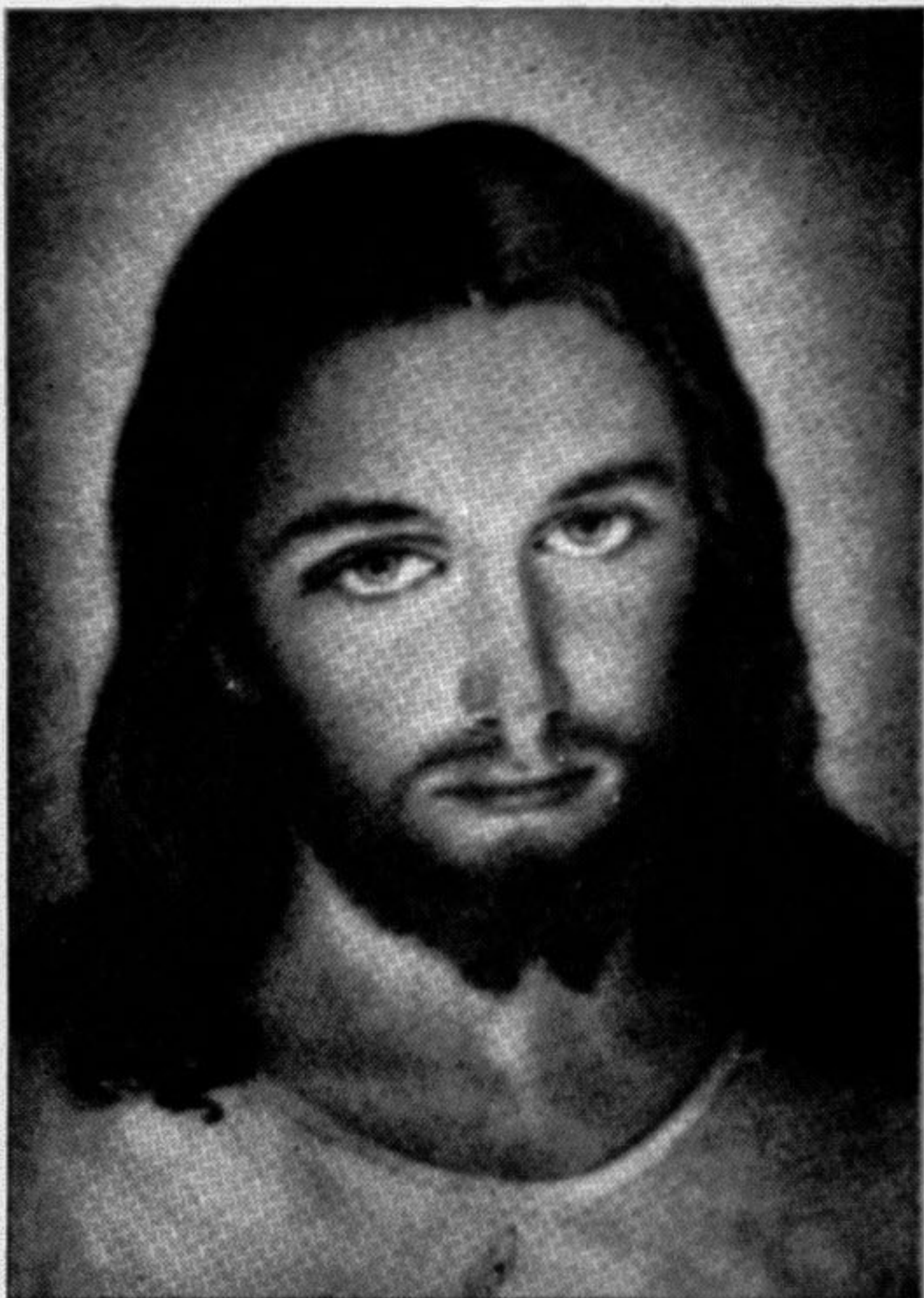


## Jesus is Our Peace

by Rev Bart Baak



I stand in the presence of God, who sent me to speak to you and tell you this good news. It was the good news that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth would have a son, who would be the forerunner of Jesus, the Messiah.

