

The message of Christmas

MARTIN ADHIKARY

CHRISTMAS reminds us that through incarnation the Eternal Word of God came to dwell with his creation as a human person in history and human culture, and to share with human experience so that man may come to get back his true glory and dignity. The eternal sinless Christ identified with sinful man.

This is the testimony to the eternal Logos, the Word and Wisdom of God about Himself: "The Lord brought me forth as the first of His works before His deeds of old. I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. When there was no ocean, I was given birth, when there were no springs abounding with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before He made the earth or its fields or any of the dust of the world. I was there when He set the heavens in place, when He marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when He established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when He gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep His command, and when He marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at His side." (Proverbs 8:22-30).

Christmas speaks of this mystery beyond human comprehension. Christmas is a time of wonder about God's unique way of dealing with man and his sin. This is the timeless central message about God's outreaching love and unmerited grace for man with the universal call for response to that divine love and grace to be manifested in a new kind of attitude to God and man. Norman Wesley Brooks aptly remarked thus: "Christmas is forever, not for just one day; for loving, sharing, giving are not to put away like bells and lights and tinsel in some box upon a shelf. The good you do for others is the good you do to yourself."

Christmas invites us to a life of faith, hope and love. By giving us His Son, God has not only shown but has also given us the model of selfless giving for others. Christ calls us to live this life and calling in our daily life, in our mundane as well as extraordinary affairs.

Christianity has essentially a holistic message covering every aspects of life. There can be no dichotomy between what is holy and what is profane as such. True sense of holiness has to be



JEREMY MAYES/GETTY IMAGES

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holistic. Everything is within the purpose of the Creator. Everything has a meaning. God is concerned with every human person. French Journalist Raoul Fullereau observed: "Today all problems are universal. Only a universal spirit can encompass them, understand them, resolve them." Christmas exhorts us to have that sense of holism and universalism. Everything in this life is integrated.

We live in a world where greed and pride, horror and hatred, destruction and delusion, communalism and sectarianism seem to be so overpowering that human values continue to be sacrificed. Jesus Christ came to the world to give supreme value and dignity to man. But even with all the sublime teachings and injunctions of religions we see so many devilish things that man is doing to man. Religious fanaticism, bigotry and fundamentalism have also been besetting problems in the world.

In spite of all the glorious achievements of science and technology and use of the fertile imagination of mankind there is sectarian use of religion. Due to human greed for power, wealth and name and fame modern scientific

and technological advancement has given us a culture which virtually makes human beings slaves to science and technology. Ethical values continue to erode. Advanced technology and secular morality push man to many morally and ethically questionable practices like genetic engineering, transplantation of animal organs into human body, abortion, half-abortion, euthanasia, test-tube babies, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, cloning, etc. There has been awful progress in militarisation, weaponry, in devices for killing man.

Undue intervention by rich nations in the internal affairs of the poor ones hinders the promotion of democracy in those countries. The web of globalisation appears to be a new way of economic colonisation of the developing countries by the technologically advanced nations. Globalisation, materialism, and consumerism have compelled the poor countries to enter into unhealthy business relations with the rich ones. Much of the earth's resources are being abused to feed those gods of materialism and consumerism.

People need to repent for the abuse of wealth and power. "Repentance" is a key-word in the Bible. This means change of one's hearts and attitude towards God, towards God's work -- His Creation. It is a complete turn-about from our worldly ways of greed, lust and pride, and helps to lead a godly life. The meaning of "repentance" is so deep and personal that John Calvin, a great theological thinker of the 16th century Church Reformation in Europe, said about it: "Unless our hearts are harder than iron, the remembrance of the great love Christ has shown us by submitting to death for our sake is bound to make us devote ourselves entirely to him."

We need to change if we wish to devote to and love God and His Creation. Mankind is in great need of healing and renewal: healing of its wounds, renewal of our relationships with God, within ourselves, with other people and also with all other creations apart from man.

Christmas comes every year with the cardinal message of grace and peace from a loving God with the challenge for change. So let it be true for us as we continue to live and celebrate.

The writer is a teacher of theology.

