

A detailed illustration of a nativity scene. In the foreground, a small wooden stable with a thatched roof is illuminated from within, showing the Virgin Mary kneeling in prayer, the infant Jesus lying in a manger, and Joseph standing by the entrance. The background features a dark, starry night sky with a prominent bright star with a long vertical beam of light. To the left, a silhouette of a city with domes and minarets is visible, and to the right, a palm tree stands against the night sky.

Meditations

on the Birth of the

Lord Jesus Christ

Rev. Dr. J. N. Manokaran

E - Book

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Meditations on the Birth of the Lord Jesus Christ

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Meditations on Birth of the Lord Jesus Christ

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Meditation - 1

A Teenage Girl, The Vehicle For Incarnation

The first Christmas was not an accident. It was planned divinely by God. "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive full rights of sons." (Galatians 4:4) When God sent His Son, He needed cooperation from human beings. One of the important persons who were responsible was a young teenager, her name was Mary. A simple, teenage girl became the Vehicle for the Incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Favour of the Lord.

Mary found favour with the Lord. She lived an upright life to find favour from the Lord. She was able to get approval from the Lord or a certificate from the Lord as her life was holy, with an attitude of humility and pure mind. It is not an ordinary feat. Today's young people strive hard to receive popularity like being crowned as most beautiful or handsome person in the world. Some work hard to become super rich. Certainly, there are few who strive to gain power over people and resources. But Mary pursued one goal: find favour with the Lord. Her moral, spiritual and ethical life pleased the Lord. She did not live such a noble life for the sake of becoming the mother of the Saviour' but it was her lifestyle. Her motivation was from within to please the Lord and not for rewards.

2. Surrender to the Lord.

She surrendered herself to the Lord. Her desire was not to fulfill her ambitions or aspirations but fulfill the will of God. When the angel gave the message, her spontaneous response was: "I am the Lord's servant, may it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38) Though she had questions and doubts, could not understand the whole plan of God, she simply surrendered to do the will of God. The call was a great honour, but also had risks and danger. She was willing to endure hardship to fulfill God's will. Being mother of the Saviour is really a privilege but there was a price to pay. She cannot do it by her own strength or power, but by His grace. It was given to her and she accepted it by becoming a servant. There was no disobedience or rebellion in her thinking or attitude or behavior.

3. Bearing shame for the Lord.

She was a virgin, engaged to be married. Her fiancée could give her divorce quietly or shame her publicly and stone her to death. She could be branded as a woman of easy or loose character. But she was willing to go through all this suffering. Even Joseph thought of a divorce; only God's intervention saved the day. Certainly, other people might have known this and would have been gossiping around. She had to take this shame and yet persevere in faith.

4. Enduring physical pains

Mary had to bear a great physical pain. Apart from being insulted and hurt by the insensitive words, she had to travel to Bethlehem so that the prophecy may be fulfilled. If it were any other child, she could have ignored going there. But the Word of God should be fulfilled, so she had to endure great pain in traveling in the desert regions when she was pregnant. Traveling is not easy or comfortable these days. Joseph and

pregnant Mary had to travel about 100 miles. In Bethlehem, she went through hardship of giving birth to Lord Jesus away from the warmth of home. It was not a hygienic or hospitable situation in Bethlehem. Most probably, without any help from any other women during the trying time, she gave birth to Jesus.

Challenge

Mary was a channel of blessing to the whole of humanity. The teenage Mary is a challenge for young people today. She teaches at least three important principles of life. First, young people should lead a life that is pleasing to the Lord. That means, the very life style of young people should be worthy of His approval and applause. Second, it is wonderful to fulfill the will of the Lord, then pursue a selfish agenda or ambitions. God has greater plans than that of plans generated by the imagination of the human mind. Third, the suffering for the Name of Lord Jesus Christ and for His Kingdom is not equal to the glory that is promised in eternity. It is a great privilege to suffer for His name's sake. The suffering could be physical, emotional, mental or psychological.



Meditation - 2

Virgin Born?

Ramesh and Umesh are classmates. They attend the same church, and so they became close friends. They do a lot of things together.

It was the Christmas season. They were decorating the church. Ramesh was on top of a ladder trying to fix the bright red star in place. Umesh was holding the ladder and giving him the directions.

Ramesh said, "I really like this season. There is an air of joy and peace." After some time, he said, "But you know I have trouble believing in the virgin birth of Jesus. What about you?" "SSH...somebody may hear...speak softly," Umesh said. "Yes, it troubles me too. Like the other day at school when Rajiv asked all these questions. I felt as if I was a fool to believe in something like virgin birth."

They were silent. Each struggled with the question. Then Umesh said, "You know we have to ask someone."

"I think we can tell our doubts to Raju Bhaiya. You know how understanding he is with us in youth fellowship. I'm sure he knows the answer to this problem."

"Yes, let's go to him." They went on with their work silently. Then Umesh said, "When?" "When what?" Ramesh asked.

"When shall we go to Raju Bhaiya?"

"Let's go as soon as we finish decorating." So, they finished decorating the church and the Sunday School Hall and cycled over to Raju Bhaiya's home.

Raju is a school teacher. He loves being with young people. He serves as a basketball coach at an orphanage. He had just got back from there when the boys knocked at his door. Even though he was tired, he welcomed the boys into his neat room.

"So, what brings you out this late? What's the problem?"

"We were talking about the virgin birth of Jesus," Ramesh said. "Yes?", Raju prompted.

"Raju Bhaiya, how can one believe in something like that in this day? It's not scientific!" Umesh said. "Really? Have heard of in vitro fertilization?"

"No. I don't think so," Umesh replied. "What is that?"

"That's just the scientific term for the process by which we get test tube babies." "So? What's the connection?" Umesh asked.

"But don't you see, Umesh?" Ramesh said, "That whole process means that someone who is a virgin can have babies."

Umesh said, “Sure. But that’s a scientific achievement. They didn’t have that kind of knowledge back then.”

That’s true,” Raju said, “but if Man in his finiteness can produce virgin born babies, why should we think that God in His almighty power could not do that? After all, science is only the discovery of what He has created.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that? It’s so simple and here I was doubting God’s power,” Umesh said. “Me too,” said Ramesh.

“Now don’t feel too bad. Even Mary and Joseph had trouble in believing in the virgin birth.” “Really?” the boys said together.

“Sure,” Raju said, “You’ll find it in the Christmas stories in the gospels. Mary asked the angel, ‘How can this be, seeing I am a virgin?’ And Joseph wouldn’t believe Mary when she told him. He had to be convinced by a dream.”

“So, you think God is not angry with us for having doubts?” Ramesh asked.

“Of course, not. What is important is that you boys had honest doubts. You were not pretending to doubt something so that you would have an excuse for doing wrong. You looked for answers. You’ve cleared your doubts.”

“I have one more question though,” Ramesh said. “Why did Jesus have to be born of a virgin? Why couldn’t it be just a natural birth?”

Raju said, “Let’s see what the Bible says”. He brought his Bible and turned to Luke chapter one. “Ramesh, you read verse 35.”

Ramesh read, “The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

“You see, Jesus had to be born of a virgin so that he would be called the Son of God. His Father was God, not a man. We are all children of earthly fathers. Jesus was the holy Son of God. He had to be born a virgin.”

Both Ramesh and Umesh thanked Raju and went home happy that their doubts had been cleared. As they continue growing, they will have other doubts. But they will not be afraid to have them or ask for answers. Their faith had grown stronger.

Meditation - 3

God Intervenes

It is amazing to know that God is interested in humanity and could intervene to send His Son Jesus Christ into the world. Christmas reminds us of His love, active involvement in our lives and wonderful guidance. Though Christmas is a mega event of the Incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ, God worked in the lives of each individual who were part of the facilitating process of incarnation in this world. Mary is one among them and she is a splendid example for God's wonderful interest and involvement in the lives of each individual.

God is mindful

God is mindful of humanity. David, who lived a major part of life outside in wilderness, mountains either grazing his father's sheep or running for his life escaping from Saul wondered at God's marvelous creation. He looked at the vast sky, beautiful stars in a clear night, and the awesome beauty of mountains, valleys, caves and wilderness and wondered, "What is man?" you are mindful about him. (Psalm 8: 4) Man, though a tiny speck when compared with the vastness of the whole creation, is significant to God. So, God was mindful of humanity that He sent His Son to redeem the depraved and fallen humanity.

God is mindful of our humble status. Though Mary had a royal lineage as descendant of David, the country was under slavery of mighty Romans. So, Mary was a slave in her own country wondering about the future. Mary reflected on her privilege of being called the "blessed" or "the mother of the Lord" as the highest possible honour for any woman in the world's history. Yes, God was mindful of her humble state. (Luke 1:48)

The writer of Hebrew writes that "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work" (Hebrew 6:10) He is righteous and just, also remembers our deeds also. Even a small service to the least like providing a glass of cold water will not go unnoticed or unrecorded, but rewarded. (Matt 10:42)

God has a Plan

Mary must have drowned in the mundane happenings around her. As a teenager she would have asked herself the hard question, "Is there a purpose in life?" With the political turmoil, poor economic and social status, her life did not offer any hope. Women in Jewish faith did not have any status. How would the future evolve in her life? Will she get married? How is the husband? Would he be really caring for her or selfish? Would God bless her with children?

But this teenager had faith in God and must have been conversing with God, like many characters in the Bible sharing her aspirations and frustrations. Her simple faith, love and commitment to God, His Word and His purposes helped her to understand God's noble and higher purposes. Neither Luke nor Mathew mentions that she was fasting or praying when Gabriel appeared to her. Mary was just getting along with her life but with anticipation God would unfold His plan in her life. And God's future plan for her life and for humanity was revealed through the message from an angel.

God has a divine plan for each one of us. It unfolds in our day-to-day life in miraculous ways. It need not be an angel who announces it to us. Maybe not as dramatic as Paul or Moses experienced. God ministers to

us through other people, circumstances, dreams, Word of God and inward witness of the Holy Spirit. His visitation can happen on any normal day that could dramatically change the future course of life. Disciples like Peter and John had their life defining moments when they were doing their daily jobs.

God surprises us

As human beings our best aspirations do not match with His plans. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Is 59:7,8) Abraham could have never imagined being a blessing to the whole world. David with all his gift of imagination and poetry could have never imagined his role in God's plan of redemption in the history of the world. So, Mary, a village girl just aspired like any other ordinary girl.

Being open and available to God to use us as His "instruments of righteousness" (Rom 6:13) is the best thing we can do. He will surprise us by placing us in a unique context, using us as His special ministers and make us a blessing to millions around us. His majesty is displayed when we are more vulnerable.

God guides us

Mary was more perplexed than anybody else in the world when she heard the message of God through Gabriel. "How will this be?" wondered the awe-struck young girl from Judean countryside. (Luke 1:34) The angel explained to her how God would bring about this miracle. "How?" is the question we tend to ask when God tells us something marvelous. Abraham could not fathom the promise that his descendants would be numerous as sand or as stars in the sky. Joseph did not realize how his dreams could become true one day. Moses wondered how deliverance of Israel could happen from the slavery of Egypt. Yes, we do have similar questions. But, like them we must learn to walk in faith.

A young man along with his father was traveling through a desert on a camel following the footprints of the caravan that went ahead. They rested fixing a tent in the night while the caravan ahead went further away. Suddenly, a sand storm swept the whole desert and the footprints disappeared. The young man wondered how they could continue the journey, as there were no trails to follow. Father replied, "Do not worry. Footprints on the sand would not always be there, but there are always stars out there that would show us the direction." Yes, when footprints disappear, there are still the stars. In our lives when guidance is not possible by human intelligence and advice, there is divine guidance like the stars in the desert. Mary was guided step by step to fulfill God's divine plan in her life.

God makes us rejoice

Pain, loss, suffering, loneliness, separation, and rejection are part and parcel of human life. Mary was not exempted from the imperfect life on this earth. She went through the taunt of the community, loss of her husband Joseph, loneliness in bringing up her children like a single parent today, and the worst blow of all was Jesus' cruel death on the cross where she was compelled to be a mute spectator. But life was not monotonous where she went through negative experiences only. She was able to rejoice that outlasted her sorrows.

The crown of her joy was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so is ours. His resurrection demonstrated Jesus Christ's deity, attested his authority to forgive sins, opened the doors of eternity and sealed the plan of redemption for humanity. As partakers with Him in His sufferings, we become partakers in his joy and glory. What a glorious hope in Christ Jesus?

Challenge

Mary was not the only one who experienced God in her life. Joseph, Zechariah, Elizabeth, shepherds, wise men and several unknown characters experienced God in their personal lives. Let this Christmas remind us that God is mindful of us to reveal His divine plan, guide us to fulfill his divine purposes and rejoice with Him.



Meditation - 4

Mary's Song of Praise: The Magnificat

Christianity is a religion of songs. In fact, the largest book in the Bible is the Song Book - Psalms. It is no wonder the favourite of many. In the Bible also there are few 'hit' songs. Prominent among the hit songs is the Song of Mary. There are other hit songs: Song of Moses, Miriam (Exodus 15), David and Asaph (I Chronicles 16), Hannah (I Samuel 2)

“And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:46-55)

Background

The angel of the Lord appears to the Virgin Mary. She has been called for a great and noble mission of being the mother of the Lord. It was an unexpected call, honour and privilege. As promised by the angel, she became pregnant And she needed fellowship, spiritual nurture, affirmation and encouragement. Mary chose to be with Elizabeth who was elderly and spiritually mature. It was a marvellous fellowship between Elizabeth who was old and barren and Mary, young and virgin. Both were chosen to accomplish God's amazing plan of redemption.

Mary had to take a journey of 100 km to be with Elizabeth for about three months. When she stepped into the home of Elizabeth and Zachariah, the greeting was a great affirmation. Elizabeth told Mary that she was privileged to have Mary visit her. The same time John the Baptist in the womb leaped for joy. The unborn child was spiritually sensitive.

Sweet song of Mary

The Song of Mary has parallels with the prayer of Hannah. It is interesting to observe that Hannah, the first born, was Samuel. He was the Priest, Prophet, Judge and installed the first two Kings of the People of Israel. However, Lord Jesus is Prophet, Priest, King and Judge, hence the anointed one.

1. Worship is magnifying God

The word Magnify multiplies the image of an object. A microscope magnifies minute things to see more vividly. In our lives, we tend to magnify something in our lives. A sports person magnifies cricket; a doctor magnifies his medical profession, a teacher magnifies her education service; a politician magnifies politics or governance. However, a disciple of Lord Jesus Christ magnifies God. People around us have to see a Great God, Holy God, Mighty God, Loving God in a magnified form in us.

