



THE CELEBRATION OF
CHRISTMAS

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It's Christmas Time! Homes are decorated, shops are illuminated, and markets are flooded with Christmas goods. Cakes are being ordered, cards and gifts are getting wrapped, people are buying new dresses, and there are festivities all around us. But what is Christmas all about? Through a series of questions, I want to take you to the spirit of Christmas.

A reflection on the Gospel narratives related to the birth of Jesus can help us draw useful insights for strengthening one's faith, and to live one's faith against various odds, including persecutions.

- 1) Making Right Choices in Life: Mary's "yes" to become the mother of Jesus is an invitation to all followers of Jesus to make right choices in life. Every choice has corresponding challenges and Mary too had many challenges. But she had the courage to accept the challenges after weighing the benefits to humanity if she said "Yes" to God.

Everyday life provides the followers of Jesus with challenging situations to make their choices: choice to follow the crowd or to make a difference by setting new trends; a choice to tell lies and escape punishment or tell the truth and suffer the consequences; a choice to be original or to copy others' ideas and style; a choice to be indifferent and allow injustice to flourish or to speak for justice and to pay the price in the process!

- 2) Life is not about Receiving but Giving: God became a human being in the person of Jesus so that people may have life and have it abundantly. Jesus taught his disciples by his life and discourses that the purpose of life is achieved by giving, giving without expecting anything in return. Mary presented herself as an excellent example of giving by going in haste to serve her cousin Elizabeth who became pregnant in her advanced age. Her response was immediate and without any request from Elisabeth.

Life provides abundance of opportunities to the followers of Jesus to bring relief, consolation and joy in lives of those who are in need by giving time, talents and financial and material resources. When millions of people are suffering due to the consequences of the pandemic, are the followers of Jesus generous to share their resources with the needy?

- 3) Simplicity and Wisdom Lead to Discernment of the Divine and Manifestation of the Divine. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem people did not recognize the messiah in child Jesus. That is why Mary and Joseph did not get a place and Mary had to give birth to Jesus in a manger. But two groups of people could discern the divine in child Jesus. They are the simple shepherds who were given the news about the birth of Jesus by angels and the three wise men, magi, who came from the east guided by a star. The shepherds were simple people without prejudices and they were open to the message from God. As a result, they could perceive the messiah in child Jesus. The magi because of their eagerness to search and learn with openness could discern the messiah in the child Jesus.

In order to see God in human beings and perceive the divine plan in the phenomenal changes taking place in the world and in India, and respond to them creatively the followers of Jesus need a combination of simplicity, openness and intelligence.



4) Leaders Need to Avoid Obsession with Power and Use Power only for Fulfilling Responsibilities: Leaders in any community are entrusted with certain powers and these powers are given to them to fulfill their responsibilities. Sometimes the leaders become obsessed with their powers and forget their responsibilities and even misuse their power. When King Herod heard from the magi about the birth of “a baby born to be the king of Jews”, he was very upset. He felt threatened about his power and it led to the massacre of thousands of boys in Bethlehem and its neighbourhood, who were two years old and younger.

Jesus presented himself as a sublime example of leadership. He told his disciples bluntly that authority is for service and not to lord over others. He also said that the “Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). By presenting the parable of the Good Shepherd Jesus explained to his disciples the qualities needed for a leader: deep knowledge about the people, care and concern for the people, leading from the front and readiness to protect people even by laying down one’s life.

5) Be Innocent as Doves and Prudent as Serpents: When Joseph and Mary came to know about the order of King Herod to kill all male children below the age of two, they escaped to Egypt and remained there till the death of Herod. Jesus could foresee the opposition and harassment his followers would have to face in the future. That is why he advised them to be innocent as doves and prudent as serpents.

When the followers of Jesus have to face crises, they should not compromise with their integrity. At the same time, they may not go for a direct confrontation with the adversaries.

6) Become Humane – Essence of Spirituality: God became human in the person of Jesus in order to teach men and women how to live as human beings. The Gospels depict a Jesus who is endowed with all noble human qualities like selfless love, forgiveness, compassion, courage, respect for individuals etc. Only when the followers of Jesus are able to reflect these qualities in their lives, will they be able to witness Jesus. As Jesus was a man for others, the followers of Jesus also have to become altruistic.

Rituals, prayers and preaching about Jesus cannot replace following the way of Jesus. To be humane, the followers of Jesus also have to undergo a paradigm shift from religiosity of rituals to spirituality of practicing the core values of Jesus. That is why Jesus gave a new commandment to his disciples on the eve of his death. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). The three main characteristics of love, as reflected in the teachings of Jesus, are forgiveness, compassion and non-discrimination or respecting the dignity of every individual.



Good Governance Day

In the year 2014, the Government of India declared 25th of December, every year, as Good Governance Day. It may be too hard for the majority of Indians to imagine that a child born in a manger in Bethlehem a little over two thousand years ago could still inspire billions of people across the globe to know what good governance is all about.

Let us look at just four characteristics of good governance that the top Indian leaders can learn from the divine child of Bethlehem.

First, the Saviour comes down from heaven to the earth, leaving behind the heavenly bliss and thus taking human form; if our leaders can come down from their ivory towers and reach out to those living in ignorance, poverty, hunger, unemployment, lack of habitation, then there would be rays of good governance emerging in our land.

Second, God chose the less known town of Bethlehem to let his Son pitch his tent among humanity; he did not choose the well-fortified city of Jerusalem, but the almost unknown town, and he would live a "hidden" life for the major part of his life. It is time that our leaders leave the comforts of the city and urban living and go to the lesser-known villages and towns to see reality. For this, our leaders will have to take dusty roads.

Third, the new-born child had as his first acquaintances the simple village people and shepherds of the neighbourhood. These are the people who have been on the margins of the society, who have been shunned by the "genteel" society. Good governance can only begin when those on the periphery are first approached and any development is seen from their perspective.

Fourth, the child in the manger also reminds the floating population; we may call them refugees, or migrants or casual labourers. If the leaders care for the people, then they need to take into consideration who are always on the move, either because of survival or because of job opportunities, and provide support systems which would assure that they are well-protected and their basic needs taken care of. That is where good governance can flourish.

May Christmas 2021 bring about 'good will' in each one of us to love, to serve, to forgive, to give, to care and to bring about Good Governance in all areas of life!

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