The same angel Gabriel was sent six months later to a girl in Israel. Mary was her name and she was about sixteen years old. In the gospel according to Luke we read: "The angel came to her and said, 'Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you! Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. The angel said to her, 'Don't be afraid. Mary, God has been gracious to you."

You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High God. And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be? I am still a virgin." And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. For there is nothing that God cannot do. I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her. (Luke, chapter 1, the verses 28-38). Christians confess that indeed Jesus is the "Son of God", not in a biological way, rather that God's Holy Spirit was in him to fulfill God's plan with the

world. Jesus' name is also "Emmanuel" — God with us. So in Jesus, God himself chose to live among his people on earth. When Jesus was born in a cave in Bethlehem, a great army of heaven's angels appeared, singing praises to God: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased." And shepherds and wise men from the East came, knelt down and worshipped him.

The baby of Bethlehem became a man and when he was 30 years old, Jesus began to fulfill his mission to save people. It is summarized beautifully in this Christmas poem of Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is still  
When the star in the sky is gone  
When the kings and princes are home  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks  
The work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost  
to heal the broken  
to feed the hungry  
to release the prisoner  
to rebuild the nations  
to bring peace among the people  
to make music in the heart.

But the most important gift that Jesus could give, was that of himself. He offered his life for us. We are the sinners, we are the rebels against God, we

destroy the earth, we commit injustice. So we deserve to be punished. But the good news of the gospel is, that Jesus has taken our punishment on himself, that he died on the cross for our sins so that we would be free.

This is indeed a "strange acquittal". So we can say, Jesus was and is the reconciliation between God and us. This replacement — Jesus who died in our place — is the heart of the Christian faith. Therefore Christians confess: "Jesus is our peace".

On the night before his death, Jesus told his friends, "Peace is what I leave with you: it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does" (John chapter 14, verse 27). The peace of the world, our peace, is only a hollow peace, not real peace. Sure, we do our every best to make peace on earth. We initiate peace talks and instigate cease-fires. But what are the results of all our efforts? Look at Rwanda, Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Chechnya. And in Western countries people live in a material prosperity as never before, but never was the discord in their hearts as great as now.

This we know clearly now: the answers to our deepest needs do not come from the army, political leaders, science, doctors and social development workers, valuable as they are in society. Yet they all are unable to save the situation on earth.

The only real answer to our deepest helplessness comes from God himself. God who has spoken through the prophets and through Jesus, and who is still speaking through his Holy Spirit in every tongue and nation. "If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says."

The Gospel of Christmas challenges us to go the way that Jesus went, that means that we want to try to live in solidarity with the oppressed, the poor, the sick, the outcasts, the addicts. Let me tell a story to illustrate this. It comes from a pastor in Germany. He describes how he found himself in a cellar in one of Germany's major cities. It proved to be a meeting place for drug addicts.

He was not wearing clerical dress but a brightly coloured shirt. As he entered, someone called out, "Hi, what do you want here?" "Don't worry," he replied, "It's all right." So a girl standing next to him burst out laughing and handed him some hashish. When he declined it, they were alerted. "Why not?" they urged; and when he replied, "I've lost the taste," they became suspicious. "Hey, who are you?"

"I'll give you one guess," he countered. "A butcher," she suggested. "Wrong," he answered. "I am a clergyman." Immediately the whole place was stung into silence. Then they began to talk. They talked till they got round to life's deepest questions and what was the point of it all. At first the pastor found himself with a tough battle on his hands. Before he left, however, he was conscious of the presence of Christ in the midst, who prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He sat there with them until two o'clock in the morning. He even prayed for them, there in the cellar. And some of them prayed with him too. It was a genuine cry to the crucified and risen Christ to rescue them from the helplessness into which they had fallen.

"Jesus is our peace." That in four words is the message of Christmas to the world. And I wish this peace to all the readers: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and any other faith.