2. Worship involves whole being

Worship involves the whole being. Mary declared that she worshipped the Lord from the depth of her being, soul or inner-person. She also sang in spirit. The content of the song provides a great intellectual content, the product of the mind. Mary sang joyfully, meaning emotional engagement.

3. Worship the Lord who is Holy

Mary understood the attributes of God. Songs teach us theology. Hence song writers should be saturated with the Word of God. One of the most significant attributes of God: The Lord God almighty is Holy. Unlike other religions, God is revealed as Holy. The inner sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple is known as the Holy of Holies. We are called to worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness. (Psalms 96:9) The Priests have to have a badge that declares: Holiness unto the Lord. In fact, Mary became a holy vessel used by God.

4. Worship the Lord for His mercy

Another great attribute of God is Mercy. The Lord shows mercy to undeserving, ill-deserving and hell deserving humanity; Mary was a witness for God's mercy. She was chosen, though being from a poor, insignificant family was chosen to be the mother of the Lord.

During the Chennai floods, the suffering people were provided with food and clothing. There were differences between various agencies. Some people were just throwing pockets of food or bed sheets or clothing at people. At the same time, Christian NGOs handed over pockets to each person with a smile. God's mercy is mercy with dignity.

5. Worship the Lord for His works

The Lord's deeds in the world and dealings with the children of God are amazing. God is almighty and displays awesome power and splendor. However, Mary describes that God does Mighty things and great things. (Not just power, but purpose)

Mighty does not mean uncontrolled power but purposeful power. It is easy to kill and destroy sinners. That is just being mighty. When God redeems and transforms sinners, it is not just almighty power; but great power. There is no equal or parallel power in the world.

Mary sings about three types of human beings and how God displays his great power to transform them. The helpless (51), humble (52), and hungry (53) are helped and they are transformed. The proud are making common people vulnerable, helpless and powerless. The proud in thoughts or haughty and arrogant are scattered. There is a value transformation.

The humble or lowly are exalted. Those mighty who are seated on thrones - symbol of power and who control resources are made powerless. The marginalized, downtrodden, oppressed and humiliated are exalted by God. There is social transformation.

The people who are hungry are fed. The people who do not have resources or access to resources are provided or fed. The proud, rich and powerful are sent empty. There is an economic transformation.

6. Worship the Lord for His Promises

In the beautiful song of Mary, she reminds us about God's Promises. Also, about the faithful, resourceful, gracious God who keeps those promises. Even though the Jewish people were unfaithful for centuries, God fulfills His promises given to Abraham and his descendants forever. The Promises of God are eternal as God is eternal. They are true and God has the capacity to fulfill the awesome promises.

There are two aspects of Abraham's blessing. Lord promised Abraham that his descendants would be innumerable like the dust or like the stars in the sky. The first aspect as dust means the Nation of Israel. The second aspect of the star indicates the Church. Mary understood this great fulfillment of promise.

Conclusion

One bible scholar wrote: "Heaven is the glorification of humility, and hell is the humiliation of pride." The song is rich in content. It also teaches great truths about God and what true worship involves. Christmas is not just feasting but a call for magnificent worship.



Meditation - 5

Joseph - Unsung Hero of Christmas

God loved the world, the sinful humanity to send His Son Lord Jesus into this world. It happened in an historical context, geographical location and with the active involvement of wonderful people of God. Of the many instruments of God, Joseph could be considered as the unsung hero of Christmas. This marvellous and remarkable man of God is a great role model and inspiration to all of us.

Walk before God

Joseph was a descendant of David, the most loved King of the history of Israel. The children of Israel lost their status of covenant relationship with God by their continuous rebellion of rejecting Him and His Word. With the spiritual deterioration came the political downfall, the nation became slaves to many foreign powers. Joseph, who could have been one of the ruling class elites, had to work hard to survive. In this adverse situation, Joseph did not murmur or resent against God. His faith in God was not dictated by external situations.

Being a carpenter was a hard job. It needed immense physical energy, mental agility and skills to produce useful products for people. He should have been a reputed artisan. His spiritual life and convictions helped him to do his job excellently well.

He was also known as a righteous or just man. "And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:19-20) According to Jewish law, Mary could have been branded as an adulteress and be stoned to death. Living under Romans, the Jews did not have freedom to give death penalty. The other option for Joseph was to 'divorce her quietly'.

A righteous person is sensitive to other people; not judgmental; and not vengeful. He accepted Mary unconditionally, lovingly and thankfully - to serve the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

God spoke to Joseph; without hesitation, doubts, questions or arguments Joseph spontaneously obeyed. Matthew's narration expresses that obedience beautifully. "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:24,25) Joseph did not go and ask suggestions and counsel from his mother or father or kith or kin or peers.

Joseph's walk with God is reflected in his attitude towards the law of the land. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." (Luke 2:1-5) Joseph did as required by the decree, even though Mary was in the advanced level of pregnancy. He did not provide any excuse to bypass the decree.

Walk with Mary

Joseph accepted Mary as his wife, loved her, cared for her and even served her. From Nazareth to Bethlehem, the distance was about 120 KM. They could walk or Mary could have had the privilege of riding on a donkey or mule, while Joseph walked. Travelling such a distance by a pregnant mother would have been an arduous journey. Joseph was the provider of the needed moral support for Mary. Joseph would have walked with Mary slowly to help pregnant Mary have a hassle-free journey.

In the era, where advance booking of rooms in hotels was not invented or practiced; the inn was packed. Maybe the hotels of that time did not even have lobbies but had parking space (for animals). The Inn keeper made some quick bucks by renting out parking space for this hapless couple. Most probably, Joseph was the midwife helping his wife to deliver her first born child. An unhygienic environment, no equipment for safe delivery and no expertise for Joseph. Indeed, Joseph was willing to walk an additional mile for his love for Mary.

Walk for Jesus

Joseph also walked for the sake of Lord Jesus Christ. It would have been easy for Joseph to walk alone from Nazareth to Bethlehem. However, he had to walk with Mary and yet to be born Lord Jesus. May be, he had to run here and there, when Lord was born, calling help from other women in Bethlehem, trying to get other needs for newborn.

"And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." (Luke 2:21) Joseph and Mary had to carry infant Jesus to perform the religious duty of circumcision. The walk was about 5 miles or 8 KM. Walking that distance right after delivery would have been difficult for both parents. Joseph and Mary were spiritual and were willing to work hard to fulfill God's requirements.

The Wise men visit stirred Herod, to seek and kill the infant. "Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." (Matthew 2:13-15) It was a midnight crisis evacuation. Again, Joseph was always spontaneous in his obedience. For the safety of Lord Jesus, Joseph had to walk, in fact, run to Egypt with his wife Mary and Lord Jesus as refugees.

As Jewish practice, Joseph took his family on pilgrimage year after year to Jerusalem. However, when Jesus was twelve years old things were different. Lord Jesus stayed back in the temple of Jerusalem, most probably without informing parents. Joseph presumed Lord Jesus was within the huge group of pilgrims. They realized their mistake and had to walk back in search for three days. "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." (Luke 2:46) This must have been a difficult walk for Joseph. Anxiety in mind, fatigue in his old frame and fear of failure in his duty in his spirit must have wearied him. However, there is no record of anger or bitterness or

resentment in the whole episode. This also reveals how Joseph managed his home. As a spiritual person, he taught Scripture, practiced prayers and was an example to Lord Jesus in his childhood.

Challenge

Joseph was called by God for a very special and specific purpose. Without doubt, Joseph demonstrated his trustworthiness by responding amazingly to this lofty position. He was righteous and did not deviate from the Law or the law of the land. Faithfully, he fulfilled his role as husband to Mary without any feeling of hurt or anger. Amazingly, he was sensitive and merciful to Mary. A spiritually mature person, he was spontaneously obedient to God's directions. As husband and father, he was a faithful provider and protector of the family.

What a great hero was Joseph as a righteous instrument of God!



Meditation - 6

Unpacking Tradition with wisdom

Tradition is like a wrapper, under which there could be a truth or a myth or a mixture of both. Unpacking tradition is helpful to understand the reason for the birth of a tradition. Santa Claus is one such tradition. St. Nicholas is believed to be a monk born around 280 A.D. in Patara, near Myra in modern Turkey. He came from a rich family, and gave away all his inheritance to the poor. One popular legend is about how he saved three daughters who were being sold as slaves by their father by paying their dues or dowry.

December 6th is his death anniversary, which is celebrated as feast day by the Roman Catholic church. Protestant Reformation forbade veneration of saints, yet St. Nicholas continues to enjoy the same status and attraction value.

Later, Santa Claus became commercialized in the USA. In 1841 a shop in Philadelphia created a life-size model of Santa which attracted children and parents, naturally it spread all over. In the 1890s, the Salvation Army dressed up young men as Santas to raise funds by ringing bells in street corners.

While we were living in Chandigarh (1995), the Lions club president approached us to come and speak at their Christmas gathering. He told me specifically to speak about Santa Claus as their people did not know anything about him. I was surprised to see a gathering of over 200 men and women. None of them were Christian. I unpacked the legend of Santa Claus and lead them to the great account of Incarnation that happened in Bethlehem - Birth of our Saviour Lord Jesus Christ. Traditions like Santa Claus has put a veil to the truth; however, it can also become a door for sharing the truth.

Instead of just condemning Santa Claus and their lovers, let us see and create open doors to share the truth. Are we unpacking traditions to share the truth?



Meditation - 7

Massacre Of Children

Nearly 2000 years ago; massacring about 20 newborn children (the estimate ranges from 6 to 144000) in a small town of Bethlehem by Herod would not have been news headlines or Breaking news. Yet the crime affected mothers, fathers, siblings, families, community, and the whole nation of Israel. The Catholic Church regards them as first martyrs and have 28 December to mark that occasion while the Coptic church marks it on 29 December.

Visit of Wise-men

The wise men from the East landed in Herod's palace with a question: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:2) Herod summoned the religious leaders, who said that he will be born in Bethlehem. Herod privately requested them to provide information about the newborn king, so that he also could go and worship. Warned by a dream, the wisemen did not come to Jerusalem to provide information, instead took another route, and went on their way. (Matthew 2: 1-12)

Paranoid Herod

Herod the Great ruled from 37 to 4 BC, under Romans. He was ethnically Arab but a practicing Jew. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and built the port city of Caesarea in twelve years. Herod had ten wives and all of them had princes aspiring to become kings. They tried to kill one another to become the successor of Herod. Ruthless Herod killed three of his own sons for treason. Alexander and Aristobulus were killed in 7 BC, while another son Antipater II was killed in 4 BC. Mariamne was his favourite wife, whom he killed as well as his mother-in-law. He invited the high priest to Jericho and in a water game, he was drowned. So many were killed in his reign for petty reasons or imagined dangers.

Herod was about to die. He asked his sister Salome to arrest Jewish leaders and keep them captive in the hippodrome, beneath his palace. When he died, he was pretty sure that none in the Jewish nation would cry mourning his death. If Salome kills all Jewish leaders, many will cry and it would be presumed that they cried for Herod.

Murder of innocents

"Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16-18)

The word tricked translated has two original ideas: deception and mockery. Herod felt that the wisemen not only deceived him, but also mocked him. Herod the Great was a cruel leader and brutal in his response to that humiliation. This massacre of infants is just a fraction of all his atrocities, throughout his reign.

Is it fiction?

There are few scholars who argue that it was just a fiction or imaginary story created by Matthew. Child mortality was high in the ancient world. Death of a few children in a small town of an estimated 1500 people was less than child mortality deaths. Hence, historians could have just ignored this. Second reason could be that Bethlehem was an insignificant town. In modern understanding, a town where no news or tv reporters go to.

Rachael refused to be comforted

The death sentence against the infants was executed by the soldiers. It was not only Bethlehem, a few villages surrounding it were also raided and male children were killed.

Israel's mothers during the conquest and captivity by the Babylonians lamented, wept and mourned. (Jeremiah 31:15) Matthew applies that prophecy by stating Rachel was representative of mothers in Bethlehem who lost their children, killed by soldiers of Herod. Rachael in Jewish culture was considered a sympathetic mother during the misfortunes of children.

Children in the world today

However, targeting innocents, infants, unarmed children; happens with regular intervals in the history. Paranoid, unethical, and wicked leaders like Herod continue to haunt humanity. Unborn children are killed by abortion. Children are sacrificed in the altars of lust. Many children die of malnutrition and starvation. They become hapless victims in civil wars and political turmoil. Pedophilic crimes have increased the world over. Child sexual abuse for pleasure and commerce is a blot on the world community today.

Children in India today

India has 472 million children which is 40 percent of the population. 33 million children go to work instead of school; one-third of child brides in the world are from India; Two-third of children who die below age of five due to malnutrition; two out of five children do not receive complete immunization and there is 500 percent increase in crime against children between 2008-2018.

Spirit of Herod

The same wicked spirit of Herod is evident in the world today. They indulge in various kinds of crimes against children.

1. Unborn children as enemies

Can unborn children become enemies? Sadly, it seems to be so in many parts of the world. Couples who like to have only male children, are willing to kill an unborn child. When there are no moral standards, such murders could become common. Girl children are thrown in the dustbin, poisoned, buried alive and even left in the open for wild animals to eat.

2. Children are enemies

Herod thought a newborn child could challenge his throne. The Egyptian Pharaoh considered male children could be future danger for his rule, he commanded the nurses to kill them and parents to throw them in the river of Nile. (Exodus 1:15-22)

3. Children as tools

Beggars' mafia kidnap, maim and use children to beg in cities to earn money. The movie Slumdog Millionaire portrays how beggars' mafia operate. Children are also used as labourers and slaves in brick-kilns, carpet industry, crackers industries and in many other places.

4. Children as sacrifices

Child sacrifice is found in many parts of the world throughout history. God was angry with His chosen people for child sacrifice. (Jeremiah 7:31) King Mesha of Moab sacrificed his firstborn son as he fought against Israel. (II Kings 3:26-27) Molech, a Canaanite deity, was offered child sacrifice. "You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 18:21) Kings of Israel Ahaz and Manasseh who were influenced by Assyrians offered child sacrifice and worshiped Moloch at Topheth outside the walls of Jerusalem. During Manasseh's son King Amon's reign, that place was used for child sacrifice, which was destroyed during the reign of Josiah. (II Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10) Even today there are people who sacrifice their children to attain wealth and fortune.

