

Christmas that beckons us

There are two ways to religious life: personal righteous life in the eyes of God, and reflection of this life in doing justice and living in harmony with others.

MARTIN ADHIKARY

THE Old Testament book of Isaiah, a prophet of the 8th century B.C., is of great significance in understanding the birth, life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, more than any other book in the entire prophetic literature. Isaiah is quoted 62 times (next only to the Book of the Psalms) and is frequently alluded to in the New Testament.

One of the most attractive verses in the Bible for me is in this book: "For this is what the Lord -- He, who created the heavens, He is God; He who fashioned and made the earth, He founded it; He did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited -- says: 'I am the Lord, and there is no other' (Isaiah 45:18)."

The eternal, true and holy God created the universe; He created it not in vain, but to inhabit it. He dwells in the human heart. However, as we celebrate Christmas today with merriment and festivities we must also celebrate the judgment of God upon the human race.

We have made lives of people hard by our selfishness, our greed and lust. The baby Jesus confronts us with the glory

and the justice of God. There is so much commercialism, wanton destruction of God's good creation and a sheer lack of stewardship of His creation today. We destroy the resources of the cosmos; creating chaos and confusion that God cannot live in it, just as there was no room in the inn for the new-born baby Jesus two millennia ago.

The Jewish people were hoping for the Messiah, who would be a political or military ruler to subdue all the nations that humiliated them in their past history. But Jesus Christ did not fulfill that expectation. So he was not the kind of Messiah that they were praying for.

Today, we are getting increasingly concerned about the future of the earth, ecology and all that they imply. We need to be saved from all the wanton destruction of nature and its resources. God created us in His image, the Bible says. This means that God has shared with Man His communicable moral attributes of love, holiness, justice and intelligence. He gave us the responsibility to glorify God and work for peace and harmony. This is what the angels sang at the birth of Jesus: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on

whom his favour rests (Luke 2:14)."

But due to the sins of pride and lust Man has distorted or marred that image. This lies behind the alienation that all of Mankind today suffers from: the alienation from God, the alienation from one another, from nature and even from Man's own inner-self. This alienation or estrangement is on both the vertical and the horizontal planes.

The subjective result is what is theologically called "total depravity." This concept means man is spiritually depraved or paralysed. Because of this, man on his own cannot satisfy God's standard; all his so-called righteousness is like filthy rags before holy and just God. He cannot help himself. He needs a saviour.

The sinless Son of God Jesus Christ came to the world to pay the ransom-price for sinful Man to redeem him from the captivity of sin. As Christmas confronts us we must realise today that man is a sinner. This picture of man, though very harsh, is absolutely true, nevertheless.

There is so much pain, suffering, envy, jealousy, hatred, strife, war and selfishness in our lives, our societies, among nations, among the rich and the poor. Our parents do not teach those things to us. We have inherited them from Adam and Eve. This is our fallen nature, our original sin.

God sent His only begotten Son, Christ, to the world to reconcile the

alienated world to Himself. But we must share this message of reconciliation, the good news, among people, among nations and among societies and communities. We must do this not by means of lip-service, not only in liturgies but also in real life situations. We can do this authentically only if we can establish right relationship with God and with others.

There are two ways to religious life: personal righteous life in the eyes of God, and reflection of this life in doing justice and living in harmony with others. God said this through Isaiah: "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, punish the oppressor (Isaiah 1:15-17)."

We hold summit talks on so many issues, like the recently held UN Summit on Climate. But we do not like to sacrifice a little for the good to the global human family; we do not like to do something that might transform the lives of many.

Our minds and wills are in bondage, our freedom and emotions are captivated by our depravity. One name of Christ given through Isaiah is "Immanuel," meaning "God-with-man." The God-incarnate Christ came to the world as a human.



The season of brotherhood.

On the one hand he exposes the human predicament, and on the other he supremely reveals the outreaching love of God for the lost creation.

In the Christ-event we know of God's great concern for the good of mankind, from Him we have the greatest Commandment, to love God and to love others, of him we receive the greatest commission to preach his life and in him we possess the greatest comfort of his co-existence with us in

our real life situation.

We can worthily magnify God's name as we sincerely seek to discover Christ and obey his commands. Let the true joy and transforming power of God-in-Christ pervade in our lives and experiences, in our words and deeds right here in our real and mundane life.

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Is wishing for positive politics a goose chase?

Many elderly citizens in Bangladesh lament that they are unlikely to see "politics for prosperity of the country" during their lifetime. Indeed, many of us feel that Bangladesh, since our bloody war for independence 39 years back, is still experimenting with the format of politics that suits the nation. The liberation war veterans are passing away, with their wishes unfulfilled, and a new era is yet to be born.