SHIFTING IMAGES

The little drummer boy



MILIA ALI

HERE is something magical about Christmas in America. Call it my romantic instincts, or the child in me, I always feel sentimental at this time of the year. The ambience of the Christmas Season gives me a mood boost and reminds me that, for all the negativity in the world, there is also much inherent goodness surrounding us. We just need to tune into the right signals.

You may be smiling and thinking that I am being naïve and sentimental. Let me clarify -- I have not had an epiphany like Ebenezer Scrooge who was shown the path to redemption. My connection with Christmas is as much on the material plane as it is spiritual. I admire the beautifully adorned suburban homes with their door wreaths, fairy lights and flickering candles. The sparkling city streets with bunting and ornamental decorations never fail to fascinate me.

Particularly uplifting is a leisurely visit to a shopping mall where one can lounge over a Latte and watch playful kids lining up to take photos with Father Christmas, bubbly teenagers chirping on their cell phones, and harried shoppers hunting for last minute bargains. Add to this the colourful store displays in red and green, the ubiquitous chant of carols and we have the perfect setting for Santa's landing with reindeers!

While some may regard all the ornamentation and decor as a competitive sales gimmick, there is an idealist deep inside me that likes to believe in the Dickensian version of "Happy, happy Christmas, that can win us back to the delusions of our childhood days; that can recall to the old man the pleasures of his youth." Part of my romantic fantasy dates back to the Christmas stories and songs my children brought home from elementary school. Stories that inspired me to reflect on the humane qualities of loving and giving.

I recall a friend once telling me that the way she observed Christmas was by making a commitment that each day she would try helping someone in some way. It could be a mundane

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task like carting a handicapped person's groceries to the car or something as sublime as spending time comforting a terminally ill patient in a hospice. She also told me that, while she adhered to her promise most of the year, her enthusiasm wavered by October only to be recharged by the spirit of Christmas. I thought this was a great way to celebrate Christmas, but for some obscure reason the chance to perform a significant act of kindness never seemed to come my way!

As if by an act of Providence, a simple but touching incident made me realise that opportunities for expressing empathy and compassion exist at every turn of our routine lives. It's just a question of being aware and seizing the right moment. On a cold and dreary afternoon this December I was at the Tyson's Mall buying gifts for friends and family. Carrying an overload of shopping bags, I approached the double glass doors of the Mall exit when I realised that my hands were tied up. As I tried maneuvering the packages, I heard a firm voice behind me say: "Please open the door for the lady." The next moment I saw two little hands pushing the door and then the radiant face of a 5 or 6-year-old boy followed by a man, who I assumed was his father. The little boy held the door open and waited for me to exit. As I thanked him and stepped out, a draft of cold air hit me but all I felt was the warmth in my heart. The simple gesture made me realise that we often tend to overlook the small ways in which we can make people feel happy. The father had not only helped a stranger, but had fulfilled a parental responsibility by teaching his six-year-old son the importance of civility and consideration for others.

As I walked to my car I heard strains of the popular Christmas carol "The Little Drummer Boy" floating out of the Mall. My eyes grew misty with mixed emotions. For me, the boy, whose name I will never know, will always be my "little drummer boy" who showed me how a small act of kindness can make a big difference!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

The Joy of Christmas

Sunita D'Costa

Christmas arrives across the globe
Rejoicing begins in Heaven above
Humans, angels, leave no space
Melody in the air, dancing in grace

Ho, Ho, Ho Santa appears
Merriment surrounds, no room for tears
No place for solitude, clamour reigns
Space is choked with pleasure and gains

Here in this fun, I've lost my soul
In the desert wastes of my heart, in some hole
Burning with thirst, but the spring is dry
"I am a stranger to myself", I hear it cry

Where is the peace I long to find
I scan within the wilderness of my mind
Amidst this gush of Christmastic
I watch the closeness, it stretches too wide

The vacuum is filled with every noise
Drowning the surge of my inner voice
Which yearns to say to Christ alone
Thank you Lord for all you've done.