5. Children as sex objects

Perverts in the communities have increased manifold. Sexual abuse of children, creating pornography with children and sexual violence against children has multiplied. Laws have not helped to curb the growth of wickedness against children.

Challenge

Satan intended to kill the newborn Messiah, Lord Jesus Christ. But Father God protected Lord Jesus. Satan let loose his fury upon innocent children. Herod became the tool of destruction. Satan's intention is to steal, kill and destroy. Millions of children die as Satan inspires people to be evil, wicked, abusive, manipulative, violent and destructive even against innocent children. Lord Jesus Christ's incarnation of becoming human includes identifying with hapless and helpless children. Christmas brings hope to children to have life of dignity, have hope, aspire and have dreams.

Meditation -8

Focused Celebration of Christmas

In Greater Noida, in a multi-storied apartment lived the family of Satyendra. They wanted to celebrate their baby Riwan's first birthday. They had invited friends and prepared a great banquet too. Parents were busy decorating the hall, arranging furniture and fixing balloons...etc. The main door was kept open as people started walking in. The boy slipped out of the main door and was holding the iron grills in the stairways. He put his head between two iron rods, looked down and wanting to explore, slipped and fell to death from the twelfth floor. (NDTV 24 August 2021)

1) Event: Birthday was for that baby boy Riwan. However, the focus shifted to the celebration event. Parents and others were busy organizing the celebration, neglecting the baby for whom it was the birthday. Sad, that Riwan's birthday became his death day. For many, Christmas is just an event that is happening now. The historical significance is unknown or forgotten. The Christmas event is memorable as it is remembrance of God's grace that He sent His son Lord Jesus Christ to the world. (John 3:16)

2) Guests: The Christmas celebration is about entertaining the guests. The hosts are preoccupied with having great conversations with their relatives, kith, kin, neighbours, colleagues, and friends. In this business, the baby was forgotten. During the Christmas season it is important to care for and visit the poor. The Lord taught us who should be invited as guests: "But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." (Luke 14:13,14) Thank God for all the saints of God who make sure that the least and the marginalized in their locality are blessed with their gifts.

3) Feast: In the celebration, feasting is important. The best chef brings out the best food for people to enjoy. Making sure there were several courses of cuisine was a hard task. In this toil, the baby was forgotten. For some, Christmas is a feast, choice food. One family wanted to show themselves as better than others in the economic status and decided to have a special biryani made of turkey instead of chicken or goat meat. They borrowed money to hold that feast in a hired venue. However, there was no joy, but strife and bitter fighting and revelry that left them sick, depressed and in debt. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17)

4) Status statement: Birthdays are celebrated by parents for their children, to show to the world, their social and income status. Instead of caring and investing in the life of the child, they use the birthday to massage their ego. When the spiritual importance of the Christmas celebration is minimized, all worldly desires would prop up. Hanging the biggest star, or having multi-colour serial lights, having imported Christmas trees, making a large nativity scenario...etc. When time, money and energy are spent in those non-essentials, the essentials of worship, prayer, sharing the Word and caring will be marginalized.

5) Tradition: Children's birthdays are celebrated and shared in social media today. There are eateries that offer special packages for celebrating birthdays. Hence, it is more a tradition for the family. Around the world, Christmas has become a cultural celebration or a traditional ritual or a yearly event of the church. The reason for the season, Lord Jesus Christ, is ignored, neglected, or forgotten. In some cities, there is

competition for the best Christmas Trees. In some cities hundreds of people dressed in Santa Claus go around singing. Carols are sung in concerts and malls without knowing the meaning of the songs.

Redemption for our sins

Adam and Eve sinned by wilful disobedience and brought sin, death and curse upon humanity. God promised that a seed of woman would be born to redeem the fallen humanity. Lord Jesus Christ was born as Promised by God as saviour of the world in a simple cowshed in Bethlehem. He was sent by Father God to die for our sins and grant us forgiveness. Thus, we could have access to the Holy God's presence through the Lord Jesus Christ and live with him forever.

Challenge

Sadly, people forget the Lord Jesus Christ but hold a celebration as individuals, families, communities, institutions, cities, nations...etc. Forgetting Lord Jesus Christ, the reason for the celebration is missing God's purpose as well as our purpose in life.

Advent season, as the Church calendar calls it, is a time of quiet contemplation of God's love for humanity, Lord Jesus Christ suffering, death and resurrection. The Christmas season is to welcome our Lord to be born in our hearts and minds for a glorious transformation.



Meditation - 9

Christmas Celebration in India

The birthday of Lord Jesus Christ, celebrated as Christmas is the most popular event around the world. The celebration is different in various cultures and nations. India with a massive population spread over vast land has many cultures and languages. The Christians are spread in almost all parts of the country. In some parts or districts, they are highly concentrated and in some they are a miniscule minority. The celebration is different in villages, towns and cities.

I was born in a Christian family in South India and lived in a small town during formative years. The economic situation at that point of time was not like that of prospering India today. As children we anticipated Christmas, mainly, because we get our annual quota of new dress. If the family is struggling, children may get only school uniforms and not colour dresses. The other anticipation was cakes and biryani (a special rice and meat dish). In those days, families may have non-vegetarian meals only once a week (mostly Sundays for Christians). Cakes were also not affordable. We never had cake cutting for our birthdays, so Christmas was special for us. The Church choir used to visit us at night. Generally, in the middle of the night. It was a joyful occasion to see Santa Claus in the visiting choir. Santa Claus used to dance and hand out some chocolates and balloons. The songs were mostly Tamil songs with local music and rhythm. Sending Christmas cards and receiving Christmas cards were great. The status of a person is determined by the number of Christmas cards a family sends and receives.

Sometimes, we have visiting choirs from other cities. They used to hold Carol service, which was awesome. There would be solos, group songs, English and Tamil songs, lovely music and of course a short message. As kids, we used to perform the nativity scene. This was an annual ritual, but for children, it was a great occasion. It was like a Fancy-Dress competition; the Magi wrapped in Kancheepuram silk sarees of mothers, shepherds with shawls of their fathers...etc.

Our home would be decorated. Usually, we have stars which we use for many years. It is hung in the front of the home to indicate that we are Christians. The carol singing team could easily identify the home. Generally, the home is white washed during that time. Inside the home, those who could afford it would have a Christmas Tree. As children we loved to blow balloons and hand them. Old Christmas cards are also hung to add color to the Christmas Tree. Nativity scenes are created with minimal pieces and with homemade pieces. Balloons with Merry Christmas are hung exactly before Christmas day.

As children, we expected a Christmas Tree program for kids. That is very important as all children would get gifts. The local Church creates a database of all children, of all members. They buy gifts, pack them and hang them on a giant Christmas Tree. Then after a short service (preferably the Sunday evening before Christmas). The Sunday School superintendent or the Pastor reads names one by one and children receive gifts. The gifts are carefully selected as they should have utility value. Some gifts could be a Geometry box that could be used in school or vessels that could be used in homes.

Christmas day began very early. We were woken up at 4 A.M. and we had to have a quick shower in cold water, pray for our new dresses, wear them and rush to the church at 5 A.M. It was a great event when the church was filled with people. There will not be space as many would be sitting or standing outside. All

dressed in the best, it was really a fantastic scene. Choir performs well, and the preaching is inspiring and short. After the service there would be firecrackers and sparklers outside the church. Noisy and colorful celebration.

After the service, we come home to have special food: cakes, vadas, idlis and dosas. Then mother cooks the spicy Biryani. Meanwhile, friends and relatives would come to visit us. There would be a stream of visitors like washer-man, milkman, postman, ...other service providers. They would get cake and sometimes a special gift (money). We used to have a good lunch, sometimes with guests. As we grew up, we would invite some of our friends also. After lunch, there would be a stream of under privileged people - beggars. Children would joyfully provide them, as it was a joyful time. The Stars, Christmas Tree, Santa Claus, Angels, Songs, Cakes, Delicacies, Christmas cards, new dress, gifts, ... are part of the Christmas celebration.



Meditation - 10

Prepare, Partner and Partake

Christmas was a unique and great event that changed the destiny of the Human Race. The narration of this significant event has three episodes of angels appearing and giving messages. All these three events are well described by St. Luke.

First one was a private appearance to Zachariah that became public immediately (Luke 1:11-17), the second was also private to Mary (Luke 1:26-38) and it was not disclosed immediately, the third was public and it was acted upon immediately by the shepherds (Luke 2: 8-20).

Message for ALL generations

1) Old grandfather

The appearance of the father of John the Baptist, while he was officiating in the temple, is the first appearance. He was old and did not aspire for a child as Elizabeth was past that stage of child bearing. They were righteous and blameless. As all Israelites, they also aspired to have children, but their prayers were not; perhaps they lost all hope. And God sent his angel with the message of hope - birth of a son who would become a prophet preparing the way for the incarnation of the Son of God, Lord Jesus Christ. God can commission even retired people to start a new project for his kingdom. Were not Moses and Noah commissioned when they were senior citizens?

2) Teenage girl

A Virgin from a rural country, probably a teenager, was puzzled to see an angel appearing to her. The message was that God has chosen among all women to bring forth to the world - Christ the Saviour. Amazing! Only a young girl can do this. God commissions young people to accomplish great things for His Kingdom. But, there is a tendency to despise young people who aspire for ministerial and missional roles. Mary was obedient to God's call, even though she did not understand the whole process of redemption.

3) Working adults

A group of marginalized shepherds - able-bodied, hardworking, dynamic adults out in the field, saw angels appearing to them, giving them the first information about the birth of Lord Jesus Christ. The Priests, Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees - religious elite could pinpoint the place of birth of Lord Jesus to the Magi from the East but never bothered to visit Him to worship. The coming of Wise men from the East did not provoke them to search for the Saviour. The religious elite had their Scripture, knew its contents, but did not believe it. These illiterates needed the Word or Information as they did not have access to the message as the religious elites did; God was gracious to send his angels. Their response was wonderful; they rushed immediately, worshipped and spread the word to others. They were worshipers and witnesses.

Unfortunately, the modern world believes that Christmas is just a cultural festival for children. A commercial bonanza for the marketers. Christmas is captured in Santa Claus, Cakes, Trees, Stars, New Dresses...

However, Christmas is a great message for all generations, all ages, men and women, transcending all human segregations, separations and divisions.

Messages received in different contexts

1) Spiritual/religious context

The angels appeared in different places. God's message of love could reach us in any context. Zachariah received the message in the temple of Jerusalem, as he was involved in the worship of Jehovah. Gabriel appeared to him as he ministered as the officiating Priest there. The same temple needed cleansing as it became a 'den of thieves' instead of a place of worship. But, a message was received in that Holy place. God is involved in the lives of people who are willing to listen, even if they live among unrighteous people. He will intervene in our lives when we wait and worship in the presence of the Lord. Worship and prayer has become a ritual rather than reception of a message from the Lord.

2) Home context

Angel visited the home of Virgin Mary. Maybe she was alone, after completing her household chores. Gabriel appears to her with a life transforming message that would impact the whole of humanity for eternity. God speaks even when we are doing our routine mundane work. But our mind and spirit could be attuned to God's Spirit. Not the context, but our attitude and alertness help us to be receptive to God's message.

3) Work context

Shepherds were in their work environment, performing their duty keeping vigil to protect their flock. Maybe they were keepers of the sheep used as sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. The angel appeared to them with a precious message. They seemed busy with their work, but their response to go to Bethlehem tells us that they had their priorities right. Neither workaholic, nor they believed work as worship, but could balance their work and worship priorities.

Message

1) Prepare

The message for Zachariah was that John the Baptist would prepare the way for the Lord. Zachariah was a Priest, but his son would be a Prophet. Many parents like their children to be a chip of the old block. Pastors want their children as pastors; missionaries as missionaries; doctors as doctors; politicians as politicians... etc. The ministry of John the Baptist would be in contrast to his father. Zachariah's was Formal, while John's was Informal; Zachariah's in temple, while John's was in wilderness; Zachariah's was ritualistic, ceremonial and systematic but John's was spontaneous, non-traditional and non-conservative. God has a special calling for each and every person. Zachariah was sensitive to the guidance of God and allowed John the Baptist to become a Prophet instead of a Priest like him in the temple.

2) Partner

For Mary, the message was a call to be a partner in the Great Plan of Redemption of humanity. There was a need for human instruments to fulfil God's eternal plan. It could be accomplished only by a woman, that to a young Virgin. God's choice fell on this humble, submissive and available vessel for God. The Word has to become flesh; Mary was available to execute God's Global agenda of sending His Son to die for human beings. Like Mary we are called to partner with God to accomplish His will in this world.

3) Partake

Shepherds, a marginalized group of people, were called to partake - by worship and witness. God prepared the way for His Son to come, called Mary to be a partner and invited shepherds, representatives of humanity to partake in the New Creation. Shepherds responded well by worshipping and witnessing.

Christmas Call

This Christmas season once again reminds us of the basic call for all Christians. We are called to prepare the way for our Lord's Second Coming. Our role is to reveal Lord Jesus Christ to the world that indwells in us. His love, grace, and power have to be demonstrated in this world through us. Like Mary we are His Holy Instruments. As members of the Body of Christ, we are worshipers and witnesses 24/7 for His Glory like the shepherds. Worshipers from all people irrespective of their caste, language, culture, nationality, economic status, social status...etc., would gather in eternity forever.



Meditation - 11

The Birth of Jesus in A World of Challenges

The life and ministry of Lord Jesus Christ on the planet earth demonstrates his identification with human beings. Even the Christmas events show us how he identified with the poor, marginalized and suffering humanity. The contemporary context today is much similar to the narratives during the first Christmas.

Political policy decision

The Roman Emperor orders a Census in his vast Empire. Maybe it was to boost his ego or make administration more effective. Anyway, the Edict would mean a lot of travelling by people in the whole Empire as they were required to register themselves in their hometown. Similarly, political decisions that cause great human misery and pain are also the order of this day. Ill-informed leaders, autocratic leaders take decisions that affect millions of innocent people. A Godly leader, with a justice and righteous mindset would avoid such blunders and provide meaningful life for citizens. Unfortunately, today the world is ruled by people, who do not have capacity to address the complicated issues faced by the world today.

Compelled to travel

Travelling in those days was more difficult and dangerous than today. A Government order compels pregnant Mary and Joseph to travel to their hometown. It was indeed a risky trip for a pregnant woman. It was not a picnic or excursion but fulfillment of a formality dictated by the regime. There is no record to know for sure how many people were maimed or killed due to the travel for completing the Census process of the Roman Empire. Many people today spend a considerable time commuting to work and back home within major cities and from and to cities. It is stressful for body and mind as they cannot afford a home near their workplace or get jobs near their homes. Mary and Joseph and Lord Jesus in the womb experienced this ordeal.

