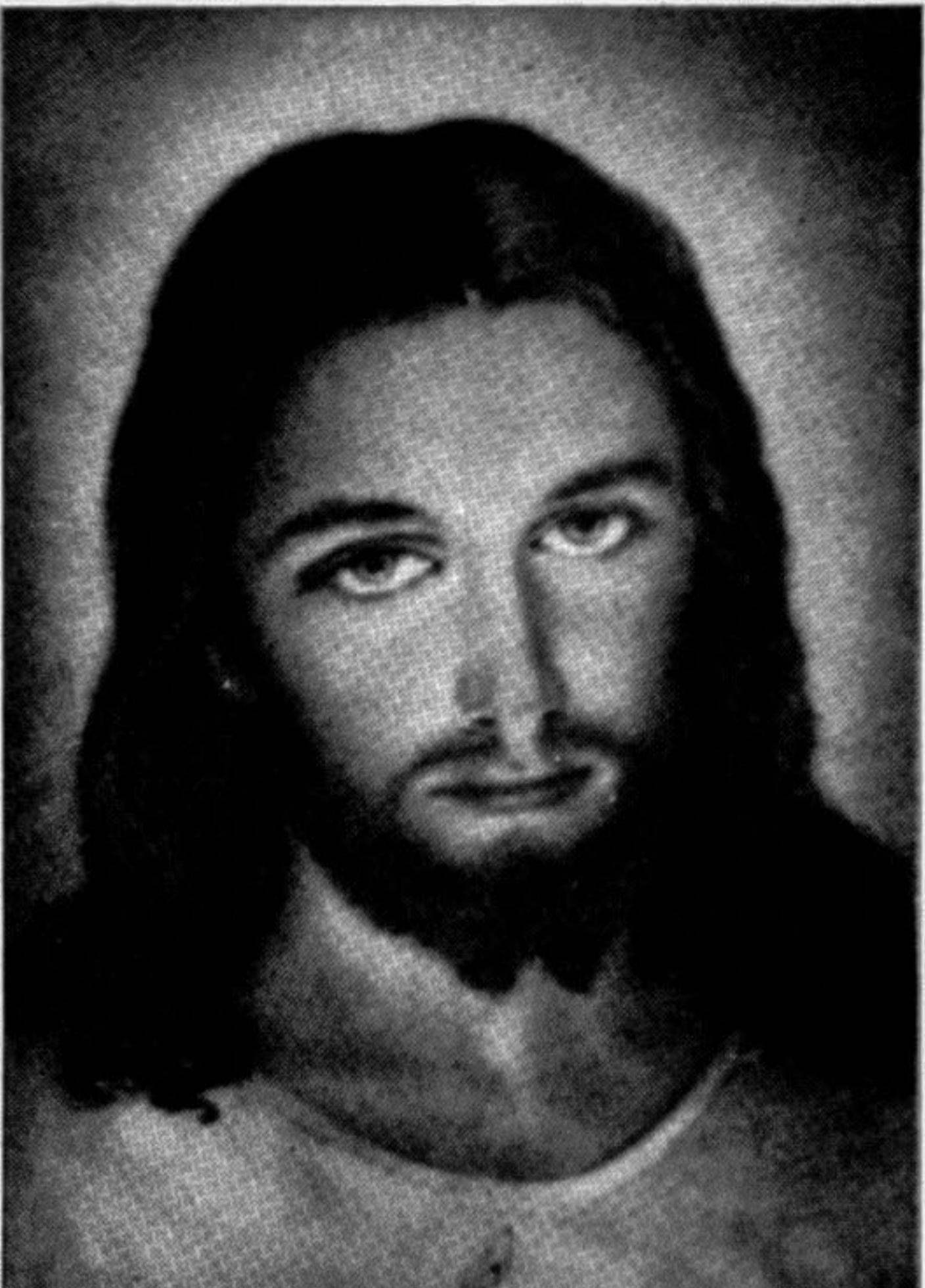


Merry Christmas

The Daily Star Special Feature December 25, 1996

Jesus is Our Peace

by Rev Bart Baak



If there is one thing these days which people are longing for, then it is peace. Whether we are Muslim, Hindu or Christian; whether the colour of our skin in black or white; whether we are young or old; whether we live in America or Bangladesh: we all long for peace.

Peace is not only the absence of war — how valuable in itself — it is more. It is living in harmony with God, with our neighbours and with ourselves. At Christmas time, Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, close to Jerusalem in Israel, two thousand years ago. They believe that through this child who grew to be a man, God brought real peace on earth.

