

Merry Christmas

Christmas

SPECIAL FEATURE

Christmas and Great Jubilee Year 2000

by Father Patrick Gomes



THIS year's Christmas has a particular characteristic. On one hand, it marks the end of a century and on the other, takes us to the eve of a new century. Counting years began from the historical event of the birth of Jesus. Time before it is time before Christ (BC) and time after the birth of Christ is year of the Lord, in Latin, Anno Domini (AD). During this year's Christmas we celebrate the 2000th birthday of Jesus Christ — which means beginning of a new century, and a new millennium. The whole world, especially the Christian starts celebrating this Jubilee year from Christmas celebration which would continue through the year 2000.

Prophecy about the Coming of Messiah
In course of their history the people of Israel were always under the control and persecution of other nations. Consequently they were in despair, even went astray abandoning God. God, however, on many occasions declared the messianic promise which means the Messiah, God's chosen one, will come to bring total liberation of man from the bondage of sin; his kingdom will have no end. Some of the messianic promises are striking in the prophetic literature: "There shall come forth a shoot from

the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. 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 waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins" (Old Testament, book of Prophet Isaiah 11: 1-5). The language here is highly symbolic. The Messiah shall be from the Davidic line and he will be filled by the Spirit. He will bring the total salvation. He will be the King of Pea, the Ruler and his kingdom shall never end. This we hear from the OT in Nathan's prophecy to David: "The Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established for ever" (OT Book of 2nd Samuel 7:12-

14, 16). The one who is the promised Messiah, Savior shall come from a virgin and he shall be a Sign. We read in the book of prophet Isaiah: "The Lord himself will give a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel" (the meaning of this name is God with us (7:14). The salvific effect of this birth of this son is peace and happiness on earth, salvation of mankind. This new situation is symbolically expressed by prophet 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. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the wind child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain. They shall not hurt or destroy.... In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an assign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious" (Prophet Isaiah 11:6-10).

Fulfillment of the Prophecy: Birth of Jesus

When the time was fulfilled God sent this promised Messiah, born of woman, born under the law to redeem those who are under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children of God (cf. New Testament — Letter of St Paul to the Galatians 4:4). St Luke in the Infancy narrative presents the nativity of the Messiah in a vivid manner.

Role of the Holy Spirit: The role of the Holy Spirit is very prominent. Evangelist Luke shows this truth that the event is taking place through persons very particularly selected by God himself: Mary and Joseph. But the whole event is under the divine plan and it is God who controls the whole mystery. The birth of Jesus is therefore is totally willed and planned by God. Therefore beyond our human comprehension.

Role of Virgin Mary: When Mary is reluctant, when questions are in her mind, the angel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Gospel of St Luke 1:35). And Mary replies, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (1:38). When Mary realizes with deep faith in God what great marvel God is going to do through her she with profound humility gives thanks to God and praises His name saying, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (Luke's gospel 1: 46-55). Jesus, a Hebrew



originated name means savior, is born in Bethlehem, least among the cities in Judea at that time. The child is wrapped in swaddling clothes and is laid in a manger. The child born in this way according to the plan of God is to be the fullest revelation of God. Through him would God speak everything to man. We read in the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, "In many various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in the last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom he also created the world" (Hebrew 1:1-3). Through him the promised salvation is realized — mankind is freed from the bondage of sin; the way to the kingdom of God is open to him. So the child who is born is called Savior.

A Good News of Great Joy: To the shepherd the angel says: "Be not afraid, I bring you a 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." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased" (Luke 2:10-14). Christmas is the feast when the whole Christian world recalls this great event of the birth of Christ, the savior, prince of peace.

Celebrating Christmas Liturgical Celebration: As said above Christmas is the feast of the birth of our Lord Jesus. This birth we can only reflect upon through prayer and liturgy and be grateful to God for He has given us Jesus, the savior, the Prince of Peace. The liturgical and spiritual preparation for this feast starts four weeks before Christmas. During these four weeks, which is called Advent season, Christians have special liturgy which is called Holy Mass or Eucharistic Celebration, with special readings from the Bible.