Over crowded

Bethlehem was overcrowded as many cities are today. The hospitality business was booming at the time of the Census. There were so many guests to cater for. Around the world people are crowded in most cities, especially in Asia and Africa. A sea of humanity could be seen in those busy cities. There are crowds of humanity everywhere competing for limited resources. In spite of the crowd, people experience loneliness. The overpopulated earth now finds scarcity and even pollution of natural resources. There is water scarcity, air pollution and lack of several things like space and even privacy. Did not baby Jesus experience such a situation?

No place in the inn

From a modern lifestyle perspective, Joseph may have failed to reserve a room in the inn. Is not competition evident in all areas of life? Competing for resources is a daily job for many around the world. Joseph and Mary were in the losers group desperately. Even the heavenly father did not make any special provision for the birth of the Son of God. There are millions in many cities around the world who do not have a home to stay. They stay in make-shift shelters, insecure and vulnerable to accidents and natural disasters.

Struggles of a nuclear family

In Bethlehem, Joseph did not have a close relationship with the extended family. He had to fend for himself. There was not an elderly relative around to help the pregnant Mary to have a safe delivery. Today, most families are nuclear, without the counsel and help of the elderly.

Unhygienic

The delivery to the Son of God did not happen in home or in an institution, but in an unhygienic context. The room was shared with animals. Is not space crunch an issue for urban poor? Sometimes, human beings live like sub-human beings while animals have better facilities. Health and hygiene is not a right for a large section of humanity in many poor nations. The maternal mortality rate and infant mortality rate is high in many poor countries as the poor do not have access to health care.

No New Clothes

There were no Just Born shops. They used dirty or rags to wrap Lord Jesus Christ.

Poor offering

The visit to the Temple of Jerusalem indicates the fulfilment of Moses Law. (Luke 2: 22-24) The offering denotes that Joseph and Mary had very little resources and opted for a 'below poverty line' offering of two doves. Economic deprivation is the lot of the poor. Unfortunately, Government policies of several nations do not mitigate their sufferings, in fact increase theirs. This also teaches humanity that poverty is not an excuse for ignoring spiritual needs.

Rich and fame are dangerous

The visitors from the East were generous. Their gifts were appropriate and timely. However, the wise men had declared that "Jesus was the King". That created a commotion in the ruling establishment and a political crisis. Paranoid Herod did not want a rival even if it is just an infant. Herod was willing to eradicate any competition ruthlessly. Is not power politics similar in many parts of the world? Killing political rivals, ethnic cleansing, and genocide are happening even today because of paranoid leaders and manipulators like Herod. An angel warned Joseph and Mary to run for life, become refugees in another nation.

Refugee

Are not refugees or displaced people or immigrants or uprooted people common today around the world? Political rivalry, economic compulsion, social hatred, and natural and man-made disasters displace millions of people. These people are vulnerable and many times lose all except their lives. They struggle to rebuild their lives again. As an infant refugee, Lord Jesus was exposed to dangers in Egypt. The uprooted family must have survived with minimum resources and comfort.

Blue-collar worker

Joseph was a hardworking man, engaged in the profession of carpentry. It was not a sophisticated job that did not need hard labour. Jesus Christ as a young boy was initiated as an apprentice in that profession. By doing so, Lord Jesus Christ taught the world the 'dignity of labour' and work ethics.

Challenge

The Lord Jesus Christ incarnation was not a fable that happened in a King's palace with all comforts, resources and servants. It was an ordinary incident, largely unnoticed by people. However, that intervention in human history transformed humanity and world history. Christmas gives us courage to face an unfair, evil, sinful world and yet be triumphant.



Meditation - 12

Christmas Trees

When we were in Haryana as missionaries, during December one of my neighbors said: "I will come on Christmas day to see the Christmas tree." I said: "Come I will give you a surprise." I did not intend to have a Christmas tree and decorations as I did not give importance to these. Few more people in our Mohalla (neighbourhood) also wanted to see a Christmas tree. That made us think. We bought a pine tree branch and set it in our home and decorated it. It was in the front balcony of our house. Many would pass by but stand to see the tree. We will invite them and tell them about the First Christmas in Bethlehem. Then on 24 December we had a Christmas event inviting friends and neighbours. The event had a few songs, one or two testimonies, one explanation about Christmas and a gospel message. After that we used to have sweets as many of our neighbours do not eat cake (as it contains egg) and tea. We announce, those who like to take a New Testament are welcome to do so.

The Christmas Tree created an opportunity to share the gospel. We did it for many years as long as we were in Haryana. Many of our friends followed our method and created an opportunity to share and develop friendship in the community.

In many cities in the West, there are awards for the best Christmas Trees. Unfortunately, Santa Claus, stars, trees... have reached people before Lord Jesus Christ is introduced. So, what would be the best strategy? Ride on those worldly elements to offer the truth. Traditions could give us strategies to reach people more effectively.

As believers we are like palm trees planted in the courts of the Lord (Psalms 92:13) and are blessed planted trees that are evergreen and give fruit in season. (Psalms 1)

Let us use all opportunities this Christmas to share the gospel.



Meditation - 13

God With Us

Father was working in the military far away from home. Son was about five years old living with his mother. At his home was a large portrait of the father in his majestic military apparel. The boy while starting to go to school would wave to his mom and salute before his dad's portrait. One day the boy exclaimed, "Dad if you could just step out of the portrait, how great it would be." The inner longing of the boy was to see his dad in reality and not just in a portrait daily.

The boy's desire is similar to the desire of all humanity. Could the distant God step out of the 'portrait' and step into the universe? "No one has ever seen God." (John 1:18) Children of Israel have heard his majestic voice in the mount of Sinai; know his love, discipline, character, and desire towards them through the Scripture. Other people who were not of the covenant created their own gods according to their imaginations or perceptions which resembled animals or reptiles or celestial bodies or objects of nature or human beings with extra limbs or head or eyes.

The historical Christmas is the incarnation, i.e., God becoming human to fulfill the plan of redemption for humanity. One of the important aspects of this great event is explained by Matthew, that the Son of God would be called Emmanuel - God with us. (Matthew 1:23) This is a precious truth that continues to transform the lives of individuals, families, societies and nations.

God

The Bible speaks about God who is the creator of the universe. He is an intelligent, moral, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and sovereign person who exists by Himself. He is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings as the creator, master and owner of this seen world and unseen world. The majestic God created man in his own image. When Adam sinned, he forfeited his right and privilege to be the ruler of the universe and to be in fellowship with God. The great God did not destroy the human race but looked at man with redemptive eyes.

The God of the Bible looks towards human beings with an attitude of redemption. But this redemption has to come with a price. As a righteous God, he cannot violate his own law, "The wages of sin is death" and hence provided a substitute through His Son Lord Jesus Christ who would die for the sin of the world on the cross of Calvary.

The Christmas story is amazing. Lord Jesus Christ, being sovereign Lord, was the only person born on the earth having the privilege to choose the place of his birth. And he chose a manger rather than a mansion. When he did, he reached the people who were pushed to the fringes of society. Joseph and Mary endured the plights of the refugees, orphans, pavement dwellers and marginalized in the society. Lord Jesus Christ identified with the least of all human beings.

With

“God with us” is a lovely phrase. The grammar of the sentence is beautiful. It is not a promise that ‘God will be with us’ sometime in the future. It was not a distant hope or mere aspiration or wishful thinking but, a total reality of the present.

Yes, the incarnation divides the history of mankind into two halves, one past that is Before Christ and the later after Him. History is “His” “Story”. The creator of the whole universe dwelt among human beings being born in Bethlehem, ministered in Judah, died in Jerusalem and rose from the dead to ascend to heaven from Mount Olives.

There was a sage who lived in the Himalayas completely devoted to meditation and lived a life aloof from civilization and people. One day a person asked, “Sir, why do you live away from the city. Does not the world need holy men like you?” He replied, “People are filthy, immoral, and sinful. As a holy man I cannot live with them. So, I live away from people.” Amazing! A mere human being who perceives himself to be holy considers humanity sinful and stench in his nostrils. He could not stand the evil and wickedness in the world. But, it is yet more amazing to see Lord Jesus Christ, the Most Holy Son of God coming down to live among human beings. This shows the love of God for men and women who live on this earth.

This is a spiritual reality today that God dwells in a person who accepts Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour and Lord. The creator God who visited the planet earth to complete the plan of redemption today indwells in the hearts of people who repent of their sins and believe in him.

Us

“Us” is the plural word that embraces the faith community of the Global Church. “What is man that you are mindful of, the son of man that you care for him?” (Psalm 8:4) Man was created from the ‘dust’ of the earth. Yet, God is mindful of humanity. So, he sent His Son to die for us.

Paul portrays this fact more graphically using four words. All are ‘ungodly’ (Romans 5:6) and do not naturally seek for God, or his love or salvation. The ‘Adamic’ nature in man responds to Sin and Satan more positively and enthusiastically. But, Christ came to die for these very people. People are powerless (Romans 5:6) to save themselves. So, Christ has to die to provide the way for salvation. God’s love is unconditional love. He did not wait for humanity to realize their sins, give a petition to God to provide a substitute to die and provide salvation. Christ died for humanity when they were still sinners. (Romans 5:8) Adam, by choosing to disobey, became the enemy of God’s love, care and purposes. The descendants of Adam are no better. So, Paul says that we were enemies (Romans 5: 10) and Christ died for us.

Challenge

The Christmas story reminds us that Emmanuel - God With Us. That means God’s love, grace, forgiveness, and fellowship is Available for us. The presence of God the Father, and Heaven is Accessible to us through Christ. Salvation in Christ is Affordable for us as Christ paid the price through His death.

Meditation - 14

Magnificent Love, Marvelous Light and Majestic Life.

“What is Christmas?” Is it all about Santa Claus, Cakes, Stars, Trees, Balloons, Nativity scenes, Greeting Cards...? The celebration of Christmas around the world has become a tradition in the popular culture and ritual in most churches. The significance of Christmas is lost in a maze of fun, feast and entertainment.

Incarnation

Christmas is the celebration of the historical fact that God intervened in the history of humanity to bring salvation and redemption. For that purpose Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, a small town in the nation of Israel. Christmas celebration could be meaningful only when the reason for His coming is understood, appreciated and appropriated.

Three words that grasps the essence of Christmas helps us to really gain spiritual insight into that glorious event and its impact on each one of us. They are love, light and life.

1. Magnificent Love

Christmas is the manifestation of God’s magnificent love to humanity. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”(John 3:16) God’s love was enormous and beyond human comprehension that he could send His Son Lord Jesus Christ to be born in the world in an ordinary environment. Lord Jesus Christ identified with the poorest of the poor that there was no place in the inn (hotel or hospital) that he was born in a stable. Of course, the world needs a ‘Stable’ influence, impact and empowerment. The Christmas narrative is that God demonstrated, revealed, unveiled and disclosed his unconditional love by sending His Son to die for the sins of humanity and rise from the dead. It is impossible for any parent to let his/her child die. Knowing about the danger outside, no father would send his son out of his sight. Lord Jesus Christ came into the world of danger, misery and injustice, where he would be killed by the sinful men, who are his creation.

God so loved the world populated with sinful people who could be described as ‘godless’, ‘sinners’, ‘rebels’, ‘disobedient’ and ‘children of wrath’. (Romans 5) Lord Jesus Christ loved sinful humanity, and volunteered to take the punishment, curse and destiny of sinners i.e., death. “Wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23)

God did not send an angel to atone for death. An alien person or robot was not parachuted into the earth for the atonement of sin. God sent his Son, Lord Jesus Christ to completely identify with humanity and so he was born as a child. He grew up in an ordinary town of Nazareth, died on the cross in Jerusalem and rose again to demonstrate God’s love, and power to humanity. Lord Jesus Christ was born to die, rise again and ascend to heaven so that he could bring salvation to humanity.

2. Marvelous Light

“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” (John 1:9) The first Christmas brought Light to humanity. Apostle John states that Lord Jesus Christ is the true light. It is obvious that the world has plunged into spiritual darkness because of the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The first couple's disobedience, rebellion and belief in a lie brought misery to humanity. Light is necessary to enlighten each and every person in the world. God, by sending his Son, Lord Jesus Christ, sends light to the world. Lord Jesus Christ said: "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) Simeon looking at the new born child Lord Jesus Christ said: "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"."(Luke 2:32)

This light dispels the darkness of sin, curse, and injustice in the world. If a torch light is beamed under rocks, the insects like scorpions would scurry away. In the same way, when Light of the world shines in our hearts, minds and soul, the sinful desires would be exposed and expelled. Whoever welcomes this light will be wise, enlightened and walk in the light. If not, they will continue to grope in the dark and even fall and hurt themselves.

The condition of humans is so pathetic that they are unable to recognize the great light. In darkness, if a candle light is lighted, all could recognize the light. However, the world plunged into spiritual darkness could not recognize the Great light. Hence, God in his mercy sent John the Baptist to bear witness for the light or to state: "This is the Light" (John 1:7) Today, the disciples of Lord Jesus Christ are called to be witnesses, by letting the world know that Lord Jesus is the Light of the World. Therefore, the believers of Lord Jesus Christ are called the Children of Light (Ephesians 5:8 and I Thessalonians 5:5) and given a mandate to be the light of the world. (Matthew 5:14-16)

3. Majestic Life

Light naturally brings Life. Lord Jesus Christ said: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) Of course, all living humans have physical life. However, Lord Jesus came to give eternal life of holiness, quality and to live in His presence forever. Humans are not just destined to live in this material world, die and perish. They are designed to live forever. However, each person has the right and authority to decide the kind of life S/he would like to have after death. Eternal life is a free gift to those who come to Lord Jesus Christ. After death, a disciple of Lord Jesus Christ will step into the dwelling place of God, Heaven, where a place is prepared (John 14:1-3) for him/her to live forever. Others who refuse to come to light or embrace the light would be eternally separated from God which is called a second death or spiritual death.

Life after death is not just changing into another species on this planet earth. Salvation is not getting immersed into ultimate reality and losing one's identity. The Bible states that salvation is forgiveness of sins through the Lord Jesus Christ, and eternal life as citizens of the Kingdom of God. For a disciple of Lord Jesus Christ, death is just a transition from the worldly life to heavenly life.