BBC Bangla: Seventy years of evolution

SABIR MUSTAFA

HERE are celebrations all around. But it's not only Bangladesh which is celebrating an anniversary. The BBC's Bengali service, known simply as BBC Bangla, is also celebrating a landmark year in 2011.

It is perhaps fitting that Bangladesh and BBC Bangla are celebrating landmarks at the same time. The birth of Bangladesh was one of the most important periods in the 70-year history of the BBC's Bengali service.

The people of Bangladesh did not need blind, partisan support from the BBC. In turn, the BBC, guided by its editorial values which demand scrupulous attention to impartiality and balance, could not offer such support either. The BBC simply broadcast news and analysis of events as they unfolded in the then East Pakistan, without distortion and without fear.

The BBC brought news of the war and what was going on in East Pakistan to its Bengali-speaking audiences as well as its listeners worldwide through English and other languages. The BBC's adherence to accuracy and impartiality meant that its audiences learnt of the facts. Those broadcasts enabled the BBC to earn the trust of the people of Bangladesh, which remains largely intact to this day.

Although BBC Bangla is celebrating its 70th anniversary in December, it was on October 11, 1941, that the BBC's Bengali-language programme was launched, with a 15-minute talk written by the author George Orwell. At that time it was just a weekly programme. Seventy years later, BBC Bangla broadcasts two morning and two evening programmes every day.

These programmes are no longer the musings of one man, no matter how brilliant, but packed with news reports on latest important events from around the world. There are hard-hitting interviews, radio documentaries on a wide range of subjects, long radio and online features, and live phone-in programmes where listeners have their say.

BBC Bangla today boasts a website: bbcbangla.com, which showcases the best of its radio programmes as well as additional news and feature elements. A year ago BBC Bangla launched a news update service on mobile phones across Bangladesh, which can be accessed on all six networks in the country by dialling 16262.

Over the years, the BBC has developed close transmission partnership with the state broadcaster, Bangladesh Betar, to relay English and Bengali programmes on FM in major cities across the country. The first was FM 100 in Dhaka in 1994, which developed into a 12-hour service with 10 hours of English output from

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BBC World Service, and two hours of Bangla programming.

Later, in 2008, the BBC signed agreements to relay the four Bangla programmes on FM in Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Rangpur and Comilla. A fair amount of technical and other difficulties had to be overcome at these stations, but by the end of 2011 these cities were witnessing a steady increase in radio audiences.

The shift from short-wave listening to FM -- which we have observed in developed as well as many developing countries -- is beginning to take shape in Bangladesh as well.

At the same time, the BBC recognised that overall radio listening was declining gradually. In

its place, television was emerging as the medium of choice -- whether to consume news and current affairs, or entertainment, or educational information. This recognition led to BBC Bangla making efforts to establish its presence at the Bangladeshi television landscape, even when radio remained its most important platform.

The first breakthrough happened in 2005, when BBC Bangla was approached by the BBC's international charity arm, the BBC World Service Trust (BBC WST now BBC Media Action) to collaborate on production of eight debate programmes. BBC Bangla provided the editorial input while WST managed the production. A partnership was forged with local station Channel I, to film the debates and put them on air.

The initial eight debates were each based on a single topic such as education, corruption, justice, governance etc. The success of what turned out to be the first phase of Bangladesh Sanglap encouraged the BBC to think of a slimmer, more sustainable and more topical version of the programme to take forward.

Between September 2006 and January 2010, BBC Bangla produced, in collaboration with Channel I, nearly 150 episodes of the programme. The coasts of Bhola and Mongla, the tea gardens of Sylhet, the banks of the Jamuna in Sirajganj and the dried-up Gorai in Kushtia, the hilly setting of Rangamati and the sand beaches of Cox's Bazar were just few of those locations outside Dhaka.

BBC Bangla has evolved with time: expansion on FM, mobile-phone bulletins, use of Facebook, reinforcing website and gaining a presence at the television landscape of Bangladesh.

The passage of time has changed many things: the way BBC Bangla works, the technology it uses, the market in which it operates and the listening habits of its audiences. But one thing has not changed -- the high regard in which it is held in Bangladesh.

The writer is Editor, BBC Bangla.