

December 2011:

A Christmas Message

By P. N. Benjamin*

“LORD, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is doubt, let me sow faith; where there is despair, let me bring hope; where there is sorrow, let me bring joy; where there is darkness, light. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; not so much to be understood as to understand; not so much to be loved, as to love. For, it is in giving that we receive; in pardoning that we are pardoned; in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

I am a Christian by faith, Hindu by culture, and Indian by citizenship. But, permit me to add a word about my Christian commitment and witness in these troubled times. I have always loved John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, perhaps because its hero remains on the move up to the very end. Even when he is crossing that last river, with Mount Zion actually in sight, he is still assailed by doubts and troubled by the hazards of his journey. I, too, have found no finality in the quest for a sure faith, and do not expect, or even hope to find one. At the same time, I dare to say as I have plodded on the light has shone a little more brightly and steadily for me. To make this light shine before men, as Christ exhorted us, has always seemed to me the highest that any communicator can hope to achieve – even if it amounts to not more than, as it were, striking a match in a dark cavern, which flares up and flickers out. Such, at any rate, is the purpose of this message, undertaken with no expert knowledge, no sudden Damascus Road illumination; representing no more than the efforts of a sceptical mind to grapple with the circumstances of his life and time.

Christmas is the feast of our common humanity. Once a year, for a brief spell, we greet one another as human beings: we shake off the trappings with which we aspire to be more than human, and give up the arrogance of treating others as less than human. The labels of race and language, caste and creed, and class are laid aside.

“Happy Christmas”, we can say to a stranger and add a smile to it – nothing would be out of place. It is as if a gust of goodwill from out of the blue has swooped into our atmosphere and we all take a whiff of it. People are kinder, handclasps are warmer, even the miser opens his purse with a sheepish smile to anyone who passes the hat around.

Christmas is also a feast of affirmations – even if only once a year we need to become aware of a set of values, which we tend to ignore in the daily commerce of life. We may grope in darkness but it is good to know that there is a gleam somewhere. Amidst all disenchantment around us we need to affirm our faith – in life, in ourselves, in others and therefore in God. We need to hope – hope against hope until as Shelly says, “Hope creates from its own wreck the thing it contemplates”. And we need to love -- to rediscover that universal principle of life.

Bertrand Russell who explained to us why he could never be a Christian slipped back in another context to the core of the Christmas message when he said, “The thing I mean, please forgive me for mentioning it, is love. If you feel this, you have a motive for existence, a guide in action, a reason for courage, and an imperative necessity for intellectual honesty... although you may not find happiness, you will never know the despair of those whose life is aimless and void of purpose”.

Magnificat: A Song of Deliverance

There is more to Christmas than peace and goodwill. The story of the birth of Christ begins with a revelation to a peasant girl that she would be the mother of the Messiah – the Saviour of the world. She would conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God. She was so overpowered by the message that she breaks into poetic utterance:

“My soul doth magnify the Lord/
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour.../He hath showed strength with his arm: He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts/He hath put down the mighty from their seats/And exalted them of low degree/He hath filled the hungry with good things/And the rich he hath sent empty away...”

This Song of Mary is called the Magnificat. Mary sees a vision of a new order of things where the weak and the poor will throw off their shackles. It is a song of liberation for all humankind. It reflects the teachings of the prophets of the Old Testament who denounced the oppressors of the people who would sell the needy for a pair of shoes. The prophets were constantly exhorting the people to “untie the knots of the yoke, and loose the fetters of justice, to set free those who have been crushed”. Mary belonged to this oppressed section of the people.

It might seem strange that in this momentous hour of her life when the angel had cast her in this stupendous role, she should be preoccupied with justice for her people. But one can well imagine that, then as now, this was a burning question. The Jews were under the Roman yoke and longed for the Messiah who would liberate them. Mary’s Song is a song of deliverance not only from foreign domination but the oppressor within the gates.

She did not know then that beginning with the Magnificat the road would end at the cross where she would stand weeping for her son who would show the world an entirely new way. But now it is a cry for justice, liberation from the tyranny of the rich and the exalted. Thus, woven into the message of peace and goodwill is also the lesson that these conditions can only come when there is social justice.

The Church has side-stepped this problem dispensing charity while ignoring the deeper claims of equality. The Song of Mary is a reminder that charity without justice is an insult, and peace only a graveyard where there is no equality.

Yes, the voice of Christmas cries in the wilderness. It is not a call to violent revolution – for violent revolutions always end in tyranny of one kind or another. Christmas calls for a change of heart, a turning away from oneself to one’s neighbour, and therefore to God. We like to imagine that religion is a love affair between man and God, but that affair is possible only when one loves one’s neighbour.

Christmas reminds us that in a creative relationship there is God, man and always his neighbour – only in such a cooperative partnership can we hope for a restructuring of the social fabric, which will be permanent. In short, Christmas comes to remind us that we are all inextricably bound together in this brief sojourn on this troubled planet; that either we are ALL saved or we are ALL damned for we are all human, all vulnerable, all in need of one another.

* P.N. Benjamin is the Coordinator of the Bangalore Inter-religious Dialogues (BIRD). This is an excerpt from the talk delivered at the Indian Institute of World Culture on December 24, 2011. The full text is available on request.