Challenge

Christmas is a time of reflection. Why did God take all pains and efforts to send His Son Lord Jesus Christ into this world? What response does he expect from each one of us? Christmas is the Love of God demonstrated, Light of God shines in the world and Life is eternal gifted to all those who believe in Him.

Have we experienced that Magnificent Love, Marvelous Light and Majestic life? This Christmas gives us one more opportunity to experience these.

Meditation - 15

Incarnation - Ultimate Avatar

Lord Jesus Christ is the only incarnation and not one of several avatars. Generally, it is understood or believed in some religious philosophies that God becomes man in human history whenever there is a need. The main purpose of such avatars visiting earth is to destroy sinners and uphold righteousness. However, the incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ is to save sinners. (Luke 5:32) The Bible also clearly declares that all humans have sinned, and there is no exception. (Romans 3:23) In that case all humans deserve to be killed or eliminated. Lord Jesus Christ instead came to save sinners.

Lord Jesus Christ saves sinners by dealing with the issue of Sin. Basically, sin is disobedience and rebellion against God. This 'deadly virus' of Sin has infected all humans who are born in this world.

Hence, the need is to deal with the deadly virus that was done by Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. The sting of death is sin. (I Corinthians 15: 56) That sting was defeated by the death of Lord Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 15: 54,55) The incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ identified, isolated and defeated the sting that is ruling humanity.

The incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ is once for all, as he defeated Sin and Death. (Romans 6:10) Hence, he need not come again and again as and when sin abounds. The incarnation of Lord Jesus Christ is to help sinners repent and become righteous. There is none righteous apart from those who are forgiven by the cleansing of their sin by the blood of Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1, I John 1:7)

So, incarnation is a unique, special and only event in the history of humanity. The Son of God took the form of man, to take the penalty of death on himself and rise again from the dead to defeat sin, death and Satan once and for all. Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven and sins are covered. (Psalms 32:1)

Are you cleansed by the blood of Lord Jesus Christ and forgiven?



Meditation - 16

Five needs of Humanity

One autorickshaw (three-wheeler) had graffiti painted on the back of his vehicle: “God should be born as an auto rickshaw driver; and should toil and live like me.” This slogan sums up the aspiration of humanity. Though all religions strive to understand God, human beings desire that God should understand them. In that case, God has to become a human being. Then, God can relate with human beings at the same level. Lord Jesus Christ came into this world to identify with humanity, their suffering and weakness. (Hebrews 4:15)

Prophet Isaiah foretold the birth of Lord Jesus around 700 BC. He also gave five names that are His attributes. These five names meet the five most important needs of human beings. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

1. Wonderful: Human need of hope

The first name is Wonderful which means astonishing or extraordinary. The child is extraordinary as born to the Virgin Mary and is the Son of God. His birth was announced by angels to ordinary shepherds who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy and also the Wise Men of the East got a sign of a Star. No wonder, He embraces whole humanity in His saving grace.

Wonderful also means that there is hope. There is a sense of hopelessness in this world. Postmodern lifestyle is without any anchor of hope and rudderless. A person's life could be transformed by Lord Jesus who is wonderful and performs miracles. There is no hopeless situation, including physical illness, or mental strain, or economic burden or spiritual darkness or social evil; that is beyond his capacity to transform.

2. Counsellor: Mental need of wisdom and guidance

The world today is a confusing and overwhelming place. In order to survive in this world, people need wisdom and guidance. Every day, all of us have to make decisions. Some decisions are mundane or routine; however, many are life changing and could impact people for generations. Hence, to take wise decisions, there is a need for counsel.

Lord Jesus Christ is our reliable, relevant and perfect counsellor. Human wisdom and counsel are finite, so fallible. Lord Jesus' counsel is from infinite wisdom and understanding so they are infallible. He could guide us in the paths of righteousness. (Psalm 23:3)

3. Almighty God: Moral need of strength

Counsellor provides wisdom to plan, however almighty means to provide strength to implement those plans. Lord Jesus has authority over heaven and earth. (Mathew 28:18) He bestows his power to accomplish His purposes in our lives. Paul declares that he could do all things through the strength provided by Lord Jesus Christ. (Phil 4:13)

4. Eternal Father: Physical need of Presence, Provision and Protection

Lord Jesus Christ is before and beyond time hence called the Eternal or Everlasting Father. Children play happily in a room when parents are present. They are frightened when parents are absent in the room. Lord Jesus Christ's Presence provides confidence and strength. As a father provides for their children, the Lord provides all our physical needs - including our daily bread. Certainly, a father protects children from all harm. Lord Jesus Christ protects His children from the attacks of the enemy - Satan.

5. Prince of Peace: Spiritual need of fellowship with God

Human beings have a spiritual need to be in a relationship with God. This is not possible unless human beings are reconciled with God through Lord Jesus Christ. The past sins of a person are forgiven by the vicarious death of Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, thus Peace with God becomes reality. Also, there is peace in the present in the heart and mind that the world cannot give or take away. (John 14:27) There would be peace that would reign in the Kingdom of God forever, where disciples of Lord Jesus Christ are destined to be citizens.

Challenge

The Birth of Lord Jesus Christ and the meaning of Christmas is relevant only when a person experiences the general need of hope is realized in Him; depend on his wisdom and guidance; receive moral strength to face the world and sin; enjoy His Presence, Provision and Protection; and experience Peace with God, oneself and have assurance to enter everlasting Peace in His Kingdom.



Meditation - 17

Christmas Carols and Singing Tradition of The Church

When Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, there was rejoicing in Heaven. Hence the angels sang as recorded by Luke. “And suddenly there was the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.’” (Luke 2:13-14) It is one of the greatest days in human history. God sent his only Son into the world. It was the manifestation of God’s love and grace towards human beings. The world is not a forsaken place nor humans abandoned in their own deeds (karma). Christmas is a joyous occasion for the redemption of human beings that began with the marvelous intervention of God in history.

Singing and music is a Christian tradition and a gift to all humanity. In the Bible, songs and music is given prominence. The Song of Moses and Miriam the song leader provides the celebration and joy of deliverance from slavery under Egyptians. Deborah also bursts out in song, rejoicing in the victory of Israel. Hannah sings praising God for her prayer was answered and son Samuel was born. David is another great composer, musician and singer. Psalm 23 is the most popular poem of all times around the world. The longest book in the bible is Psalms. The song of Mary is another great literary piece full of meaning.

St. Augustine introduced music in western education and worldview. He saw the scientific basis for music. The essence of music is mathematical numbers. With the biblical worldview, Western musicians assumed that the world is cosmos and not chaos or illusion (maya). First there was monophonic music like Gregory Chants, then polyphonic music. According to Vishal Mangalwadi: Christian worship laid the foundation for Western music, both religious and secular. Benedictine monks built the world’s largest pipe organ in the cathedral of Winchester, England that required seventy men and twenty-six bellows to supply wind to its four hundred pipes; which was the most advanced machine until the invention of the mechanical clock.

Christmas carols were written inspired by the heavenly choir that sang in Bethlehem. Some songs are evergreen sung for centuries around the world. Every Christmas witnesses numerous songs in various languages sung with great joy and enthusiasm around the world.

Songs teach God and Biblical truths

Songs teach people about God, his nature, majesty, traits and love for humanity. Song writers reflect on God’s word and their experiences and express that in beautiful poems, rhyme and music. Writing a song is an important awesome responsibility. Content of the song should be rich, meaningful, spiritually edifying and warm the hearts. Simply writing songs with Ha...Ha... or Ila...Ila... will not teach people biblical truths. Christian songs are not just for music or rhythm but for teaching.

Different Variety of Songs:

1. God speaking to non-believers in song: Come and taste the Lord
2. Believers speaking to fellow believers

The Christmas carol: “O come all ye faithful.” is a song addressed to fellow believers. This song invites other believers to join in worshipping the Lord. There are songs that invite other believers to join in the task of reaching the world with the gospel. Psalms 100

3. Believers speaking to non-believers Why do nations rage... Psalm 2

4. Believers to God: Songs of prayer, surrender

I surrender all, I surrender all, all to Jesus I surrender, I surrender all surrender.

Another song is: I'll be somewhere working... I have decided to follow Jesus...

5. Believers singing to their own inner person

This song is a song of soul

A good example is: Bless my Lord, Oh my soul... The song is addressed to a broken or discouraged inner person. Such songs help a person to lift up from hopelessness to eternal hope.

Christian faith is a singing faith

There are religions that do not have singing as it's tradition. Because their religion offers no hope. Christian faith gives us eternal hope.

Christian singing is also congregational singing. It is not just singers or choir just singing, it is the whole congregation that sings.

Angles inspire us to sing for His glory as Heaven is also filled with songs. We mirror worship of heaven on this earth.



Meditation - 18

Three Responses for Christmas

In India, many celebrities are considered for gods and goddesses. Even when they are alive, shrines are built for them by their devotees or fans. It is interesting that fellow human-beings could upgrade their own to a higher status of deity, similar to electing Presidents or Prime Ministers. However, Christmas is the great intervention of God in human history. In fact, God downgrades himself to become human to save humanity.

Voluntary

Even without the consent of a celebrity, he or she could be upgraded to and perceived higher status. But, it is not possible to downgrade someone without his consent, when that person is all powerful, almighty and creator. God the creator, makes a deliberate, voluntary and joyful to choice to take the form of his own creature, man so that he could redeem humanity from the Sin, Satan, Slavery and death. There is no force in heaven or earth that could compel or threaten him to become man. God's love for us made him do this magnificent sacrifice. In the gospels, the birth of Lord Jesus Christ was proclaimed, announced and it also spread from one person to the other. There were three kinds of responses: Awe and Worship; Adverse reaction and Apathy.

Wise men from the East

Matthew writes: Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose^[b] and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)

Three responses

The Wise men saw a Star and followed that to reach Jerusalem searching for the NewBorn King. These wise men were not from the Children of Israel, but from the Eastern part of the world. Mathew says that they were wise too. That means they were learned and by their search, research and study were seeking for a Saviour and the King. Their reason suggested that the King should be born in a palace. Hence they turned

towards the palace of the reigning king: Herod. Herod summoned religious leaders to find out the location of the NewBorn King. They found it effortlessly and the wise men went to Bethlehem to worship the Son of God. The wise men responded with awe and worship; king Herod became an adversary and wanted to kill the child; while the priests and scribes were apathetic, unconcerned and indifferent.

1. Apathetic religious leaders

The Wise men reached Jerusalem and created a commotion. Their unannounced and unscheduled arrival made Herod and the citizens of Jerusalem to wonder. When Herod heard that a special or unique child was born within his jurisdiction, and these wise men took all pains to visit the infant, he was troubled. That means he was worried, concerned and even paranoid. He immediately summoned the Chief priests and Scribes who were experts in the spiritual and religious issues. Apathy means indifference or lack of concern or enthusiasm. (Matthew 2:4-6) As a matter of routine or mundane query from King Herod, they gave an answer. They quoted from Prophet Micah that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. After that we do not read about them in the gospels. Most probably, they were paid for their duty and they simply returned home.

The Chief Priests and the scribes should have gone ahead of the Wise men to worship the NewBorn King. The distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is 6 miles or 7.1 kilometers. They were well versed in the Law and Prophets. In fact, they could pick up the right text from the hundreds of scroll collections. They had knowledge about God, Law, Covenant and Prophecy, but they failed to apply the knowledge by faith in the day-to-day lives. For them, these religious knowledge and training was just for survival and sustenance. For them, religion and Word of God was just ritual.

Even the presence of foreigners in Herod's court failed to provoke their interest or faith. They were totally indifferent to the religious elite or professionals of that time.

2. Adverse Political leader

King Herod was troubled when he heard the message that a King is born in his geographical jurisdiction. Herod was clever but also selfish. He was threatened by a New Born King. It was more so, because the infant could attract a delegation of diplomats from a foreign nation in the East. More than the Wise men, Herod was very particular about knowing the exact place of birth. Herod was clever enough to summon the right people to get the right answer. Without much toil and efforts he got the answer.

King Herod inquired when exactly the Star appeared from the Wise men so that he could know the time of birth. He also wanted the Wise men to come back and report to him on their visit. His intention was not to worship the NewBorn King but kill him, his rival or competitor or enemy. He was selfish and thought he would be a ruler for a long time. His political power and ambitions did not give him room to think about spiritual aspects of life. He was unrighteous and wicked, so, later he sent his soldiers to kill all the male infants below two years. (Matthew 2:16) God led Joseph and Mary to go to Egypt as refugees and thus Lord Jesus Christ was saved from the hostile attack of Herod.

3. Awe and Worship

The wise men went to Bethlehem and worshipped the NewBorn King. These wise men travelled in the ancient days, most probably in caravans of camels crossing forests, rivers, nations and deserts to worship the

Lord. Faithful seekers who were willing to sacrifice, suffer and lose to gain the eternal blessings. They also offered: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Their gifts were also symbolic their spiritual understanding and discernment. Gold denoted that Lord Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Frankincense denoted that Lord Jesus Christ is the deity, the Son of God. The myrrh symbolized the purpose of Lord Jesus Christ Incarnation; i.e. redemption through his death and resurrection. The Wise men response was awe and worship. The shepherds also responded with awe and worship when angels announced that the Saviour is born in Bethlehem. (Luke 2:1-20)

Sovereign God and superstition

Wise men and kings from the East came to worship Lord Jesus Christ. (Matthew 2:1-12) The number is assumed to be three as they gave three gifts; while other traditions think it could be 12 or even more. According to one of the traditions they were Melchor, a Persian scholar, Gaspar, king from India and Balthazar, representative of the king of Arabia.

The wise men understood the movement and position of stars. It was considered science at that time and mixed with occult practice, hence comes the word 'magic'. Before the era of telescopes, planets, stars, novae, comets, meteors were all called with a generic term 'stars'. Those astronomers/astrologists tracked the position and timing of the stars when they were first visible. "For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matt. 2:2). God in His Sovereign power and authority used the Magi's Superficial, superstitious and stupid faith to reveal His marvelous work of incarnation.

The trip could have been at least a month long. The scribes and other leaders could not walk three hours from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to worship the King, but the Magi risked their lives and traveled a huge distance to worship the King of Kings.