Z. A. KHAN

MANY elderly citizens in Bangladesh lament that they are unlikely to see "politics for prosperity of the country" during their lifetime. Indeed, many of us feel that Bangladesh, since our bloody war for independence 39 years back, is still experimenting with the format of politics that suits the nation. The liberation war veterans are passing away, with their wishes unfulfilled, and a new era is yet to be born.

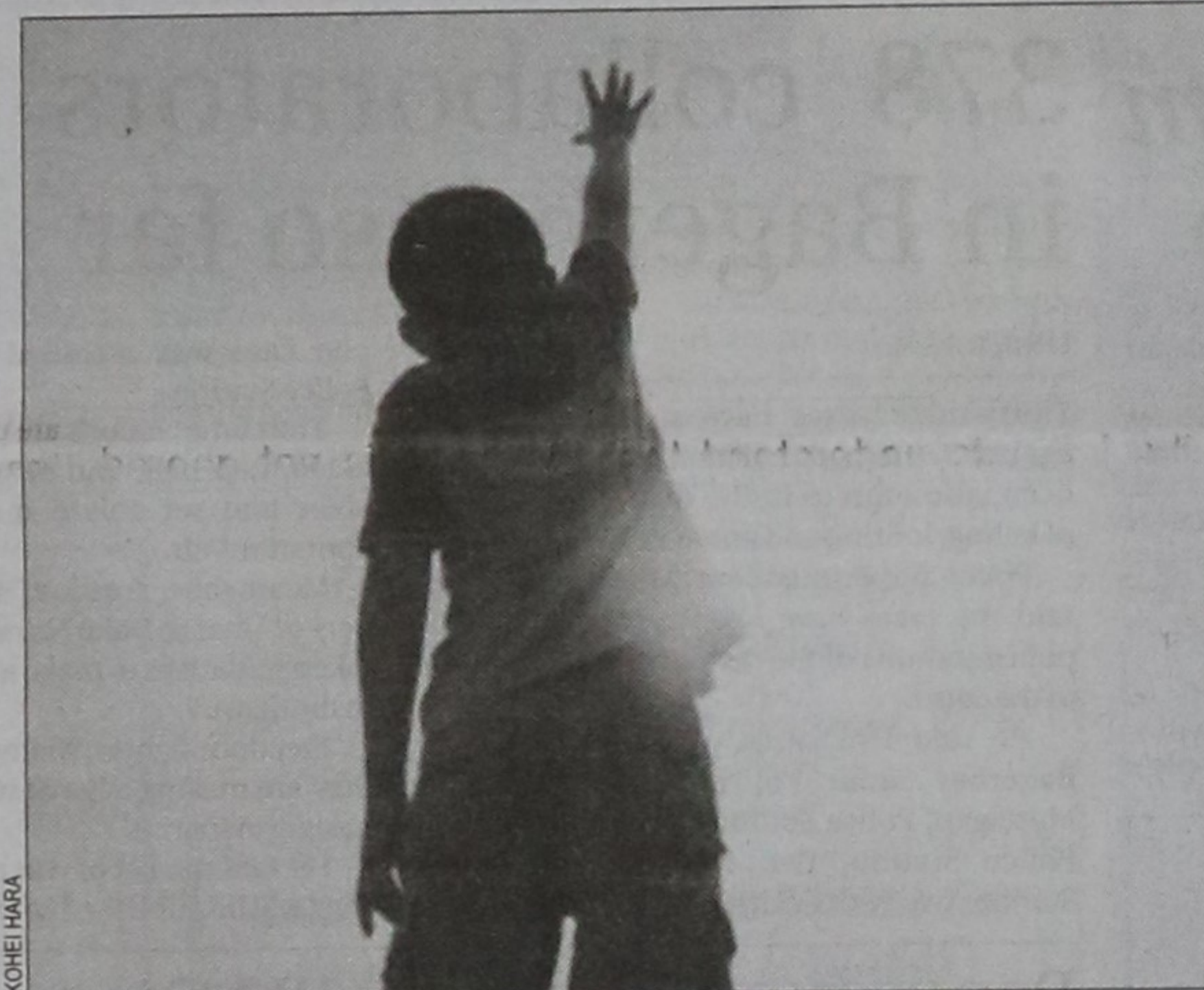
In the interregnum, a variety of symptoms are appearing that do not promise to accommodate the challenging dynamics of change and the unneeded sensitivities that may trigger violence. Can we preside over continuance of this situation? Does not posterity expect us to find ways that can midwife a rebirth of the commitment that inspired us to fight hand in gloves for our independence, regardless of political differences?

