

Christmas brings the Gospel of grace and change

One starlit night

MARTIN ADHIKARY

BISHOP Desmond Tutu, a Nobel Prize winner said: "I preached my only sermon that God loves us freely as an act of Grace." Ideally, Christianity is the Gospel of Grace, God's unmerited loving kindness to sinful mankind. John wrote: "From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:16-17). This is the Christmas theme.

Grace is not just a positive attitude. It is a verb. It is an attitude incarnating into positive action. It speaks of the notion of God becoming one of us, completely taking our physical nature, sharing in the common aches and pains of humanity. It is God's unfathomable love in action. God is not something far off, or impossible to understand. William Barclay, a great Bible scholar said: "In Jesus we do not see abstract God of the theologians and the philosophers, but we see, perfectly and completely, in full revelation, the Father, the attitude of God to me, how God feels to me." God became human so that we could better comprehend a transcendent reality. We worship a God, who became the human image of God himself.

At Christmas the eternal divine creator has entered into time and space. In the form of a human person God intimately revealed himself in his creation. God-incarnate Christ came to a lost world to redeem it from the bondage of sin. Sin pervades the whole human race: it is the self-will of man putting "I and Me" in the centre everywhere. The message of Christmas is the triumph of life over death, love over hatred, order over chaos and good over evil. But humanity still passes through a valley of death. This is the world into which the divine came to meet the mundane.

There is no greater good news to be found anywhere in the world than that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as he preached exactly what he lived: the life of selfless divine love, holiness and justice. But why do evil and suffering still prevail? The answer to this question is that we teach



and preach the doctrines of and about Christ, but do not strive enough to follow him. We need to accept the hard reality that our right doctrines do not help us unless they are vouched for by right attitude and action. We cling to our power, positions, status quo our comfort zones. We need to strive for a world which is more just and less violent and where mankind will live in love and peace and be ready to pay the price for it. We need to be able to separate good and bad. This requires us to internalise the moral values that enhance life.

The truth is that God does not do anything to better our situation if we neglect what he has given us the ability and will to do. We must create the environment where God's good can operate. We are his co-workers! Oswald Chambers, another Christian scholar, said: "The battle is won or lost in the secret places of the will before God, never first in the external world."

In the helpless baby in the manger in Bethlehem Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the magi saw a warrior, who was to wage the greatest war against evil. Christ teaches by his life that peace is something which needs to be paid for. It is not granted. True peace is always just peace. No justice, no peace. Unjust people need to be brought to repent

for their evil actions, made to retribute and restore what they rob other people of. Otherwise, divine grace continues to a long process of license to please ourselves and continue sinning. When human dignity is trodden down by us or before us we make a mockery of God's grace. When brutish animalism perpetrates and life in society is forced to pass through the valley of deep darkness, and when the people in authority and entrusted with the sacred trust of protecting the innocent and weak hide their faces from their responsibility it is the heart of the Creator of all mankind that cries out first of all.

Today when we meditate the theme of God's giving greatest value to man by Himself coming to man as a human person we must learn from reading both what God says in the Scriptures and what the media has to inform us: we need to read both the good news and the bad ones.

We cannot and must not ignore this world, and keep ourselves preoccupied with the vision for the other world.

None of our external decorations for celebration of Christmas add to our challenge of change unless we commit to the gentle Jesus and change our ways and decorate our hearts with love, gentleness and peace. The greatest miracle that he wants to effect is the transformation of the human heart. With this he wishes to transform his creation. We find ourselves living in a world marked by selfishness, greed and lust, a landslide loss of values.

Jesus did not care for cheap popularity. His gospel was not of cheap grace. It cost his life. He was serious and decisive and acted to effect change. Christ has two births, one is on December 25, when we traditionally celebrate his coming to this world; the other is timeless, and is whenever he is born into our hearts. Both need to be viewed together. One causes us to celebrate, the other causes us to take a challenge. We believe in a God who is full of grace, and his grace is dynamic and active. He showed us his grace by giving. We truly celebrate Christ if we are ready to give.