God uses insignificant and unlikely things and people to draw people to Himself. Let us pray that God may use us too. May all kings bow down and worship him. (Psalms 72:11)

The choice before us

Christmas reminds the love of God for humanity, the love of Lord Jesus Christ who chose to suffer humiliation and death for humanity. The world is divided into three categories of people. There would always be adversaries like Herod who desired to destroy Lord Jesus and God's plan of salvation for humanity. There are other kinds of people who are religious, pious and knowledgeable. Nevertheless, they do not go further to appropriate the Truth and live accordingly. Certainly, there are the third kind like shepherds and wise men, who processed the information and arrived at the place of awe and worship. Which group do I find myself in today? Are you a star used by God to lead people into righteousness? (Daniel 12:3)

Meditation - 19

Stars of Righteousness

We thought of hanging a few stars in our home. Recently, we have moved into this home. What is significant about hanging stars?

First, hanging stars would denote that the Christmas Celebrations have begun.

Second, it would be a guide for the Carol singers to identify our home from a distance.

Third, our neighbours would also learn that we are disciples of Lord Jesus Christ.

Four, the Star led the wise men from the East to the Newborn Saviour of the world in the city of

Bethlehem; so, we should be like that Star leading people in the right direction towards Truth and to Heaven.

Paul exhorts Christians to shine like stars holding the Word of Life. “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the Word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.” (Phil 2:14-16) Daniel foretold this several centuries ago: “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3)

Apostle Jude compares the wicked people who spread False teachings to Wandering Stars. (Jude 1:13) These people could mislead, misguide simple people in the wrong direction, enslaving them. There are too many Wandering Stars in the world today.

In the Christmas Season let us think:

Am I like the Star of Bethlehem shining for the Glory of God and leading people to righteousness?

Am I holding to the Word of Life or following Wandering Stars at our own peril?

May God help you to be a Shining Star holding the Word of Life among the crooked and depraved generation.

Meditation - 20

The Events Preceding the Coming of The King

There are many events that preceded the First coming of our Lord Jesus. During the First Christmas he came as Saviour. As a community of Christians, we wait for His coming with great eagerness. However, now he is coming as Judge of the world. There are many parallels for His Second Coming in our own times that teach us and warn us.

Jewish Nation missed the Messiah

During Lord Jesus' time the Jewish leaders and the Nation missed the Messiah. They were expecting Prophet Elijah to come as a forerunner for the Messiah. "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. (Malachi 4:5) Their interpretation and fulfilment of this prophecy was incorrect. They were obsessed with the sign of Prophet Elijah and they missed the real - Messiah. They did not understand how John the Baptist was like Elijah. "Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist." (Matthew 17:11-13) The 21st century Church also could be like the Jewish Nation and the church leaders like Jewish leaders. Let us see one example.

Mark of the Antichrist

There is a small company in the Western hemisphere that produces and sells consumer goods in a few outlets in three or four nations. It is owned by a Christian who is strong in his convictions and also elder of the local church. When some people wanted to amend the laws so that marriage could be re-defined in such a way that it contradicts the Bible; he raised his voice against it. He and his business became the immediate target of the media and other activists. The propaganda was so strong against him that the Government decided not to re-issue the business licenses unless the person publicly issued an apology. The company went into a downward spiral. This incident demonstrates how Anti-Christ is active in this world.

“It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.” (Revelation 13:16-19) Generally, people think that silicon chips would be made and inserted in the forehead or right hand of a person. While people are looking for that ‘sign’ Lord Jesus may come again.

There is a danger for Christians to miss the Lord’s coming by focussing simply on signs. One of the signs is the domination of the Antichrist. The Christian owner of the company was not compelled to receive a mark in his forehead or right hand. However, he was refused permission to sell or do business. The Anti- Christ demands mental consent (forehead) to his philosophy of life (or policies) and right hand of partnership (mark in the right hand) to his programmes and agenda. Antichrist has already attracted a number of

Christians into the system, without the trapped Christians realizing the conspiracy. “Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.” (Romans 14:22)

God’s word in wilderness

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” (Luke 3:1-2) The whole world was looking towards Tiberius Caesar - the divine - a Roman Caesars claimed to be. The political leaders were looked upon to bring deliverance and prosperity. The religious leaders also influenced the society. However, God’s word came to John who was in the wilderness. Similarly, today people are looking for God’s word from various charismatic leaders, TV evangelists, among the crowd; but God speaks through simple men and women like John the Baptist who is in the wilderness. Political leaders could promise change, but cannot bring change for good. Religious leaders could promise ‘peace’(Ezekiel 13:10)“They dress the wound of my people though it was not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say,when there is no peace.” (Jeremiah 6:14) The intellectuals give empty optimism based on assumptions. Godly servants like John the Baptist proclaim the truth as they listen to Him.

Religious leaders miss Messiah

Herod was disturbed to see the Wise Men from the East seeking the NewBorn King. He summoned the religious leaders to know where the Messiah was born. “When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied” (Matthew 2:4-5) The religious leaders were pretty quick to identify the place of birth of Messiah, but could not identify the Messiah. They did not bother to verify why the Wise Men from East were there in Jerusalem. Even their presence failed to provoke the religious leaders to seek the Messiah. They were religious without spiritual sensitivity. In the same way, many Christian leaders would be like the religious leaders who may have knowledge but do not apply that knowledge for their spiritual growth. Like the Elder son, they live in close physical proximity but lack spiritual sensitivity. (Luke 15: 28)

Prepare and purify

“All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” (I John 3:3) Anyone who has hope about His Second Coming, prepares himself. He is prepared by purifying himself for the Lord’s coming. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, half of them were not prepared. In the last moment, they were not able to buy or borrow or steal the oil. The ‘memorable moment’ became ‘miserable moment’. The Lord’s Coming would be a glorious memorable moment for those who are prepared while a miserable moment for those who are not ready. As we celebrate Christmas, we should not forget to prepare ourselves for His Second Coming.

Meditation - 21

Promise and Prophecy

Christmas is the time for celebration, worship and witness. The birth of Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, the city of David was not an accident.

Plan

Christmas was not an accident or an after-thought. In fact, Paul states that God chose those who would believe in him before the foundation of the world. (Ephesians 1:4) God knew about his creation, humans, free will, and also the Fall. Therefore, he planned the salvation for the fallen humanity by sending His Son Lord Jesus Christ into the world. Though the first Christmas event seems as though there was no preparation for there was no place in the Inn and no medical care for the delivery of the child for Mary. The Plan of Salvation is eternal and invisible.

Proactive intervention: Policy

Caesar Augustus passed a law that all citizens should be registered in their hometown. Hence Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem to be registered. (Luke 2:4-7) “The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.” (Proverbs 21:1) God is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As the Sovereign ruler, he overrules all human actions. Thus, he proactively intervenes in the history of humanity. A policy decision could be taken according to the context and need of the government. However, these actions facilitate the fulfillment of God’s ultimate plan and purpose. When Caesar Augustus passed a decree, he was doing that with his knowledge, information and need. However, God turned to the same policy decision to bring his prophecy to pass. According to Micah the prophet, Lord Jesus would be born in the city of Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2) The policy decision of the Government compelled Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem. Most probably Joseph and Mary were not conscious that they were fulfilling the prophecy of Micah by journeying to Bethlehem. God’s timing was perfect. Mary gave birth to Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem.

Purpose

The purpose of God’s plan is to save humanity. The Christmas event is the birth of the Saviour to die on the cross of Calvary to redeem sinners. The First Christmas saw the angelic choir sing; however, Christmas is not about choir, hymns, carols, and singing. The First Christmas saw the Wise men coming from the East and giving gifts to the NewBorn King. The wise men and shepherds worshiped Lord Jesus Christ; however, Christmas is not just paying homage or respect to the Son of God. Though choir, carols, worship and gifts were part of the First Christmas, the purpose was the Gift of Saviour for the rebellious, perishing and disobedient humanity.

Prophecy

In simple terms, prophecies are like pieces of a puzzle that makes a master picture. Each piece is unique and has a critical place in the work of art. In the same way prophecies regarding the Messiah are critical pieces provided by the Lord to understand the work of God. Hence, several prophecies that were told by the Old

Testament saints and prophets were fulfilled during the First Christmas. One of the prominent prophecies was foretold by Isaiah nearly seven hundred years ago, that a virgin will give birth to a son. (Isaiah 7:14) Christmas is the celebration of the birth of the Son of God, by Virgin Mary. Another prophecy was that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2)

Promise

When the Lord confronted the first couple of their sin of disobedience in the Garden of Eden, He also promised a redeemer who will deliver humanity from Sin. (Genesis 3:15) The righteous and devout Simeon who was waiting for the consolation of Israel, spoke seeing infant Lord Jesus Christ stating the Messiah is glory for Israel and light to the whole world (Gentiles). (Luke 2: 26-30)

Philosophy and Challenge

When we try to understand the world, events, happenings, people and nations without the Paradigm of God's Plan, Proactive intervention, Purpose, Prophecy and Promise, it is called Philosophy. Empty philosophy is comfortable with Santa Claus and not the Empty tomb. For disciples, Christmas is always a time for excitement, wonder, worship, celebration, sharing and caring.



Meditation - 22

Responsible Response of the Shepherds

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:1-20)

The birth of Lord Jesus Christ changed the history of humanity. The insignificant, non-dramatic, and unnoticed event; God taking human form demonstrates God's love for humanity. The political power (Romans and Herod); religious power (Judaism - priests, scribes); just ignored or tried to obstruct the birth of the King. But the event certainly brings joy, peace and love to those who believe.

God is Sovereign

God is the sovereign ruler of the whole world. He is in control of all political, social, and economic contexts of the whole world. The stage was set for the Son of God, Jesus Christ to be born in the world. According to prophecy, the Messiah should be born in Bethlehem. So, Joseph and Mary should go to Bethlehem to fulfill their legal obligation but above that they were fulfilling the prophecy of Prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register." (Luke 2:1-3) Joseph's lineage of King David; as promised to Israelites that the Messiah would be 'Son of David'; is also established as Joseph goes to the city of David (Luke 2:4).

The Roman Emperor's order sends people in search of their ancestral roots, where they belong. They tried to discover their family lineage. Unfortunately, people do not search for their spiritual roots, their relationship with their creator. But here the creator comes in search of humanity. All religions attempt to search for God, but Lord Jesus Christ came in search of people.

No place in the Inn

The Census procedure made people travel back to their hometowns. So, there was heavy rush in Bethlehem, a historical city. When Joseph and Mary reached the town, the Inns were overflowing with people. They were forced to share the Holy night with cattle, as there was no place in the Inn (Luke 2:7). The most significant event in the history of mankind happened in an insignificant - dirty, smelly and unhygienic place.

The birth of Jesus in the extension or outhouse of the Inn is to remind us that we are temporary residents of this world. The world is not a permanent place for human beings as they are created for eternity. (Eccl 3:11) Human life is short and that life could have meaning, when we have a relationship with the Creator and fulfill His purpose.

Angel's Visit

Nobody is out of the way of Divine visits or interventions. God loves to communicate with people. None is insignificant for God to communicate with. The socially lowly placed, marginalized shepherds were specially chosen by God for the Angelic visit.

Gideon received the Angel of God when he was winnowing in his field. Lord Jesus called the disciples who were busy with their boats and nets. Matthew got the visit of Lord Jesus in his tax collecting office. God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, when he was shepherding the sheep. God would communicate with us in our own contexts.

Visit in the night

The timing of the visit was night. Yes, when people normally sleep, there are few who work hard. Like drivers of vehicles like train or bus or trucks or airplanes; nurses who care for sick; security personnel who guard national borders; and those who work in BPOs or Call centers; the shepherds were guarding the sheep in the night. These people are not out of the purview of God. Angels did not wake up those who slept well in their mansions, but visited those who were in the open fields with open minds. For God all time is auspicious and he communicates 24/7.

Extraordinary news to ordinary people

The visiting angel came with a Great and Good news. Ordinary people received extraordinary news.

1. All the people: The message is a universal message relevant to the whole of humanity. It was not just for an ethnic community or race or a nation or a region. There is no privileged class or caste. The Messiah of the Jews is the Saviour of the Whole world; who was born to die for all humanity and rise again from death.

2. Do not fear: For simple minded shepherds the message dispels fear. But Herod was terrified as he thought the Messiah was his competitor. Fear has gripped people of all ages and in all places. Fear of health, wealth, job, future, terrorism, economic recession ...the list is endless. But Lord Jesus dispels all fear.

3. Great Joy - Creator has come to save the creature. Shepherd has come to seek the sheep. The message is of restoration, reconciliation and homecoming for all those who believe. Christmas gives hope to humanity; hence it brings great joy.

4. Today - The message is not future fulfillment or expectation. It was and is relevant and a reality today. The presence of the Kingdom of God in the person and ministry of Jesus.



Meditation - 23

No Place in the Inn

Humanity had perpetually rejected God who created, sustained and loved them. It was highlighted in Bethlehem when Joseph and Mary reached there. (Luke 2:7) Joseph did not have room booking apps in his smart phone to reserve a place in advance in a hotel or hospital or he simply forgot?

Hospitality to strangers was a noble virtue of the ancient days. (Judges 19:20) Job declared that he did not allow any stranger to stay on the street, his home was always open. (Job 31:32) Strangely, this hospitality was missing that day in the city of David's, Bethlehem.

Certainly, Herod would not have given room in his palace. How can a Roman elite allow a commoner (though descendant of King David) to claim to be a king?

In Nazareth, he was rejected and could have been killed. (Luke 4:14-30) He was rejected in his hometown. He could not do many miracles among them because of their unbelief. (Mark 6:2-5) Lord Jesus condemned Capernaum because of his unbelief. (Matthew 11:24) "And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20) When Lord healed the demon-possessed man, the people were not delighted. In fact, they asked him to 'get out'. "Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So, he got into the boat and returned." (Luke 8:37)

Even today the situation is not different. Which country would elect Lord Jesus as President? Will any university allot a chair like that allotted for Aristotle or Socrates or others? Which multinational corporation accepts him as director?

Blessed are millions who have opened their heart to Lord Jesus Christ. Have you opened your mind and heart to Lord Jesus?

No place in the Inn

No place in Thoughts

No place in homes

No place in workplace

No place in market

No place in media

No place in schools

No place in colleges

No place in public halls

No place in churches

Come Lord this Christmas and Reign in my Heart, Mind and Life

Meditation - 24

Wonder, Worship and Witness

Christmas season is one of the greatest celebrations on the planet earth. It is a celebration around the world in various countries, cultures, languages, and races. Sadly, a majority of the world population celebrates a 'secular Christmas'; where Lord Jesus Christ is not the reason or center. For children Santa Claus is the center of attraction. For environmentalists, trees are the center of attraction. For gluttons, cake and goodies are the major aspect for Christmas. For musicians the carol is the thrilling aspect of Christmas. For young adventurous people, carol rounds in the cold night is 'cool'. Let me share what I think of Christmas. I would sum it up in three words: Wonder, Worship and Witness.