The bumpy road of politics that we have treaded so far has failed to direct us to the destination. The nation inherited a war ravaged economy and fractured political institutions due to mismanagement and manipulations of some of the then political bigwigs who did not pur-

sue the cause of independence according to the people's wish. In the depth of this misty situation, there was the misguided motivation of personal greed, ethncal misunderstanding and political jealousy.

What we lack in our pursuit of democracy and development is unity in diversity in the political dispensation. We have witnessed that major political parties opposed each other even on vital national issues. This notion has become more prevalent in recent years, causing ambivalence about the consequences of the negative approach. Right now, our nation is in quest of a model of political initiative best suited for us, backed by accentuated necessity of accommodation. It is time that the political leadership abandon their attitude of opposing everything that the opposite number puts up.

One does understand that the suspicion that has accumulated over the years cannot be supplanted by hastily taken initiatives for concord to enable good politics to return to centre stage. Our people today are willing to challenge the political wind and often question the probity of those in power. This is fraught with potential danger of driving a wedge



Where is it?

between the opposing political leadership, which may blockade intercommunication.

Experience reveals that our people have a talent for doing the unexpected, and may force a rapprochement on the leadership to forge an alliance based on necessity and shared values. An array of reckless disputations has immersed our nation into the current political imbroglio.

The leadership of the major parties go haywire when voted to power, and take decisions on national issues without discussion with the opposition as they have the carapace of power around them to make them impregnable against public outbursts. This has shrouded the

possibility of taking each other in confidence while delving into vital national issues.

It is not difficult to fathom that the current conflict between the political parties is tinged with personal dislike of one top leader for the other, and vice-versa. This has prompted the top leaders to espouse "yesmanship" even by cajoling, when so needed to consolidate their hold on national politics by wooing public support.

In the whole process the masses have been alienated, political institutions have been desecrated to the extent that they have become private organisations run on individual whims, and the leaders hardly feel obliged to be transparent and

accountable. Amendments to the party constitutions have been done to suit the leaders' design without consultation with the party leaders.

The recent party conventions of the major political parties have legitimised the top leaders' absolute authority to act at will, forgetting the adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely. This has not only weakened the functioning of democratic institutions, but has also made statecraft critically vulnerable to power games and to the use of power for power. The nation has waited for long to see that politics improves to consolidate good governance.

There was a brief tremor in the recent past to tell us about the true status of our democracy and the dwindling edifice of the leadership. Although the brief intervention failed utterly to focus on a minimum programme to "right the wrong," it has at least made us aware of our lacking.

The need of the hour is to tide over the self-created barriers to liberate democracy, which seems to be like a riddle wrapped in an enigma. In our brief national history we have witnessed the chequered rise and violent fall of political leadership for pursuing absolute power, both in the dispensation of state responsibilities and within the party. This provoked internal party feuds and acrimonious political opposition.

This process has catapulted a few less known leaders to prominence, who become sycophants to consolidate their hold on the new found political affluence by doing anything to convince their top leaders that there is none in the party or in the country more capable than the leader to run the party or to govern the country. They deployed all the tactics of ruse and deceit to prevail upon their leaders that they (leaders) being superior must always be the holders of powers.

Thus, the golden rule of democracy, which is freedom of choice and justice, could not endure the test of time. Flagrant rejection of patience and tolerance, the two pillars of sustainable democracy, became rampant. The top leaders have made themselves incommunicado, and the party divide has become wider.

The mandarins of the parties gave in to the currency of the time, which is sycophancy, and indulged in all kinds of activities that gladdened their leaders. Jealousy tiptoed into the attitudes of the top leaders about their opposite numbers who, taking leave of their senses, started castigating the opponents as inefficient, anti-people and unpopular. So both the parties oppose each other's decisions, which leads to confrontational politics.

The gnawing dilemma prevailing now is that, while some are keen to take a privileged look into the future others are battling to survive because of the sheer inertia of the system that they have craftily mapped. This has forced backtracking of reform efforts that could have dispatched confrontational politics to its murky backyard to rot unnoticed. Many people committed to championing the cause of the deprived and underprivileged are taking voluntary exit, appreciating that no measure of reform is possible in current political environment.

It is time to stop pursuing the blame game without suggesting an antidote. We should not forget that the rhetoric of throwing blame on others brings diminishing returns. We must unremittently resolve to call spade a spade and be prepared to face any calamity that may follow.

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In memory of Saber Reza Karim

MD. MATIUL ISLAM

MY long association with Saber Reza Karim, spanning over 58 years, started in Lahore in 1952 and ended with his death in his sleep in the early hours of December 16 in Dhaka. We were colleagues and batch-mates in the Civil Service of Pakistan and met for the first time in Lahore after joining the Civil Service Academy as probationers.