The last nine days before Christmas is the climactic time for spiritual renewal through penitential rite (called sacrament of reconciliation). On December 24 there is Midnight Mass i.e. Christmas liturgy in the Church where the Christian faithful sing "Glory to God in the highest" and announces the birth of the savior. The readings from the Holy Bible during the midnight liturgy speak about the light that has driven away the power of darkness: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone" (Prophet Isaiah 9:2). This light is Jesus Christ who calls himself the "Light of the world" (John's Gospel). In the same passage we hear about the birth of a child: "For there is a child born for us, a son given to us and dominion is laid on his shoulders; and this is the name they give him: Wonder-Counselor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace" (Prophet Isaiah 9:6). The gospel passage that is read from the gospel of St Luke of the New Testament speaks of the Infancy story of Jesus, the birth of Jesus (cf. Luke 2:1-14). Jesus is born in Bethlehem from the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. The announcement of this great event goes first to the shepherd who announces to them saying, "Be not afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And there is a sign for you; you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:13). On this event during Christmas there is Christmas crib in every church made with a small hut in which there are images of Mary and Joseph, the animals and in the centre the baby Jesus. We also find the images of the shepherds who went to adore Jesus and the image of an angel, the announcer of this great news. There is Holy Mass at dawn and there is Holy Mass in the morning. The morning Mass has the readings from the Bible with the theme of Incarnation: "In the beginning was Word, and the word was God. The word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:12, 14).

Socio-cultural Celebration: In Bangladesh both the Christian and Muslim as well as the tribals celebrate this feast in a great festivity. First of all they prepare their houses by cleaning the mud or straw walls; local motifs are painted on wall. Christmas greetings are written there on, common among them is Suvo Borodin, happy Christmas etc. Christmas car-

ols, called kirtans are sung in groups. These Kirtans are composed with the text about the history of Christ's birth in Bethlehem; they also speak about salvation brought about Christ; speak about the joy and happiness that this birth has brought. The music of these kirtans is full of rhythm, so people dance and sing with joy. The kirtan groups (carol groups) go house to house and sing and the housemasters make them happy with Christmas gift, normally money, and entertain them with special Christmas food.

In Bangladesh villages the Christian houses are decorated with banana trees, flowers, coloured papers. Many houses have the Christmas star hoisted. In towns houses are given special illumination. From 24th December midnight prayer service music is played with Christmas songs. Nowadays it is becoming common to see Christmas crib prepared in the villages as well as in towns. Christmas tree, though imported is prepared in the Churches as well as in some families, mostly in towns, symbolising new life.

Various local cakes called Pitha are prepared. Housewives are busy weeks before Christmas preparing flour from rice to make these delicious pithas. It is good to see when Christians invite all irrespective of cast and religion to enjoy Christmas Pithas. The tribal people have also their own traditional delicious pithas made during Christmas. Christmas cake is prepared or ordered during Christmas.

The children and youth are dressed colourfully. Gifts are exchanged. Especially the children wait for Christmas to receive gifts from their dear ones. Sending Christmas cards is more and more becoming a very happy culture.

Christmas and Jubilee Year 2000

With the celebration of the birth of Jesus on begins the Jubilee year. Holding this historical event we enter into a new century, a new millennium on January 1. What we reflect during this Jubilee year 2000 of Christ's birth is love and peaceful communion. God so loved the world that He sent his only son, Jesus. He came as a man to live among us. In his incarnation Jesus manifests his love, his pardon for us, his communion with whole humanity.

Meaning of Jubilee: The people of Israel would celebrate Jubilee every seventh year — namely Sabbatical Year. During this time the land would be

kept fallow; debt cancelled and the slaves freed. After seven sabbatical years on the 50th year they would celebrate Jubilee year. All the elements of sabbatical year would remain same and would be celebrated in much more pomp. The central idea of Jubilee year was social justice and liberation. What is said about Jubilee in the Old Testament of the Bible is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The time of his coming is attributed as year of Grace. His coming brought sight to the blind, strength to the lame, liberation to the captives (cf. Luke's Gospel 4:18-19). Jubilee speaks therefore of wholeness Shalom, peace and love, above all liberation from the bondage of sins, Jubilee speaks of brotherhood and communion. There is immense joy when these values are realized.

Message of Christmas and Jubilee Year: In the history the world has experienced the sin of divisions, hatred, jealousy. The two world wars are examples. Yet the world also witnessed efforts in different levels, at different stages to build up society where dwell peace and harmony among people. Our motherland Bangladesh has faced and is still facing many challenges to shape it with peace and harmony, love and communion. International summits, international games, visits of many world leaders to Bangladesh are hopeful signs that our country is getting more and more in communion with the whole world. There is a scene of native culture and heritage among all. All these are positive signs of development with values like love, peace and communion. On the other hand there are also evils like religious fundamentalism, bribery, killings etc. which are stumbling blocks to peace and communion. However, God has given every human being the strength to fight against these evils.