It is WONDER

I am awestruck to learn that God the Father sent His Son Jesus Christ to be born in an insignificant place-manger, in a cowshed, in a small town called Bethlehem (Luke 2:12). God could have planned it well, allowing the incarnation to happen in some luxurious palace, in a great city. But the place was deliberately chosen so that even the marginalized humanity would be comfortable to come to the Saviour. A luxurious place would have turned off many poor and under-privileged people.

Mary (Luke 1:29) and Joseph wondered too, how they were chosen. A teenage girl became the vehicle of incarnation. A Not well educated, poor girl was chosen. I also wonder how I was chosen to become a child of God. Do I deserve it? His grace compelled the Son of God to be born in Bethlehem. Christians are from all the spectrum, from least to greatest. Foolish by world standards but wise by God's standards (I Cor 1:20-22).

For shepherds, it was a wonder to see an angel delivering a great message (Luke 2:10,11). Shepherds were considered as low in the social hierarchy and their profession was not highly rated. God visits people irrespective of their social or economic or political status. God intervened when they were doing their secular profession. He speaks to us in our own work contexts. God spoke when the shepherds were doing their night shift. Society forgets those who serve at night: watchmen, security personnel, drivers of trucks, trains, aeroplanes etc., nurses, doctors, BPO employees...etc.

I get my self-worth by His love that He came in search of me.

Call for WORSHIP

The response to Christmas or the birth of Christ is worship. The shepherds heard the message from the angel. They discussed among themselves and said, 'let us go' (Luke 2:15). They went and worshiped him. The Angel had said the child is: the Saviour, the Christ and the Lord (Luke 2:11). The child was a one-day old baby but Son of God, Lamb of God who will die on the cross of Calvary for the sin of humanity and rise again. So, He is the Saviour. The Jews were looking for the Messiah - the anointed one. In the Old Testament priests, prophets and kings were anointed. But, here is the Messiah who is greater than

priests or prophets or kings. As creator God, the Son of God is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the sovereign ruler of the universe. When we worship we acknowledge his sovereignty over our lives. The Wise men from the East also worshiped the newborn king (Matthew 2:1).

Christmas is a call for me to acknowledge His Lordship and worship him. That means my whole life becomes worship. Whether I eat or drink, I have to do it for the Glory of God.

Worship is my life priority and lifestyle.

Mandate to WITNESS

After the shepherds worshiped, they spread the word (Luke 2:17). People, who heard their testimony, were amazed (Luke 2:18). It was a spontaneous reaction to their Christmas experience. They were not trained or not motivated by reward, but they responded enthusiastically by spreading the word. The Christmas message of joy and peace was not just for the small audience of shepherds but for the whole of humanity. So, they should not keep it to themselves, they will explode the message. That is what they did precisely. I have my job description, to be a witness and to make disciples of all nations. I am not supposed to keep silent. I cannot demarcate boundaries, for the message has to break all cultural, national, class, race, gender, race, age, economic, social barriers and spread the whole world. I have to become a channel of that blessing. Witnessing is my only life purpose.

Challenge

This Christmas makes me wonder again and again to understand how God loves me. It demands re-organization of my life - a lifestyle of worship. Christmas gives me a mandate to witness and take the gospel to the uttermost part of this earth.



Meditation - 25

Christmas - Tradition or Reflection

Traditions are good as well as bad. Some traditions have a definite origin and fulfil a certain need in certain contexts. There is an interesting Indian story. A guru used to teach his disciples sitting under a tree every morning. A black cat came to the place, jumped around and distracted the discourse of the guru. The guru got angry and asked his disciples to catch the cat and tie it to a tree trunk. It became a day event. The black cat was tied to the tree and released after the guru finished his discourse. It happened for many years. One day the guru died. A new guru took over and wanted to give his inauguration speech.

He sat on the previous guru's seat. Before starting his discourse, he looked up and saw the black cat missing. "Where is the black cat?" The disciples said that the black cat is also dead. Guru shouted angrily: "Fools. Do you not realize, I cannot deliver a lecture if the black cat is not tied to the tree? Run, catch one, and tie it."

The black cat was tied, so that it would not disturb the discourse of the guru. It was a good practice. However, when the cat died, the practices should have been abandoned. But the new guru did not understand the history or context, and ordered the cat to be tied as a tradition. Many traditions have such interesting origins and should have been long abandoned but continue to this day in local communities, societies, nations, culture and religions.

Christmas - Tradition or a tool for teaching/evangelism?

A nativity scene, Christmas tree, hanging stars, placing gifts, exchanging cards, distributing cakes...are some traditions followed by a majority of Christians. These began many centuries ago. Only oral communication was the predominant method of communication. Visual aids for communication were not cheap and not readily available. How could Christian parents teach children and the local Church teach the community about the most sacred and significant truth of Incarnation? There were some artists or gifted people who could create visual aids. Maybe they got the clue from the Passover, where Israelites explained what God did for them in the feast. The whole feast was the enactment of Passover that happened several centuries ago, led by Moses. With remarkable progress in technology and communication tools, our children could see YouTube and televisions. Several centuries ago, the nativity scene was the only visual communication of the gospel.

The nativity scene, tree and stars were marvellous tools to teach children the truth of incarnation. When we were missionaries in North India, word quickly spread that we decorated a nativity scene and neighbours would just drop in to see. My wife and I used this as an opportunity to explain the truth of incarnation, and how Lord Jesus came to save us from our sins. We also gave them a New Testament. It became an opportunity to share with people. The people used to ask about each and every thing that is displayed to know the meaning.

Date of Christmas?

There are people who argue that 25 December is the exact date of Lord Jesus' birth. They may be true. Christmas is not about the date, but about the love of God that was demonstrated by sending His Son to the

world. That should be celebrated every day of the year. For right or wrong reasons, 25 December is the date fixed by some leaders in the past and has been followed for many years. Again, this day gives us an opportunity to reflect on the Advent of Lord Jesus Christ. We generally say: "We know for sure Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem. We are not sure of the date, but we celebrate the fact not the date during the Christmas season." In India, many children do not know their date of birth as their parents are ignorant and illiterate. When they go to school, the teacher may enter a date arbitrarily and that date becomes the date of birth of that child. He has to live with it throughout his life as his date of birth is a mystery. In the same way, the date of birth of Lord Jesus Christ is not known, but that does not minimize the truth of his birth and significance of incarnation.

Christmas Carols

This is another tradition that brings cheer to many and ruffles the feathers of some. The angelic choir sang, rejoicing at the birth of the Saviour as recorded in Luke's gospel. Today, his faithful people like to sing to remember and reflect on that great event. Carol rounds were again a wonderful tool for sharing the gospel. When we were in Haryana, we used to go to villages to sing in the homes of the believers and they used to invite relatives and neighbours. That gave us a tremendous opportunity to share the love of Lord Jesus Christ. However, in some places this is used for raising funds from among Christians which is not right and resented.

Santa Claus?

While we were in Chandigarh, one secular club invited us to their gathering to share about Santa Claus and Christmas and also to come with the dress of Santa Claus. I have never worn Santa Claus apparel before or after that event. I took that as an opportunity and challenge to share the love of Lord Jesus Christ. I said that: Christmas is often equated with gifts. Truly, Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God is the greatest (indescribable) gift given by God to humanity. After explaining that, I said Santa Claus was Saint Nicholas who lived in Europe, who chose poor people and kids and dropped gifts for those families in the night.

Unfortunately, the focus has changed from sharing and giving to receiving and getting. Our children could be taught to sacrifice and prepare a gift and place it under the tree in homes that could be shared with a friend who is poor, marginalized and deprived. Instead of expecting, they could be taught to give and enjoy the joy of giving.

Challenge

Instead of throwing the baby with the bathwater, let us learn to look with a redemptive attitude. The whole Advent or Christmas season provides us an opportunity to reflect God's amazing love and wisely share this joy and hope with others.

Meditation - 26

Indifferent Innkeeper?

Inn is known as the “resting place for the night”. During the Old Testament times, hospitality was considered a religious duty. But, inns or modern versions of hotels were not available in those bygone days. However, during the time of Jesus Christ, inns became a common stopping place for the business caravans that crossed desert lands to reach various cities with goods for merchandise.

Orphan in his own hometown

“And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7) Joseph and Mary could not find a place in Bethlehem.

Firstly, Joseph belonged to the city of David, Bethlehem (Luke 2:4) but was an orphan or refugee or uprooted in his hometown. The plight of refugees/migrants today was experienced by Joseph and Mary in the first century.

Secondly, The people of the town did do the righteous thing of providing shelter for the travelers. The children of Israel began to be a community with commercial preferences rather than sacred religious duty.

Thirdly, The young couple did not have enough resources to hire a place. It was most probably beyond their reach. The Innkeeper gave them only the stable that was within their budget.

Innkeeper was not alert

The innkeeper was immersed in his routine duties. He did not anticipate divine intervention neither in his work nor in this world. Hence, he was not alert to opportunities that God might have offered in his life. His paradigm was work, earn, enjoy and sleep. So his mind was not open for God’s interventions or God’s purposes in his life. God normally does not interfere in supernatural ways. He likes to interact with us in our own routine context. The risen Lord interacted with the disciples on the road of Emmaus in a casual and normal way (Luke 24:13-35). He also met Peter on the shore of Galilee (Luke 5).

The innkeeper left a golden opportunity to serve the incarnate Jesus Christ. He missed it miserably as his spiritual senses were blunted either by ignorance or love for ‘making while the sun shines’.

The Innkeeper did not show spiritual inclination

There was a great expectation and aspiration in the minds of Jews during the time of Jesus’ birth. They were under the bondage of the Roman Empire. People were seeking deliverance, in fact, looking for a Messiah who would save them from the yoke and bondage of Romans. There was both a political aspiration for a King like David and a spiritual aspiration for a Messiah. Simon was waiting to see the Messiah with his own eyes and Anna was fasting and praying in the temple of Jerusalem. Several individuals were leading rebel movements, misunderstood by common people as Messianic movement. But, all these did not influence the innkeeper. His commercial interests dulled his spiritual aspiration. He failed to play a key role in the historical event.

Did the Innkeeper do his best?

From his own perspective he could have done his best. However, from God's perspective he did not do the best. The couple in great need should have been his priority. (Some auto-rickshaw drivers in India do not charge for taking pregnant women to hospital.) But he just gave permission for them to use a stable where the Son of God took abode with the animals. "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:11) Christ came for human salvation and the human beings including the innkeeper rejected him and refused to yield a place for him. Good that the animals did not reject him.

In our life we come across several people who need help. Are we doing our best to help them? Today, it is their turn to be in need but tomorrow it may be ours. A small help can change the destiny of a person or society or city or a nation. Rs. 200 may help a student to complete her graduation; Rs.1000 may help a street vendor to do a small business. Small and insignificant amounts for middle class Christians; but life transforming resources or investments for the poor.

Innkeeper's name not recorded

The innkeeper's name was not recorded in the Bible. When the angels gave information about the birth of Jesus, they simply announced that Christ was born in a manger (Luke 2:10-12). The inn could have become world famous but it did not. When an angel appeared to Cornelius, the angel said that Peter was staying with Simon the tanner (Acts 10:6). Similarly, the angels could have announced the name of the innkeeper or the name of his inn.

Challenge

Even today human hearts are overcrowded. There is still no room in many hearts of men for Lord Jesus. Let us not miss the opportunities God sends us like the innkeeper but do the best possible for all people.

Is there any room and priority for the Kingdom agenda in our hearts?



Meditation - 27

Insightful Simeon

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2: 25-35)

Simeon is an important personality in the First Christmas event. Luke has carefully documented the visit of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to the Jerusalem temple. Insightful Simeon is an inspiration to us even today.

Righteous and Devout

Simeon is described as righteous and devout. Righteousness is a word used in the Bible for a person who loves justice, does what is right and speaks truth. When a person is described as righteous; it means that the person had an impeccable reputation in the community. Simeon was seen as a righteous person in the community and was also a devout Jew who frequented the Temple regularly. Simeon was devoted to studying the scripture, praying and having fellowship with fellow Jews in the Temple. His personal life, spiritual life and social life were exemplary.

Insightful about Prophecy and Past

Simeon was waiting for the 'Consolation of Israel' - that is the coming of the Messiah. He had keen insights about the prophecies regarding the Messiah. In fact, he was a student of the Word of God. His search and study helped him to have insight that the Messiah would be born during his lifetime. Unlike the Priests and Scribes, who had scholarly knowledge about the birth of Messiah in the town of Bethlehem (Matthew 2: 3-6) and did not bother to act on that knowledge; Simeon was diligently seeking the fulfillment of the prophecy of the coming of Messiah.

Insightful of God's work in the present

Simeon was a spiritual man led by the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:27). Simeon did not stay in the Temple of Jerusalem permanently inspecting every child that was brought there to determine who would be the Messiah. Unfortunately, today there are many who are seeing for signs of the Second Coming in each and every happening in the world. But Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit, who came to the Jerusalem

Temple just at the right moment when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus. Simeon took the baby Jesus, blessed the Lord, thanked the Lord for fulfilling his promise and prophesied to Mary also.

Insightful about Future

Simeon was a true man of God. He spoke of the Global plan of God, the plan for the nation of Israel and the personal life of Mary. Lord Jesus Christ has come to the world to be Light to Gentiles. Adam and Eve descended the whole world into spiritual darkness. Now, Christmas is the spiritual dawn for all of humanity. The Son of God, the Light of the World has come to lead people out of darkness. The Good News would spread as light in all nooks and corners of the world.

Israel, the chosen nation of God will see the Glory as the Son of God chose to be born as a Jew. Jesus, the Son of David is Greater than David and Greater than the Temple. However, Israelites failed to understand that their Glory was not the Jerusalem Temple, but the Word who became flesh. (John 1:14) Mary will also have to go through pain and suffering - a sword would pierce her soul. Being the holy vehicle to bring the Son of God into the world was not an easy or simple task. Mary had to go through intense suffering throughout her life.

Challenge

Simeon is an inspiration and challenge to us. We ought to be righteous and devout like Simeon. He was well instructed in the Word of God. Inspired by the Holy Spirit he went to the Jerusalem Temple at the right time. Simeon was able to interpret the prophecy precisely about the World, the Nation of Israel and also Mary. May God help us to be insightful in the Word, guidance of the Spirit, and interpreting Word for the World.