The nine-month long training course in the Academy was designed to groom new entrants into Civil Service as model administrators. The training programme included course studies and exams on Civil and Criminal Procedure Code, Penal Code, Revenue Laws of both wings of the country, Islamiat, field training, attachment with district administration as well as learning to dress in black or white dinner jackets -- depending on whether it was summer or winter -- for attending formal dinners. In between came horse riding, lessons on tennis, typing, the art of speech making and essay writing. Under the watchful eye of a senior British ICS officer, we entered the Academy as raw meat and came out as well-done steaks.

Saber excelled in all departments, but horse-riding was not his strong point. Once, returning from a cross-country ride, Saber, who was riding next to me, was thrown out of the saddle by his mount and in a split second he fell flat on the ground. Fortunately, he did not break any bone but had to walk back two miles to the Academy in his riding gear of boots and breeches.

For the speaking test, the subject he selected was "East Bengal" to give a first hand preview of Bengal to our colleagues from West Pakistan. He spoke about our history, culture, tradition, language, food-habits as well as the weather. His depiction of Norwester (*Kal-Boishakhi*), vivid description of its fury and destructive power, mesmerised the listeners.

Saber and myself teamed up to visit Delhi and Calcutta on our way back to Dhaka after completion of training. We got accommodation in a guest room of Pakistan High Commission in Delhi where our last place of call was the Shrine of Hazrat Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya, the famous Sufi Saint who died in 1325 and is buried there. His great disciple Amir Khosru was also buried in a nearby graveyard within the premises of

the Dargah.

In 1972, I visited the Shrine again when I went on an official visit to Delhi as Finance Secretary, Government of Bangladesh. The Khadem who had escorted us during our first visit in 1953, immediately recognised me and enquired about my friend Saber Reza Karim. It was amazing that the Khadem, whom we met 20 years ago, instantly recognised me and vividly remembered Saber. His mind must be working like computer. I told him that Saber was not well, had a heart valve replacement surgery and was in London posted as the economic minister in the Bangladesh Embassy. He led a special prayer for Saber's recovery and long life.

In 1970, Saber was posted in Karachi as the finance director of National Shipping Corporation. In between, he held a number of important positions with distinction both in East and West Pakistan. Recently, when I mentioned to Mr. Samson Chowdhury about the death of Saber, he instantly remembered him as the deputy commissioner of Pabna where Saber was posted about 50 years ago. Saber also held the most coveted position of deputy secretary cabinet,

Government of Pakistan, where he had been working very closely with the high-ups in the central government. A foreign posting from that position was almost routine. However, Saber opted to take a posting in East Pakistan.

In 1970, I was in the private sector working as a director of Pakistan National Oil posted in Dhaka. I met Saber and Sitara frequently in Karachi. In 1971, I found that he had gone abroad on long leave for medical treatment.

I heard from him again in 1972 when I took over as the finance secretary, GOB. He wrote that he had to undergo a valve replacement surgery in Houston and was in London with Sitara passing a miserable life with no source of income. He needed constant medical checkups and his health condition would not permit him to return to Bangladesh. I immediately spoke to the finance minister and sought his consent to post Saber in the Bangladesh High Commission as the economic minister. In his typical manner, Tajuddin nodded his head and the posting order was issued. Keeping in view his health condition and the rigours of London posting, an official transport was also sanctioned for him.

Two years later, he was transferred to Washington as the economic minister in the Bangladesh Embassy and took up residence in Bethesda, where I was also residing and working as alternate executive director in the World Bank. With his interest in literature, music, poetry and Sitara's warm hospitality, his house became the venue of some cultural activities of the Bengali luminaries, of whom Mr. Syed Nuruddin, the press counsellor in the Bangladesh Embassy, was one.

Saber Reza Karim was a very senior civil servant and should have occupied the post of secretary to the government, or an ambassador when posted outside Bangladesh. Due to his heart condition, he was unable to return to Bangladesh to take up his rightful place in the administrative hierarchy and had to accept a lower position. His compensation was that his son, Shah, who was a very bright student, got the opportunity to study in the best educational institutions in USA and got well settled in life. Shaji, their daughter, and her children were also a source of great joy and solace for Saber and Sitara.

Saber's *qulkhani*, attended by people from all walks of life, spoke eloquently of



Mr. Saber Reza Karim

his popularity, diversified interest and social activities that he was associated with during his lifetime. In his death, I lost a friend with whom I had closely interacted for long 58 years and whose memory I will cherish for the remainder of my life.

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