I will explain this. First I will take you back to the beginning of the Bible, the Holy book for Christians. In the first two chapters, Genesis 1 and 2, we read in brilliant poetry about the creation of heaven and earth by God. The glory of his creation was human beings: Adam who with his wife Eve was allowed to live in the garden of Eden. 'God looked at everything he had made, and he was very pleased'. It was a blissful situation. God talked with them and they with God. There was direct contact and they lived in peace.

But then Adam and Eve disobeyed God and God became very angry with them. True He did not kill them, but expelled them from the garden of Eden. Since then life has been in disharmony. Humanity multiplied. But bigger and bigger became their pride and selfishness. Yet God never had a plan to destroy his creation; on the contrary. He thought out a plan to rescue it.

So in Abraham God made a new beginning to save the world and humanity. In the Bible we read about the calling of Abraham by God and his promise to him: 'I will give you many descendants and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make your name famous, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you. But I will curse those who curse you. And through you I will bless all the nations'. (Genesis, chapter 12). For this reason we can call the Bible the report of God's rescue plan.

Through Prophets, priests, and kings, God spoke indirectly to Israel, but most of the people did not want to listen to God or obey his commandments.

They served more and more other gods..... Then for a long long time there was silence from God. There was no prophet in Israel who spoke in God's name and there was no angel who had a message from him. Would God have forgotten his people and his plan to save the nations? Would not God stick to his promise, given so clearly to Abraham, yet meant for all?

But then after a silence of two to three centuries the heaven opened and an angel was sent by God to an old priest in Israel, named Zechariah. The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel.

He was the harbinger of good news.

This was to be Christ who delivered us, who saved us. He was destined to be born of a virgin. We now know this was our Blessed Mother, Mary. We also know that Jesus came to redeem mankind from sin and to open the gates of heaven. You see sons, it is our Christian belief that when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit which God forbade them in the garden of Eden the doors of heaven were closed to the human race. It then took Christ, the son of God reincarnated as man, to come to earth to atone. So Christ's appearance on earth was the harbinger of good news.

This is why we celebrate Christmas. It is a time of joy and merriment because Christ appeared to save us. Christian tradition has handed this down to us over the ages, that is, from about 2000 years ago. But what of its origin? I think it all began with the three wise men mentioned in the Bible. (They are also known as the Kings and as the Magi.) When Christ was born, they were guided by a star to his manger. They took to him gifts of frankincense and myrrh. Very expensive gifts in those days. (Perfumes are, even to this day). The wise men had a reason to be happy. You see, Christ was a Jew and the Jews in those days believed that a man would be born to deliver them. The Jews were an oppressed lot. They were especially oppressed by their Roman rulers. And remember, I told you that Jesus' coming was foretold in the Bible. So, the wise men probably took Jesus to be their worldly saviour and paid their respect to him with gifts. There is also a passage in the Bible which says that angels from heaven appeared to shepherds and sang: 'Gloria in excelsis Deo..... Glory to God and peace on earth to men of good will.' Thus, even the angels in heaven rejoiced.

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 pithas. 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 on 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

and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'

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If we think of merry-making, we certainly have a lot to rejoice about. God has been very good to us in the past year. Remember we have had good health and lots of support from a tremendous lot of people right around us. In a land where so many of our brothers and sisters have so little, the plenty we enjoy is certainly enough cause for joy. Our joy would have been greater, Julian, if your exam results were not so poor this year. But Jonathan, you did well and we are proud of you. This Christmas time your boro mama and mamee will not be with us. They have been good to us. We don't know when we will see them again. But we hope they prosper wherever they go. We'll certainly miss them. Also it is a joy to be able to see 25 years of our country's independence.

When we are in Noakhali this Christmas we shall meet many of our relatives again and exchange greetings. We shall sing Christmas carols instead of playing them on the stereo. I should like to give you a taste of the Christmas I enjoyed when I was your age. But I don't think I shall quite succeed. There is no more the bamboo-walled house nor the hurricane lantern nor the cold. Neither are your grandparents there nor your Uncle Wilfred. Your Aunt Lily and your cousins are all abroad. Still, we shall have a shuo boro din.

Your Papa.
Joe

Life's precious invaluable gifts.

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 young woman jumped in. 'A butcher', she suggested. 'Wrong.' He responded, '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.

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 gathe
Outweighs all material gain
A selfish life is life in vain

Time 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
gifts

Life's precious invaluable
gifts.

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 pithas 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

A Feast of Nativity

by Father Patrick Gomes

the birth of this child, the incarnate 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 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... 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... He reflects the glory of God...'. (Hebrew 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 a 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 peace 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 peace to become the first guest 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 Ishaian prophecy of new state realised in our midst. Christ is born, he is present among us, he is Immanuel among us. May the peace 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

C HISTIANITY 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 Chittagong 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 list 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 Bengali prose. He was also deeply involved in the social reform of the then Hindu community.

During the liberation struggle

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.

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