opines that this 'tailed wonder' was the Star of Bethlehem. The Chinese astronomical records also claimed that the 'broom star' was visible for 70 days -- long enough to guide the Magi to Bethlehem. If this is true then Jesus was born in the spring of 5 BC.

Most astronomers believe that a comet does not fit the bill. The Magi

were not kings, but Babylonian astrologers. They were not used to observing the sky closely and logging unexpected events such as comets. They simply calculated the position of the Sun, Moon and planets, and their relations to each other. With this knowledge they could 'predict' events months or even years in advance. So, argues Henbest, the Star of Bethlehem must have been something much more arcane and subtle so that it would not be evident to those without astrological (or astronomi-

cal) knowledge. A third hypothesis goes in favour of a rare triple conjunction of three planets. This happened when King Herod decided to massacre all children under two years of age in his attempt to kill the King of the Jews. But the British astronomer DW Hughes, of Sheffield University, claimed in 1976 that his research and calculations clearly showed that this coming together of Venus, Jupiter and Saturn occurred in 7 BC i.e. seven years before the presumed birth year of

Christ. Although Michael Molnar, the famous American astronomical historian, has of late come up with even more spectacular astrological perspective, this claim of the triple conjunction is supported by the majority of modern astronomers.

This claim of Hughes does not, however, surprise the historians since the exact date of Jesus' birth is not known. "To track down the real Star of Bethlehem", says Henbest, "we need to know roughly the date of Jesus' birth. Jesus was not born in the Year Zero (which does not exist), or even in the Year One. According to Luke it is associated with a census which was held in 6 AD. It is also stated that Jesus was born in Palestine during the lifetime of Herod the Great whom the Romans had appointed to rule as King of Jews. Herod died, soon after an eclipse of the Moon, definitely in 4 BC and Jesus must have been born earlier than that. Vincent Taylor also admits in The Jesus Report that the date of birth of Jesus could be as early as 8 BC; since Herod's degree, set in motion by the news of Jesus' actual or imminent birth, that all newly born infants in Bethlehem should be slaughtered, obviously must have preceded Herod's death.

The historians point out that although the Christian Calendar is dated from what was supposed to have been the year of the birth of

Jesus, the people who worked out the Calendar made a mistake in the date. It was in the AD 500s that the monk Dionysius Exiguus, who introduced the present custom of reckoning time by counting the years from the birth of Christ, miscalculated and his reckoning was four to seven years later than the actual date. The calculations of Hughes, with the suggestion that the star of Bethlehem was a rare triple conjunction of planets, testify to the fact that Jesus indeed was born in 7 BC and vice-versa.

This interesting episode attracts both the astrologers and the astronomers. Jupiter, as the King of the gods, symbolises Royalty, and in Jewish astrology Saturn, representing both Palestine and the principle of justice, protects Israel. Pisces, the zodiacal sign of the Jewish people, is also in Spring time, the birth of a new age. The Magi, looking at their astronomical charts, would have interpreted the conjunction as a sign that a Jewish Messiah would soon be born. Hence the birth of the King of Jews as recounted in St. Matthew. In this case, since the Star of Bethlehem, the rare triple conjunction of Venus, Jupiter and Saturn, appeared in sky in the year 7 BC the world should now be passing through 2013 and not 2006 as we all inadvertently believe.

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