The writer, from the Netherlands, is principal of St Andrew's Theological College of the Church of Bangladesh, in Dhaka.

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Pax Vobiscum

by Sunita D'Costa

Time has returned  
For bells to jingle  
For stars to twinkle  
For angels to sing  
Glory to the New Born King

Time has returned  
For hearts to mingle  
For love to kindle  
For all to bring  
Sweetness to everything

Time has returned  
To remind once more  
An empty hand but love galore  
Outweighs all material gain  
A selfish life is life in vain

Christmas has returned  
From the immemorial sphere  
Journeying to someplace nowhere  
Laden with generosity  
Kindness and humility  
Spreading the fragrance of peace and love

On the wings of the gentle dove  
Showering all, knowing no rifts  
Life's precious invaluable gifts.

## A Feast of Nativity

by Father Patrick Gomes

EACH year the great feast of Christmas comes to us with much joy and happiness. On December 25 churches are decorated, Christmas star is hoisted, delicious cakes or *plithas* are prepared, joyful youth groups go around house to house singing Christmas carols. However, what is unique is the Christmas crib which brings to our mind the historical event of the Nativity of Jesus Christ. In the crib we gaze on a very mysterious scene: a baby lying in a manger; he is surrounded by Joseph and Mary with their praying hands; the cows remind that this baby was born in a very poor condition; he had no better place than a cow shade. On the birth of this baby the band of angels sang "Glory to God in the highest..." the angel announced, "I have brought to you a good news: Today in the city of David is born Jesus Christ, the Savior" (Luke 2:42). The mystery of Nativity: The way God's divine plan comes into fulfillment is supernatural, is ontological. Ever since God made his promise for the salvation of mankind (cf. Genesis 3:15), God began his journey of the fulfillment of this promise. He enters into human history, scripturally what is called "Salvation history" of the Chosen people, and reveals himself as God who liberates his people from the bondage of slavery (cf. Exodus).

The whole of the old Testament of the Holy Bible demonstrates God's dealing with mankind: He is ever faithful to the covenant, always waiting for His children to return to Him. This God never abandons His children. In the midst of many sufferings and despite of His people God is always present with them as hope and strength. And the most striking of the messianic hope is expressed in the book of Prophet Isaiah: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel, (meaning God is with us) [Isaiah 7:14]. And the mystery of Nativity centering which the whole Christmas celebration evolves is nothing but the mystery of

the birth of this child, the incarnated word of God.

Prophecy about this child: "There shall come forth from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding... He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth... Righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins." (Isaiah 11:3-5). From this and many other prophetic sayings, we understand and reflectively consider the divine characteristics of this child. He will be the fuller revelation of the Divine. The

advent of this Messiah will bring a total change here on earth. All disparities and conflicts will have no place, but there will exist newness in the heart of men. This new state as the result of the coming of the Messiah has been beautifully expressed in the book of Isaiah: "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... They shall not hurt or destroy for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord (Isaiah 11: 6-9).

The Nativity of the Lord: Since it is a mystery, it is beyond our reasoning and human understanding. The miraculous



and mysterious birth of the child speaks only one truth to us: "The savior is born to this earth. God who in many and various ways spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets has now spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed as heir of all things..." (Hebrews 1:1-3). He is born in Bethlehem in the city of David in a small hut. He is lying on the manger.

At his birth angel proclaims this good news: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people: for to you is born this day in the city of David 'Savior who is Christ the Lord.' (Luke 2:10-11). At his birth the multitude of heavenly host praise God singing: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." (Luke 2:14). Such is the joy, peace and happiness in the heart of man because God is present here on earth — he now dwells among us (John 1:1-5). One who is, like us, in everything but sin (Philippians 2:10) embraces our condition of poverty and humility only to demonstrate that he loves us and wants to live with us. He comes as a savior who invites us to receive this salvation and obtain eternal life. One who is simple, humble and man of place can see and obtain this salvation. And interestingly enough, it is not the one with purple dress but the shepherds who first hear the good news of the birth of the child, it is they who are men of place to become the first guests of this Savior (Luke 2:15-16).

