

HOW DO WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS?

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As Christmas approaches many people may ask a question to themselves: How do we celebrate Christmas? The people of other faiths may ask, how do the Christians celebrate Christmas? The Christian parents may ask the question, what shall we do to celebrate Christmas with our kids?

As we look for answers to these questions we need to understand what Christmas is all about. The Christians recall the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas. But there was no Christmas celebration when Christ was born or for that matter for several centuries after Christ's birth.

The historians say that the Romans observed holidays at midsummer and midwinter solstice when the sun reaches at its highest or lowest point in the sky at noon. They marked the longest and the shortest days of the year. According to earliest recorded celebration in 386 A.D. the Pagans in Rome celebrated 'Sol invictus', that is "the invincible sun" on winter solstice. From the pagan celebration of the birthday of the mystery God "Mithra" meaning the "Sun of Righteousness" on December 25, the Christians took it as the birthday of Jesus Christ, the true "Invincible Sun". As Christmas feast, the birth of Jesus is celebrated in the cold winter season, many ways of merry-making and gift giving came into existence.

But the Christians in bygone days took care to tell the world that the Christmas is the feast of God's biggest gift of Jesus to the entire humanity. This is clear for those who believe in the Bible. In the first Gospel of the New Testament Evangelist Mathew reveals the meaning and purpose of Christmas in the message of the angle Gabriel.

The Angle Gabriel tells Joseph who was engaged to Mary, "Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife. For it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived. She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus - because he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1, 20-22).

Then, Mathew says two things. First, Mathew shows that it is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Prophet Isaiah: "A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called 'Emmanuel' which means "God is with us."

Second, Mathew has confirmed that Joseph married Mary as the angel told him and specifically say, "But he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son. And Joseph named him Jesus." (Mt 1, 25).

Mathew has given the central message of the Christmas story in the 2nd chapter of his Gospel. As Mathew has narrated, some men came from the east to Jerusalem. They had seen a star in the east and followed it to Jerusalem and asked King Herod, "where is the baby born, to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him". (Mt 2, 2)

The men from the east often called the wise men or Magi and the star remind us of the prophecy of Balaam in the Old Testament Book of "Numbers." Balak the king of Moab, called Balaam, a

Magus or prophet to curse the king's enemies, the Israelites. But Balam in his vision said, "I look into the future, and I see the nation of Israel. A king, like a bright Star, will arise in the nation. Like a comet he will come from Israel." (Num. 24, 17)

Evangelist Mathew, who is always trying to identify Old Testament prophecies in his Gospel, sees Jesus as the bright star of the prophesy and the King in the line of David, the ruler of the Jews. Jesus as David's son is born to rule the Jews and hence the men from the east asks "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews?" (Mt 2,2)

Jesus is born as the King of the Jews and he is proclaimed as such even at his death. The writing on the cross, that is, his crime was "INRI" which means "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews in Latin." But by giving the story of men from the east coming in search of Jesus, Mathew is also proclaiming that Jesus comes not only for the Jews but for all people of all ages.

This message of Jesus, coming for the entire humanity is still more clear in the second infancy narrative in Luke's Gospel. Jesus' birth is proclaimed in Luke not to the gentile Magi – the men from the east, but to the Jewish shepherds. An angel appeared to the shepherds spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks and said to them, "I am here with good news for you. This very day in David's town your Savior was born – Christ the Lord!") (Lk 2, 9-11)

Earlier the Angel Gabriel appeared not to Joseph as in Mathew but to Mary and said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end!" (Lk 2, 30-33)

After Jesus' birth is announced by an angel to the shepherds, Luke says that, "Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises for God. 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!'" (Lk 2, 13-14)

The unique message of Christmas is peace. The peace which Jesus brings at his birth is not a peace in the absence of war and strife. It is not a political peace of the reconciliation of enemies. It is a peace, which God brings to men and women of all ages. It is a peace of the heart which comes from men and women being reconciled to God, men and women at peace with God. It is the peace experienced in the innermost being of a human person. This peace calls all people to be reconciled with one-another and with their God.

As we ask again our question of how to celebrate Christmas this year, we can see among other things two important messages in the two infancy narratives in Gospels according to Mathew and Luke. The first message is that Jesus has come as the Messiah not only for Christians but also for all people. His incarnation is for the entire humanity. The second message proclaimed at the birth of Jesus is peace. It is the peace of reconciliation of every human being with God as well as with one-another.

So we can celebrate Christmas meaningfully and fruitfully only by recognizing that Jesus has come for all people and responding to him accordingly and being at peace with ourselves, with

our neighbours and with God. So we need to delve into our hearts establishing peace there by removing everything which abstracts peace like hatred, envy, enmity intolerance and lack of love, etc. When our hearts are open to Jesus and the entire humanity beginning with our neighbours, then we can celebrate Christmas in a fitting way.

We can celebrate Christmas in many ways, which help us to bring into our lives an increase of love, joy and peace. We can celebrate Christmas by ways and means of reconciliation with God and with fellow men and women in love and peace.