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SUNITA D'COSTA

Years ago one starlit night, Heaven shone
On a swaddled babe who chose to be born
In the land of the sands, amongst lambs and sheep
To an humble couple, Mary and Joseph.

The Creator's message in sweet music flowed
In the melody of the angels and in the paths they showed
"Behold, the essence of love, there in the manager lies
Showering His love to the fools and the wise."

That was the night when the world stood still
And nature whispered, Peace and Goodwill!

Padma Bridge: Between denial and *dadagiri*?

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MUCH has been talked about and written on the Padma Bridge project since it became clear that the government of Bangladesh succeeded in negotiating the \$2.9 billion loan agreement with 4 donors led by the World Bank (WB). Where the fate of the project stands today is anybody's guess.

The WB is expected to soon come up with another statement with one of three possibilities on the basis of their assessment of the stance taken by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) regarding the alleged conspiracy of corruption in connection with the appointment of a consultant for the project. One possibility could be that they would be satisfied with the "progress" made by ACC as a result of which

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seven people are being investigated while two remain listed as "suspects." Hence, they could come back happily. Such a scenario, quite unlikely though, could be a cause to celebrate.

The second possibility is that WB may find key suspects in their understanding off the hook. Judging by the strong stance they took directly against the former communication minister, in this instance they would be short of patience, and hence no more Padma talks.

A third possibility is a combination of the twofold they may not accept or reject the ACC stance, and for that matter that of the government, they may decide to observe how the investigation proceeds, and hence they could indicate that doors are not closed yet. That would practically drag the process beyond the tenure of the present government. In the best possible version of this scenario, however, depending partly on the government's negotiating skills, they may agree to resume talks for reopening the loan processing under another set of conditions added to that of full and fair investigation.

It is useless to bet on one or the other among these possible scenarios, and indeed, one

shouldn't be surprised if what eventually turns out is anything but these three. Instead, it is worthwhile to raise some questions, by way of assessing if and how opportunities have been lost in the whole game around the project caught between a denial syndrome in a section of the government and *dadagiri* (highhandedness) on the part of WB. It is also for us to try drawing lessons for the future.

What would have happened if, in response to media reports parallel with concerns raised by WB of possible corruption conspiracy (this term conspiracy was used more recently though), the government had shunned the ostrich-like denial syndrome, and taken the allegations seriously and ensured proper investigation early on? What if the then communication minister had decided to voluntarily and honourably step down on moral ground and waited to be garlanded if he was to be found not guilty, as he claims, in the due process?

What would have happened if the government, in the wake of WB's cancellation of the loan agreement on June 29, embarrassed as it was, took the case as an acid test and instituted a highly credible, fully independent and sufficiently empowered judicial probe into the allegations of corruption? What if the government position that ACC has been tasked to investigate was not every time almost instantly followed by claims that no corruption has taken place? Could the challenge then be converted into opportunity?

When in September WB reopened the prospect of conditional come back, what would have happened if the assessment of the former minister's patriotism could wait and didn't come on the heels of his removal from office? What would have happened if the ACC, agreeably the most unenviable institution of Bangladesh, could have avoided being the mirror image of the government? What if the government's interpretation of the WB condition of sending their experts to observe the Commission's investigation process as intrusion into sovereignty was not instantly echoed by the ACC claiming that the law didn't permit such a role, especially when it had to quickly take a u-turn following the government's change of mind though no legal reform had by then taken place?

What if the ACC didn't take recourse to such flimsy ground as "the minister was not sufficiently attentive" in his work for which he could not be investigated? What if they were mindful enough that perhaps the minister could have actually been particularly attentive and crafty so as to appear innocent when his secretary changed the composition of the evaluation team for the high profile procurement as many as four times?

What if the ACC didn't wish people to buy the

idea that a secretary of the government could be so powerful or naïve as to take such vital decision on his own, especially when the minister was being met by the supply side of the conspiracy Canadian company SNC Lavalin and its lobbyists? Would the inclusion of the former ministers in the list of those to be investigated by itself mean that they were actually guilty?