Christmas: A feast of Nativity the whole Christian world rejoices immensely at Christmas. On the cards, in the church we look at the image of the nativity. Christmas invites us to make a deep reflection on the mystery of Incarnation, the mystery of Nativity. The feast calls us to make ourselves renewed through a radical conversion in our life, thus making Isaian prophecy of new state realised in our midst. Christ is born, he is present among us, he is Immanuel to us. May the people and joy of the feast of Nativity, Christmas be with us all. May the child Jesus bless us all and our families.

## Christian Social Services in Bangladesh

by Nikesh Chandra Das

CHRISTIANITY first came to the subcontinent in 52 AD when St. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ, came to South India and preached there. Its modern journey to the subcontinent started after Vasco-da-Gama's discovery of the sea-route to India in 1498. Thereafter, the Portuguese traders, settlers, and missionaries gradually started arriving.

The first Christians in Bengal were the Portuguese traders and settlers. Portuguese Jesuit missionaries established the first Catholic Church in Bangladesh in 1600 at Chandan or Iswaripur, near Satkhira town in Bangladesh. Christianity was introduced in Dhaka, then Mughal capital of Bengal, in the early 17th century. Portuguese Augustinian missionaries built the first church of Dhaka at Narinda in 1612.

According to the 'World Christian Encyclopedia', from 1612 onwards Anglican clergy served in India as chaplains under the East India Company. In 1793, the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) missionary William Carey arrived at Serampore in West Bengal and the modern age of Protestant Missionary work in the subcontinent began. In 1796, William Carey established the first Baptist Church at Dinajpur in Bangladesh.

Over the years, Christianity has flourished in Bangladesh. Now our country has over 300,000 Christians of whom about 60 per cent are Roman

Catholics. Even though their number is microscopic, the Christians of Bangladesh have been rendering significant social services aiming at the welfare of the people at large. Actually, the spirit of Christian services is ingrained in the teachings of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, Moses gave his followers ten commandments. But, Jesus Christ made a gist of the ten commandments and condensed it into two: "Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). It means love the Creator first and then His creation. The creation shall have to be loved through services.

The Christian missionaries worked for the socio-economic as well as spiritual need of the people. Here, we can mention of the great Protestant missionary Dr. William Carey. His arrival at Serampore in 1793 opened a new era of missionary work in Bengal. Besides preaching, he translated and printed the Bible in Bengali, wrote many books and dictionary in Bengali, helped develop Bengali type for printing and established Serampore Mission and College. In 1818, Carey founded the first Bengali monthly 'Digdarshan'. William Carey is considered one of the pioneers of modern Bangla prose. He was also deeply involved in the social reform of the then Hindu community.

During the liberation strug-

gle in 1971, the Christian community of Bangladesh actively took part in the war. Most of the Christian missionaries of diverse denominations stayed at their posts at the risk of their lives refusing evacuation. They didn't want to save themselves leaving the people around at the hands of the hounding army. Among the priests and missionaries, Santali priest Fr. Lucas Marandi, Italian Xaverian Father Mario Veronisi, American Holy Cross priest Fr. William Evans and French nun Sr. Emmanuel were the ones who were killed by the Pakistani soldiers.

There are many other Christians who left their marks in the war of liberation to free the beloved country from the grip of Pakistanis.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, the Christian Churches have remarkably been contributing to the development of the country through their schools, hospitals, relief and development programmes. Education and healthcare services are two of their major successful activities. There are about 200 primary and 60 high schools and 149 orphanages run by the Catholic Church in Bangladesh. Notre Dame College and Holy Cross College are two well-known quality educational institutions in our country. Besides there are four hospitals, two leprosaria, and 47 dispensaries providing treatment to thousands of people irrespective of caste and creed.

Apart from these services,

Caritas Bangladesh, Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), World Vision of Bangladesh are some of the prominent among many Christian NGOs working for the socio-economic development of Bangladesh.