Conclusion
Christmas and the year 2000 calls us to be purified and have the inner peace of mind in our personal life, our family and social life. The peace is there where the heart and mind is without the influence of sin. Where there is this peace there is the birth of Jesus, true Christmas. And here lies the universality of the significance of Christmas. Let this Christmas sentiment and Christmas message run throughout the whole Jubilee year of 2000. To all irrespective of caste, creed and religion, there is one wish, one greeting: Merry Christmas, and a very happy Jubilee year 2000. May the blessings, peace and joy of Christmas and year 2000 be with us all.



The Joyous Celebration

by Faguneshu Hia

I have begun to scan the horizon, but there is no sign of a bicycle there. Four friends of mine must be coming here. I am waiting for them since ten. We are supposed to hold a meeting here, under the shade of these fig trees. This meeting will be about the coming Christmas. But what about them all? They are all brutes. They kept me waiting but no trace of them. A funny joke indeed. O, there they come. My head was almost fuming with anger when they reached me. All gave a pleasant smile as if I will be out of my anger just seeing their amiable smiles. Dina said, "Dear Hia, don't get so angry. We are terribly sorry. You know Richard is hungry for adventure, and so, while he was planning for another we were bound to listen to him." I said, "Well, you all were planning for an adventure but never thought of me. I will also not think of you any longer." Robin said impatiently, "O...., please we are sorry for the last time. Cool down Hia, it's okay. Seeing their sorry faces I ended my wrath and soon we started our meeting. Shelly said, "Guys, we all know that food and fun always go together, so we must prepare very good dishes for Christmas." We all agreed. Richard then reminded us of the gifts that we should make or buy for our friends. We decided to present Santa Clause a gift from us. I added, "Chocolates and cream-cookies are a must." We thought so and so did all children.

heard Shelly saying, "hay, we are out of our track, we lost it right? Now what else for the Christmas, quick." We said aloud, "Nothing more." The most important thing is to remain happy and pleasant for the coming joyous celebration", said Richard. We do not have rotten luck and so, we are expecting to be more happy than anyone else. We all then promised not to tremble like jelly only because of cold in the Christmas morning so as not to spoil the whole day. There we ended our conversation and departed.

25th December. At last our desired Christmas had appeared. This morning is delightful. I have jumped up from my bed and started to prepare to go out. When I was searching for my socks, I found them filled with something. Oh, there were chocolates, biscuits, nuts, etc. Santa had presented me those and so, I am happy. Again down the fig trees we met, and wishing the fig trees we started to walk towards the church. In the church we found a big box of paper and all of a sudden, something jumped out tearing the paper. Wow, that's Santa! He looked so brilliant with a red dress and a huge conical cap. On his shoulder there was a huge bag consisting of some attractive things. Santa, not wasting a minute, started making as engaged ourselves. He sang songs, danced with us and also played the large red piano and the huge drum. Santa then looked at me and asked, "Dear, what do you want this day? I was nervous but said at last, 'I want you to sing once again for all of us.' Santa laughed aloud and said, 'I think you will be more happy to get this,' saying so opened a big green box where there was a huge golden bell. I was surprised as I never saw such a beautiful bell in my life. I took that and Santa distributed all other gifts he had brought for the other children. Finally taking flowers and balloons we came out of the church. It became night time. Everywhere there were candles and colorful bulbs. We then came to our secret head quarter, 'Snow Cave' and there I gave Dina a ring and she gave me a locket. All presented me some gifts and I also presented them. Time passed by and so, Christmas came to can end.

The Last Christmas of 20th Century Thoughts on Socio-Economic Condition

by Dr Thomas Costa

TODAY the Christian community throughout the world is celebrating this century's last Christmas. Numerically microscopic Christian community of Bangladesh is also celebrating this day giving importance to spirituality and reconciliation.

In the life of the Christian community, another important event is taking place at the end of this century. In accordance with the religious custom, Jubilee year is celebrated at an interval of every 50 years. In view of celebrating the millennium year of Christ's birth, the Grand Jubilee Year will be celebrated. This is an important special period for the spiritual lives of the faithful of Jesus Christ. The meaning and importance of this X-mas and the Grand Jubilee does not merely matter with "individual life" but include the lives of all members of a family as well as the world Christian community at large. Thus we feel the need for change in our own lives and transformation in the life of the society as a whole.

