

Merry Christmas

Special

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The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath

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ODAY is Christmas day! Christians all over the world observe this day as the birthday of Christ, the eternal Mind and Word of God incarnate as a human person, as Jesus of Nazareth born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us be reminded one more time, amidst all the festivities that usually accompany Christmas celebrations, of the true meaning of Christmas. What was the purpose of Christ's coming into this world? What was his teaching for our practical life, and about religion? These are some of the pertinent questions that one would usually ask this day.

John, the writer of the most spiritual gospel, testified to Christ thus: "For the Law (Mosaic Law, Taurath) was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." In the Mosaic religion, the holiness and other-worldliness of God was over-emphasized against His grace. The preachers of the faith during Christ's time painted a fearful picture of God so that man feared God more than spontaneously loved him. Man's dignity and potential was underestimated. But in spite of man's sinful

ness the entire Bible speaks of man very highly. Man is created in God's image and likeness, and as such he is given the dominion and the responsibility of stewardship of God's creation. He is a little lower than God Himself, declares the psalmist (Psalm 8).

To the Jews the Mosaic Law represented God's presence in their midst. It was their highest and holiest possession. The purpose of the Law was to teach, instruct and exhort man to live love God whole-heartedly and also other people as oneself. But something went wrong. The Law came to be manipulated by the so-called leaders to suite their vested interests. It was misused politically, spiritually and economically. The very thing, which was to represent God's loving kindness, was turned to be a barrier between man and his neighbour and man and God.

Jesus came to give the true and life-oriented interpretation to religion and specially the Old Testament laws. The New Testament declares that he came to fulfill the Law; he is the end of the law. Matthew records Jesus saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any

means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

He appealed to the righteousness as opposed to the external righteousness of the legalistic approach to Judaism and called for the authentic spiritual interpretation of the same. Talking about the relationship of Christ with the Old Testament Henry Halley in his Bible Handbook observes, "[T]he Old Testament is

and grace supremely and reconciled man to God.

The so-called spiritual leaders tended to underestimate the dignity of human life while they were extra-careful about the meticulous observance of the Law, which they codified into 613 rules: 248 commands and 365 prohibitions, and as many as 1,521 amendments were made to them adding minute details. The Law

burning his food by simply uttering the phrase "I divorce you" three times. John's Gospel records Jesus saving one woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders and other people were ready to stone her to death. But we don't see the male person around. He fled away. But the Pharisees and Sadducees giving the Fatwa to kill the woman were silent about her consort! Throughout his

were to rest and glorify God. By doing the good works of mercy and freeing people from their disabilities and deformities Jesus protested against the narrow and partial interpretation of the Law. He said that God did not forbid doing good works on Sabbath days. He said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In effect, he was telling that religion was for man, and not

year, cultivate flowers; where the

vision is for a decade, cultivate a tree,

where the vision is eternity, cultivate

people." God created man in His

"image" and "likeness" implying that

He gave man part of His communicable and moral attributes of love, holiness, justice and the ability to commune with Him. So in essence, we human being are all God's Image bearers though as a consequence of sin that divine image has got tarnished or marred in us, but not entirely obliterated. As Pascal said, "Within each of us there is a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill."

Religion and godly values cannot be legislated, but ought to be spontaneous.

The mission of Christ's coming to the world was to restore God's image in full in the human person. Nietzsche could say, "Man is the reason for the world." Leonard Verdun aptly said, "The plain implication is that from the earliest beginnings the divine interest was to reach its climax in man. All that goes before is anticipatory, propaedeutic to the dominion-haver known as man. Man is pictured as the crown and capstone of the entire creative enterprise of the Almighty; man is the goal towards which the whole undertaking moved. Verily the Bible does not speak meanly of man." The Law and the Prophets prepared the way for

The lives of millions of peace-loving ordinary people often appears to be hostages in the hands of the few who want their vested interests carried out. But are really any religious dogma above the sanctity and dignity of human lives? Let this question be a point for our special thought at this time of the year. For God loves all people irrespective of religion, caste, nationality, sex or social strata in all times and at all places because His seat is the human heart.

the account of a nation. The New Testament is the account of a Man. The nation was founded and nurtured of God to bring the Man into the world." The Law could not save people from the judgment for sin. It pointed man to where salvation was to be found, that is, to Christ. God sent His only begotten son, who vicariously suffered at the hand of the sinful people and gave his sinless life so that sinful people could receive salvation in God's grace through faith in what he has done on the Cross of Calvary. Christ incarnated God's love

and the religion of the ordinary people became a burden than being something to quench their spiritual thirst after God. Karl Barth made it clear saying, "The weakness of the Jewish religious establishment was the weakness of organized religion everywhere. Instead of religion serving the people, it so often turned out that people were serving religion." (his Commentary to Epistle to the Romans). In Jesus' time, according to Pharisees like Rabbi Hillel, it was possible for a man to divorce his wife for a very simple reason such as

public ministry of Jesus he was ridiculed for his interpretation of religion and the Mosaic Law. He was even humiliated for healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, empowering the weak and helpless merely because he did all these great miraculous works that testified to God's glory and mercy for the poor, the weak the marginalized and the stigmatized people on the Sabbath days, the day of rest (Saturday). According to the Moses' law people were supposed to observe the Sabbath by desisting from work,

man for religion.