However, the Christian community and the Church have often been called "foreign" and this has helped build a sort of ghetto mentality among these people. "Foreign" was perhaps attributed because originally the foreigners brought Christianity to this region and until recently the leadership was also foreign.

But the two disastrous cyclones of 1970 and 1991, our historic liberation war in 1971 and the ongoing social services of the Christian community have helped breaking the ghetto mentality. All through these events, it has been established undoubtedly that the Christians are the sons of this soil. They are partners in all the sorrows and joys of this land.

In fact, the real prosperity and potentiality of the Christian community in Bangladesh lies with the assimilation of the Core Message of Christianity incorporating the cultural context of this soil. The more the Christian community internalize the message the more strongly they will grow. Only a strong and cultured Christian community will uphold the interest of both the community and the country helping make this land a better place for all the citizens.

All things of Nature are drawing closer. Man has come over any superstitious and dogmatic bases to know and learn the inner as well as the outer bounds. The concept that works behind such exploration and restoration attempts for long and healthy life is secularism in Christianity. The essence of this interaction lies in the sense of fraternity which we have opportunity to share on every Christmas. Above all, remorse, serenity and tranquillity in Church give a man peaceful gain of faith and hope on the Christmas Day.

A Christian's Duty  
Good Christians have no other choice but to keep on praying for the bad Christians who are almost forgetful of proper Christian values. In the society or the organisations hatched, grudge, revenge have got life in full-swing. Many leaders are the mainstream forces for making lobby against lobby, group against group, misappropriation of positions. The laymen are following their examples. As a result, moral degradation lowers the position of Christian life. God-fearing and dedicated leaders and laymen should come forward, practise their prayerful and honest life for the glories of Christianity and teach the bad Christians the good lessons.

## It's Christmas!

by Joseph D'Silva

Dear Jonathan and Julian:  
I rejoiced when you, Jonathan, said, "Let us play Christmas carols on the stereo today." I said, "No." That was on 30th November. I said "No" because we were still in the month when we remembered those who passed away. But I told you we could play the carols from the morning, on 1st December, when we entered into the Advent season.

This is the day we usher in the new year in our Catholic religious calendar. It is when we start preparations to receive Christ and for Christmas. We begin by lighting one candle on the Advent wreath on the first Sunday of Advent and thereafter one every Sunday until Christmas. That is, four candles. Remember the Advent wreath I showed you two brothers?

So... my Christmas got off to a good start with your remembrance of carols, Jonathan. Then, Prof Maire Mulcahy, for whom I did research work in Ireland in 1981-83, sent us our first Christmas card of the season. The next day your cousin Sunny called to suggest we go home to Noakhali for Christmas. I agreed, without so much as consulting your mother. It has been years since we spent Christmas at home and it seemed a good idea to go back to where your grandparents gave me birth so many years ago. Your Aunt Winnie and Cousins Bibiana and Marlene will also go home.

How else have we been entering into the spirit of Christmas? I notice your dear mother has been quietly buying gifts. I suppose these are for your grandma, *mamas*, *mamees*, aunts and cousins and yourselves. (This year your *boro mama* will be in another land and I know your grandma will miss him very much.) Your mother has also been talking about ordering cakes for Christmas. She has already got your Uncle Derrick to bring her rice flour from home to make *plithas*. I know too she has asked him to buy fattened ducks from the *char* lands so that these may be ready before we get home. He in turn has asked for sausages to be taken from the city.

As for me, I have sent away as many greeting cards as I can. But it is far too small in number to the ones we have received or that I should send off in remembrance of all those who have befriended us. There are many people who remember us and I rejoice in this. Unfortunately due to the sudden pressure of work on me this year, I am guilty of the sin of omission. Or is it commission? I have also been looking at the readings from the Holy Bible which prepare us for Christmas. These have been very inspiring. I will quote from the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah. These books were written before the birth of Christ. But the passages in them foretell of his coming. In Jeremiah 23:5 it is said: "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a King who will reign wisely." In Isaiah, there are many references which tell of Christ's coming. This one is in Isaiah 7, Verse 14: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will be with child