The celebration of any religious festival provides opportunity for organising own life with new orientations for positive human values and correct-out of order in our individual, family and social life. While celebrating this Jubilee Year, we may take some concrete steps: "To exempt the poor loanees from the burden of loan, to release the mortgaged lands of the poor, to free helpless captives, to provide shelter to the shelterless and other acts of social transformation."

These issues socially. Great poet Rabindranath Tagore expressed his feelings about the meaning of festival as "Each day the man is small, poor and alone but during the festival day the man is great; s/he is great in unity with all men; feeling the power of humanity on the festival day s/he is noble." In fact, keeping the festival before us we may look back at our past life, so that the spirit and inspiration to go forward can be found. On the occasion of celebrating the last Christmas of the 20th Century, I often question myself—

— We the people of Bangladesh, what have we really achieved during the current century?

— What could we not achieve or failed to achieve?

— What are we expecting in the depth of our hearts, during the forthcoming new century?

First: As a nation, our greatest achievements are — the recognition of our mother tongue in 1952 and the freedom from the Pakistani rulers in 1971. Moreover, the recognition of 21st February as the International Mother Language Day throughout the world, is our national pride. Because of the struggle of the Bangladeshi people and the great sacrifice of the martyrs of our language movement, all nations and tribes of the world got recognition to their own languages.

I express thanks and congratulate the authorities of the "Prothom Alo", on their call to our nation by extending recognition of the languages of Bangladeshi Adibashis and the tribals. By doing this, they take national initiatives for the development and preservation of their most valued cultures and improvement in the quality of their lives. Thus, we shall be able to set another example to the UNO for its replication in other countries of the world wherever cultural minorities exist.

Secondly: In spite of many natural calamities and various kinds of limitations and obstacles after the war of liberation, the farmers of our country have done a miracle by doubling the food production to feed almost the double number of mouths increased during this period. The average food deficit however, almost remained static.

Thirdly: The development of garments industries is another great achievement which earns more than half of our foreign exchanges.

Various signs and symptoms indicate that fast changes are taking places in our society and economy. Some even assume that, the next decade will bring so many changes, which have not even been achieved throughout the past five decades. The communication system, information network and the high-tech are the major indicators of such assumption.

But, in spite of such achievements, we, as a nation, have to enter the new millennium with several drawbacks which need to be treated and cured as quickly as possible. Our worst drawback is our political traits, which are unhealthy and create obstacle to people's well-being. The other one is selfish bureaucracy. When their responsibilities are to remove obstacles and pave the way for development and prosperity by inspiring and directing the people effectively, our bureaucrats are busy cherishing their self-interests and acquiring power. The people's

servants have become masters of the people.

Our national politics is also failing to reach consensus on the minimum basic issues regarding the national well-being. This is the most urgent and important matter to be tackled. According to many, development is at our doorstep but because of the political rivalry, we are unable to taste the development.

It is our desire and expectation that "In the new century, new political base will be built in coordination with the patriotic people, intellectuals, professionals, scientist etc."

Another important issue for the new century is to create more opportunities for the unemployed, thus bringing ray of hope to the enormous number of unemployed youths. This should be a top priority in the national policy. I urge that in spite of our differences in opinion, let us work together and consider the unemployment problem as a national issue and take measures to tackle this problem. In this context, a democratic government must take the front-liners role. Such opportunities need to be created at the rural areas to resist influx of migration to the urban areas. The real implementers, no doubt will be the people of rural areas.

Finally, I am most sincerely and humbly expecting that the last Christmas of the 20th century would inspire to create new awareness and attitude amongst our Christian and non-Christian brothers and sisters alike in Bangladesh; so that we can bring changes in our own hearts and take concrete steps for the needed social reforms and transformation towards desired human well-being.



We're All One

by Sunita D' Costa

Lights are lit in Bethlehem
While people nearby swim
in the river of darkness
What distress!

Can you hear the jingle bells
With people throwing bombs and shells?
Extreme vengeance in their soul
How cruel!

Yet the Angels proclaim in glee
to one and all, bound or free
Vishnu's greetings from the sea
Desert blessings from Mahanabi

Buddha, Nanak and all the rest
in essence other names of Christ
Merry Christmas!