Jesus gave priority to ethical and moral values of life above external rites and the teaching about heaven, which does not add value to human life here and now. He took human life in this world seriously. So he invested on people, built them up so that they could be agents of God for transformation of this world into a place where God's love, peace and justice would reign for all mankind, where heaven and earth would kiss each other. An ancient Chinese proverb says, "Where the vision is for one

Christmas: Reflection, celebration and determination

FATHER PATRICK GOMES

ODAY is December 25 of the 2005th year of the Lord. Today the whole world celebrates with great solemnity the birth of Jesus, nativity of Jesus -- Christmas. This is the day our Saviour was born; what a joy for us! This is no season for sadness, this is birthday of Christ who is life -- the life which annihilates the fear of death, and engenders joy, promising immortality. However, Christmas celebration becomes relevant and spiritually fruit bearing 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.

Christmas mystery reflected: The history points out that when Palestine was ruled by the Romans, Jews were treated as slaves and when these Jewish people tired of slavery and underestimation were expecting a Messiah promised by the Lord and prophesied by many Prophets the Messiah was born in a very simple manner almost unnoticed, unannounced by human voice and unrecognised. He was born in Bethlehem in a tiny cowshed finding no corner when Joseph and Virgin Mary came to Judea for enlisting their names. He was born to Virgin Mary! God the Father in and through this new born revealed to man completely. Therefore, this man -- the newborn Jesus -- is ordinary as well as very extraordinary as he comes in human and divine nature both. Through Incarnation the unspoken word is being spoken. The Bible says: "When in former times God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion through the prophets. But in this the final age he

has spoken to us in the Son whom he has made heir to the whole universe; and through whom he created all orders of existence" (Letter to the Hebrews 1:1-2). It is God who therefore comes down to earth through Incarnation. It is the cause of great joy for humanity.

This birth of the Child Jesus brings tremendous joy to the world because this birth is for the spiritual salvation of the whole world. The world is liberated through Jesus: his life, his preaching, his example 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 saviour, 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). At his birth the shepherds were the first guests that came to visit him. Yes, those who are clean and pure in heart, simple and humble in nature can find God in their heart, in their lives.

Jesus is born to dwell with us as a light: The Bible states that "The world 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 can dwell only when we are prepared with our holiness in heart and mind, in words and



deeds. 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 birth of Jesus by a lighted star (Cfr Holy Bible, Gospel of St Mathew 2:9). We are called to be guided by the divine light who is Jesus. Christmas is truly a feast of light.

Religious and socio-cultural celebration: As regards preparation for this great spiritual festival a four-week period, liturgically called the season of Advent is loaded with prayers, Bible reading and meditation. Devotees and the faithful cleanse themselves through a sacramental ritual called

Confession or Sacrament of Reconciliation. The last nine days of this Advent season is intensified with hymns and prayers that bring newness in the life of the believers in order to welcome the newborn Jesus in heart in a befitting manner. On Christmas the Christmas prayer service, the Holy Mass is held at night, traditionally called mid-night Mass on 24th of December and in the morning of December 25. Culturally speaking people normally decorate houses during Christmas, Christmas stars are hoisted, Christmas cards are sung. Delicious and variety of cakes are prepared in almost each family and are shared by friends and neighbours irrespective of caste and religion. People go house to house to exchange Christmas wishes. Of course people, especially the youth and children are donned in new clothes.

Jesus the Messiah and his kingdom: The salvation history narrated in the Bible foresaw that the Messiah will come from the house of King David and He will be called Counselor, Prince of Peace. And at his coming the whole situation will be renovated; the messianic kingdom will be of peace and harmony. Its features are stated in the Book of 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; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Prophet Isaiah 11:1-8). The Prophecy again says: "Nation will not lift sword against nation, there will be no more training of war" (Isaiah 2:3-4). This text is very relevant for Bangladesh at this present period when the country is going through bitter experience of turmoil and unrest.

Call of Christmas: No sword but peace. It is not merely a slogan, because slogans are these days very

cheap, even misleading. It must be a reality. Jesus is born to liberate mankind from the bondage of sins. And as said above, these sins are a reality in our country. This year in our country Christmas mystery and celebration strongly voicing: no sword but peace. 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 value that this nativity embraces and renounce, abandon once for all these nasty and ugly sins. Following the message of Christmas the result will be a new person, new society. The whole country will be refreshed where will dwell peace, true peace.

Establishment of this peace is possible because Bangladesh has an excellent tradition of people of different religious faith living together in harmony. Brotherhood and communion is in the blood of the people. Therefore even though this year's Christmas message puts before us a big challenge to realise peace yet we say we are able to face this challenge.

Conclusion: We can conclude that, the oath: "no sword but peace" is a must not only for Christian community that celebrates Christmas but also for all others. We all have the moral responsibility to make this world, this country better. Peace is inner disposition of man's life expressed in outward personality through words and deeds. When we are men of peace, we don't destroy but build, we don't demolish human life but help it grow. On this year's Christmas let our prayer to the Lord be: Make me a channel of your peace: where there is hatred, let me bring your love; where there is injury, your pardon. And where there is doubt, true faith in you. Merry Christmas!