What would have happened if the ACC could avoid appearing to be short of courage and determination to follow the example of its own enquiry team and take a more professional decision without fear or favour? Couldn't that have given the ACC a golden opportunity to gain some credibility in the eyes of the people nationally and internationally? Wouldn't that have also given the government a higher moral authority to ask the WB to start the process of disbursement so the construction of the bridge could have gone parallel with the investigation process?

On the other side of the game, what would have happened if the timing didn't coincide with a stage of transition in WB itself prompted by demands within and outside to take more responsibility than in the past for corruption in projects funded by its loans in developing countries globally? What if the WB, as a newcomer therefore to the world of openness and corruption control, was a bit more strategic to avoid the overenthusiastic course of chopping off the head for headache?

What would have happened if instead of cancelling the agreement the Bank had chosen to engage with the government and ACC to assist the investigation process, and kept the loan open? In that case, wouldn't it be more sensible to keep on reminding the government and ACC of the parallel investigation which is going on in Canada? Did WB exhaust all constructive leverages at its disposal in ensuring transparency and accountability in various stages of the project from the beginning as the lead donor?

As the WB gropes for an option to serve its interest as a stakeholder in the Padma Bridge project, the likes of which are its lifeline, shouldn't it be asking itself whether what it is likely to gain today from the way it has played its card is hardly any different from what it could achieve by continuing to engage as indicated above?

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A perilous journey through the anti-joke zone



MY face brightened as I saw the sign at the security check area at an airport in Australia. In large letters on a board were the words: "We Take Jokes Seriously". Air_security_2_2
"Look," I said to Eddie, the guy I was travelling with. "These are people after my

own heart."

I take jokes seriously too. I spend my days dealing in jokes. I make lists of things which make Easterners laugh and things which make Westerners laugh. I study theories of humour. I discuss laughter-generation with researchers in neuroscience.

"If they want jokes, I can deliver," I said. "When the guard asks me if I have a laptop in my bag, I'm going to say: 'No room, because of all the bombs.'"

"NO!" shrieked Eddie, eyes popping. "The sign means strictly no jokes allowed."

"But that's not what it says," I argued.

As we inched along the queue, he explained that "We Take Jokes Seriously" signs meant airport officials immediately arrested anyone who tried to be funny. "They actually put people in jail for being mildly amusing," he said. "Even if no one laughs."

I frowned. "Then it should say the opposite of what it says," I argued. "It should say 'We Do Not Take Jokes Seriously', since they're refusing to recognize jokes as jokes."

Eddie looked at the sign again and decided that technically I was right.

"And what about human rights?" I continued. "The right to be funny is surely a fundamental freedom covered by the United Nations Bill of Rights."

"I don't think it is," he said. "It's probably not even mentioned. I was rendered speechless by this inexplicable omission."

As we edged closer to the security gate, I suggested we help the Australian Government by re-wording the sign to say what they intended it to say.

Eddie said: "What they are trying to say is that if you make a joke at the security gate, they will treat it as a terrorist threat."

I understood. "So what the sign should really say is: 'This is an irony-free zone. Any statement intended ironically will be misunderstood.'"

"Correct," said Eddie, starting to look worried. "Listen, mate. Airport officials have their senses of humour surgically removed when they get their jobs. So please don't try anything funny."

He then dropped back to let other people go in front of him. This was to put some distance between himself and me, in case I committed humour in public. I had never seen him so terrified, except for all the other times he has to do anything with me.

Five minutes later, we were both through the security gates and met up at the airside coffee shop.

"I was right," I said. "It was an irony-free zone."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "You didn't try joking with those guys, did you?"

I nodded and pointed to a chubby guard with an ill-fitting uniform, a 1975 haircut and a plastic digital watch.

Eddie winced. "You're crazy to take risks like that," he scolded. I could tell he wanted to change the subject, but he couldn't help but ask: "So what exactly did you say to him?"

"I said, 'Coolly did you. Nice haircut. Wish I had a watch like that.' The guy nodded and thanked me. So I was right. It really is an irony-free zone."

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