Who challenges man's existence today
Chasing him from the Arctic
To the dense forests of the Amazon below?
Is it not his very own shadow?

Who's that ghost who whispers to man
Justifying every action he takes
Be it in the forests or cities, wherever he goes?
Are not his senses his very own foes?

Who's the forerunner of man's destruction
Alluring him to the depths of shame
To be caught in the trap of misdeeds?
Is it not his insatiable greed?

Stop man, stop! You can still win
See your reflection in all, in and out of kin
Your sorrow is theirs, and theirs is yours
Your peace is theirs, and likewise

Be kind to nature, birds and animals everywhere
To the fishes of the seas and the marine life there
Be kind to yourself, be you a Muslim or a Hindu
A Christian, a Sikh, a Buddhist or a Jew

Life is precious, as a rose to bloom
And not to be sacrificed and burst like a bomb
Offer a rose to the world in all its fragrance
Holding Christ's love in His remembrance.



Celestial joy

RICHARD TAPAS ADHIKARY

HE 9th Verse from Luke, Chapter 2, goes like "An angel of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." In Bethlehem, the town of David who was born of his birth there are a number of amazing stories that strike the world with queer wonder. These amazing stories are the celestial glimpses of God.

The same angel brought good news to the shepherds herding nearby so that they would not be terrified. The good news behind Jesus' coming to earth is borne by an angel. The glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. The scenario of such birth and Bethlehem itself is attributively supernaturally dictated. So, the angel asked them not to be afraid. Because Bethlehem, though a tiny town, gave birth to a Savior. He is Christ. His birth is a great news of joy for all men.

The angel added "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger". Jesus was noted to have been in cloths wrapped and kept in a manger. It is his pointing to a precise identification, just a 'sign' which potentially denotes God's miracle unlike any human birth from womb. A manger could be the baby's comfort place of after birth. When Jesus was nailed on the Cross, his head was adorned with a crown decked with thorns, not with gems or pearls. A manger or a crown of thorn is



an absolute peace. Because peace is not earthly palpable.

A great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel who praised God and said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests" in Luke 2: 14, while Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, king David's town. Jesus is made vivid to be a symbol of peace. He has brought peace, on the

and he kept praying on the eve of being arrested. He arbitrated him to stop to attempt defending him against the captors. He blasted while Peter rose impatient protest. He pointed that his kingdom was in Heaven. His existing on earth was only to fulfil God's wish. His appearance to Thomas was an absolute answer of the whole world's question of impossibility of coming back after death once. Jesus' resurrection is another miraculous sign that is entirely celestial and divine.

Mary found her little baby Jesus was adored by the men from the far off East. This surprised her. The cattle and their naive scenario of the stable's surroundings on a lonely night doubled her senses of awe and surprise when the baby came to her virgin womb without an amity with Joseph. Poverty ruled the tranquil scenario of the birth. But angels declared it different. A king was born. Poverty is gone. Peace steps in. It is a gift of God as a little newborn king lying in the manger. Poverty never comes from food and clothing. It originally comes from the sin of disobeying God. Jesus says man does not live only with bread but by the word of God. Jesus paved a new way to live in peace in eternity after world's misery.

The mother Mary silently kept watching all things around that happened centered on her newborn. Shepherds heard and were amazed of the king's birth. Angels sang and praised God. Wise men gifted and worshipped led by a star. All the hap-

penings were not familiar to the sense of her being a simple woman, not knowing a man. They nudged her introspective and intuitive entity. Intrinsically she fathomed a shadow of God and His greatness in her immaturity womanhood. The 19th Verse of Luke, Chapter 2 tells "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" which in her different identification of the world we can obviously call Heaven. It is the celestial world. Christmas bears the joy that is the hope that a man can enter Heaven through Jesus Christ.

The story of Jesus Christ's birth is rich with many divinely gifted events. These are paradoxical to the events of any human birth. Jesus' birth in a stable and being kept in a manger is suggestive of the realm of the Almighty God. He is the celestial being of miracles. Jesus points to a Heaven for all men. He brings peace by crucifixion of himself edifying forgiveness. His birth magnifies God's making an impossible into a plainly possible thing which our world's reason cannot answer. Innocent love and faith can dictate one to the realm of Jesus' kingdom of peace. He who believes in Jesus will attain Salvation and enter into Heaven. Heaven's life is celestial. Glory rules life here as the Holy Bible says. So, Christians surely tell their neighbours of the celestial joy of commemorating Jesus' birth on this Merry Christmas.

That thou preached Christianity.
But the people of other religions
Speak of you, praise your doings.
This's thy glory.

Chaos and confusion are driven now
From man to man, class to class, nation to nation.
Oh, great soul, looking for your miraculous action
That could lead us to a new age.

To me, thou one of God's incarnations.
The world people recollect thee today.
My heartiest tributes to you today
For it's thy birthday celebrations.