Meditation - 28

The World Needs the 'Stable'

God's most significant intervention in the history of humanity is incarnation. It happened in a simple, humble, and unadvertised atmosphere. Amazingly, the birth of Lord Jesus was in an unhygienic place, wrapped in swaddling clothes, without basic facilities. He was placed on the hay in the fodder trough, manger. The World today needs the influence or touch of the 'Stable' more than any time in the history of the world.

Uncertainty to hope

We are in unstable, uncertain and volatile times. The future seems dark, dangerous and disoriented. Christmas message is hope. Without hope, there is no stable present.

Moral relativism to convictions

Morality has been degraded to individual subjective preferences and choices. More and more young people are confused and are going astray. The birth of Lord Jesus Christ, brings the Law, Love and Grace personified. There is no ambiguity but firm and stable moral and righteous convictions.

Fear to Faith

The shepherds were terrified to see the angels appear. The message of the angel was assurance that helped them to move from fear to faith. They went to Bethlehem to express their faith in worship. In the world of fear, faith is the anchor that provides stability - the marvelous result of the: Stable.

Stress to Joy

The 'Stable' is a picture of joy, humility and simplicity. The Creator of the world chose a stable instead of a palace. Contentment in the barest minimum is the greatest joy. Today, the world dominated by consumerism is stressed out. Christmas reminds us that stability and joy does not come from the abundance of riches or gadgets.

May the 'STABLE' bring stable transformation in my life.

We wish you a STABLE Christmas and a STABLE New Year

Meditation - 29

Cowshed not a Palace

An Afghan woman delivered a baby on an aircraft. She was a refugee who was being evacuated. (BBC 22 August 2021) If an aircraft is a strange place to deliver a baby. A manger was also an unusual place for Mary to deliver her son, Lord Jesus Christ. Lord Jesus Christ was born in a manger in Bethlehem and wrapped in swaddling clothes. (Luke 2:12)

1) Humility

God becoming human, or incarnation is 'stepping down.' Second person of the Trinity, Lord Jesus Christ set aside His glory, throne, authority, power, majesty to take the form of man to redeem humanity. As Sovereign God, he chose humble manger to demonstrate that His mission is that of a 'servant' to serve humanity. A servant need not be born in a palace.

2) Law and Grace

A palace is where the king dwells and sometimes holds his court. The King is generally the Law giver, also dispenses justice and could choose to show mercy. However, Lord Jesus came as a personification of grace and truth. (John 1:14) "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." (II Corinthians 8:9)

3) Access to all

The Palace is a formidable, majestic place, full of pomp and show. In contrast, manger is a simple humble place. No palace gates to overwhelm seekers. No guards to stop seekers coming to see the King. No hindrance for humble folk like shepherds or the wise people from the East. Even in the Temple, there was limited access, especially in the Most Holy Place.

4) Spiritual symbolism

Animals go to the manger for food, nourishment, and protection. They have freedom inside the manger. The Lord Jesus in the manger is the Bread of Life for humanity, the Bread that came down from heaven. (John 6:35,51) Those who need spiritual food and protection can always get inside and receive salvation. The Least, the Lost and the Last can have free access to Salvation

Do I rejoice with the Saviour born in manger?

Meditation - 30

Santa Claus Declared Dead

One pastor was worried. Children in his congregation were more interested in the mysterious visit of Santa Claus and giving gifts. For most children, Christmas was receiving gifts from Santa Claus. A purposeful tradition has become a meaningless superstition.

Origin of Tradition

Nicholas was a famous bishop of Myra (now Demre) in Lycia. He was generous in giving to the poor. One of the famous stories is that he gave generous gift that helped three daughters of a poor pious Christian so that they were not pushed into prostitution. He was well known as a bearded bishop in Greece, Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, Germany and Czech Republic. The tradition became prominent in the West as Santa Claus with a pot belly, red dress, snow white beard riding a reindeer sleigh and bringing gifts to children.

Commercial interests

With commercial interests, market forces promoted this idea by producing numerous products. Christmas cards, stars, trees, nativity scene dolls, Santa Claus images...etc. Christmas season brought huge revenues.

Misleading children

Children believed this concept and prayed for gifts they wanted: toys or dress. Parents, knowing their desire would provide the gift stating it was from Santa Claus. Parents would hang stockings as children see. After children go to sleep, they fill it with gifts. This was perpetuated from generation to generation and Santa Claus achieved a cultic status.

Culture

Soon it became part of Western Culture. Governments, social organizations, market complexes...installed a Christmas tree, a portrait or puppet of Santa Claus with balloons, bells, stars, nativity scenes during that season. Christmas became just a cultural expression.

Innovative pastor

The church became overwhelmed by tradition, culture and market forces. Sadly, the reason for the season, the birth of Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, became obscured. Hence the pastor created a Christmas play in which Santa Claus was dead and buried and informed the children, he will not come anymore. The whole congregation decided to focus on the great truth of incarnation instead of the peripheral aspects of celebration.

Do I celebrate the birth of Lord Jesus Christ without distraction?

Meditation - 31

Genealogy of Lord Jesus Christ

One person started reading the first chapter of the gospel of Matthew. He was astonished to see so many names listed. Only a great man could have that kind of genealogy. That made him read further and came to know Lord Jesus Christ as his personal saviour. For many reading Matthew, the first chapter is a challenge with so many names. In fact, the names of forty-two men and five women are mentioned. (Matthew 1: 1-25) The five women who are named are outliers in their life and achievement. They belonged to five different periods of history: Tamar, before slavery in Egypt; Rahab, as they possessed the Promised Land, Ruth, time of Judges, Bathsheba, era of Kings and Mary, in the period of silence.

1) Tamar

She was a seeker of justice, as her rights were ignored. Tamar is a Canaanite woman married to Er, Judah's first son. He died without a son. Levirate Law states the brothers should marry the widow to carry on the dead man's name. Second son Onan also dies and Judah refuses to give her the third son Shelah. Tamar dressed as a prostitute and slept with Judah and got his seal, chord and staff as pledge. (Genesis 38) She becomes an ancestor of Lord Jesus 28 generations later.

2) Rahab

Rahab invited the spies sent by Joshua to Jericho, protected them and guided them. A woman of faith, who opened the door for possession of the Promised Land.

3) Ruth

A great inspiration for faith, service and sacrifice. She left her nation to follow Naomi, her mother-in-law, to Israel from Moab.

4) Bathsheba

A victim of deception, ultimately prevailed. Her son Solomon built the Temple which David was forbidden as he had shed a lot of blood in many wars.

5) Mary

She was an unlikely teenager from a poor family. Archangel Gabriel appeared to her and she would conceive through the Holy Spirit. (Luke 1:26-38) She could have been stoned, thrown into slavery, or carry stigma all her life.

Each woman had unusual, unexpected and improper situations. Lord was not ashamed of his human ancestors.

Do I celebrate the truth, God became flesh?

Meditation - 32

Mind of Christ

Paul describes only three aspects of the mind of Christ that helps us to understand Christmas. (Philippians 2: 6-8)

1) Form of God

He is God but did not want to grasp or hang on to be in the status of equal to God, the second person of Trinity. The Lord Jesus is the self-existing God, and not an evolved being who became God. He was willing to set aside the power, authority, glory and throne for a time to complete His task of redemption.

2) Emptied

The Lord Jesus emptied Himself to become a Servant as described by Isaiah, that of a suffering servant. (Isaiah 53) Prophets, priests and kings were all servants of God. These positions or offices have some status in the society. Yes, servants of God are many times treated like demi-gods. The Lord Jesus emptied further and was human, which means humanity was added to him. That means he became an incarnation like an ordinary human, without any aura or glory or extraordinary power. Ancient kings could disguise themselves as peasants and try to be with common citizens, in disguise, the king does not cease to be a king, so is the Lord Jesus. In Bethlehem, he was an infant, vulnerable and could have been killed by Herod. The soldiers took great joy in beating, spitting, and also plucking his beard. Third, Paul writes he was in likeness or similar to humans, because of limitations, imperfect environment, temptations, needing rest, sleep and food.

3) Humbled

Paul goes further to state that as though emptying was not enough, Lord humbled himself to be obedient. Lord was obedient to the Father as Isaac was obedient to his father Abraham. The cost of obedience was too high. The Lord Jesus had to pay with His life and go through death that were ordained because of the Fall of humans. In fact, it was not an ordinary death, but a violent death in the history of humanity. It was a cruel, shameful and gory death on the cross of Calvary. His obedience was voluntary, willing, joyful, and purposeful.

Do I have the mind of Christ?

Meditation - 33

The Lord Humbled Himself

Lord Jesus becoming man to redeem humanity is beyond human comprehension. That he had choices and options but chose humility and simplicity. The Lord Jesus humbled Himself. (Philippians 2:8)

1) Not angel, human: The Lord Jesus chose to become a man. Of course, man had more limitations than angels. In God's plan it was essential that the Son of God should become human.

2) Birth, unhygienic place: When He was born the Roman Empire was reigning the world in glory. He could have chosen to be born in the Roman palace. He chose Bethlehem an insignificant city and that too a cowshed, an unhygienic place for childbirth.

3) Child, Not adult: Adam was created as an adult, not as a baby. Could he have been parachuted into the world as an adult? The Lord chose to be born as a dependent, vulnerable, and weak child.

4) Poor Parents: The Lord could have chosen a rich family in Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary were so poor that they could only offer birds as offerings in the Temple of Jerusalem when Lord Jesus was born. (Luke 2:24)

5) Trained as a Carpenter: The Lord Jesus was trained as a carpenter, a blue-collared job. He spent probably 18 years doing that job from the age of 12 to 30.

6) Simple life: Lord lived with the twelve disciples as a community. It was not in a mansion, in a simple place. He did not have a place to lay his head. (Matthew 8:20)

7) Human struggles: The Lord Jesus went through human struggles like hunger, thirst, tiredness and had to take rest like sleep.

8) Temptations: The Lord was allowed to go through temptations by Satan. (Matthew 4) He was tempted in every way like any other human. (Hebrews 4:15)

9) Spiritual agony: The Lord Jesus went through the spiritual turmoil in the Garden of Gethsemane pleading for the removal of the cup of God's wrath. (Luke 26:36-56) His cry to the Father of being left alone was great spiritual agony. (Matthew 27:46)

10) Death: His death was humiliation by his own creation, cursed, brutal and undeserved. Should we not humble ourselves like him?

Meditation - 34

The Baby is Born

Babies are born every day around the world. However, this baby is different. The shepherds heard from the angels that a 'baby' was born in Bethlehem. E. Stanley Jones wrote how the world would have anticipated in his book 'Victorious Living.' India could have said: There you shall find a mystic light. China would have said: You shall find a correct code of morality. Greece would have said: You shall find a philosophical conception. God's message: There is a babe - an embodied person, born in Bethlehem. (Luke 2:11,12) World religious leaders, seekers of truth and philosophers were looking for a concept or an idea or code for morality or a mystic light. However, God sent His son to indwell or pitch a tabernacle among humans. For the wise of the world this was inconceivable or illogical. The Lord came into this world revealing 'Grace and Truth'.

1) Powerless

A newborn baby is a powerless being. Life could be snuffed out easily. Indeed, Herod wanted to kill Infant Jesus. Unhygienic manger, dirty environment and uncomfortable swaddling clothes could have killed the baby. The Messiah was born as a 'vulnerable' baby, not in the King's palace. The Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth becomes a baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

2) Dependent

A baby is most dependent of all creation. The Lord Jesus chose to be born as a dependent on Mary, Joseph and others. A baby cannot do anything by himself: feed or drink or walk... Sovereign Almighty God limited Himself to be a human, that too a child to be cared for by humans.

3) Identification

By the birth in Bethlehem Lord Jesus identified Himself with humanity, universal humanity and with the least of humanity - a baby. The Lord was not parachuted from heaven as a full-grown human being but was born as a baby in Bethlehem.

This birth transformed the whole world, with the gospel of love, grace and power. Millions received salvation, hope, dignity, wisdom and grace.

Meditation - 35

Heavenly Choir

Singing, songs and music are important for Christian life. The largest book in the bible is Psalms. There are hit songs in the bible like 'Song of Moses', 'Song of Deborah', 'Song of Solomon,' 'Song of Lamb'...etc. St. Augustine introduced music in the Western Worldview. The essence of Music is mathematical numbers. The Lord Jesus Christ sang with his disciples. (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) Probably they sang Psalms 114-118.

Luke describes the heavenly choir singing rejoicing when the Lord Jesus Christ was born. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14)

1) Glory to God

Singing is worship and giving glory to God. Admiring His love, adoring His majesty, acclaiming His victory and applauding His grace; is worship. Angelic choirs were giving glory and honour to God in the highest, heavenlies.

2) Joy and celebration

In the world, there is joy and celebration because of 'peace' the prince of peace brings. The birth of the Messiah is the beginning of a new era, where peace between God and sinful humanity is established through death, burial and resurrection. The aspiration of all humanity for salvation, reconciliation with God and peace is granted and gifted through the Lord Jesus Christ.

3) Celebration

In Christian worldview, worship is celebration, even fasting is worship. Joyful celebration of God's grace, love and victory over Sin, Satan and Death is always worthy of celebration.

4) Good News

There is only one ultimate 'good news' which is the gospel. Angels announced or declared the good news to the shepherds. It was proclaimed by Lord Jesus, apostles and continuously until now by His servants. The message of the angels is relevant today as it was when it was first announced. The songs like that of angels should be sung again and again as a message of hope to the world.

Do I sing songs of deliverance, salvation and celebration?

Meditation - 36

Humble Birth in Bethlehem

Lord Jesus Christ was born in a small insignificant town called Bethlehem. Even today pilgrims throng the place. The spot is in the Church of nativity which is a cave. The entrance to this place is through a 'Door of humility' as all have to bend or kneel to enter. Why of all cities in the world was Bethlehem chosen?

1) Humble city: God chose the humble city of Bethlehem so that no other city could boast. If he would have been born in Political power city of Rome or Religious city of Jerusalem, these cities could have boasted and claimed to have given credibility to Lord Jesus.

2) Humble place: God chose a manger so that no innkeeper could boast. Rejected by people, the Lord chose a humble place, a manger, a place where animals got their food.

3) Bread of life: The manger is the Lord's table, the Son of God, the Bread of life was placed in swaddling clothes there.

4) Living Water: In Bethlehem and surrounding villages almonds and olive trees are grown. It has a good water source, an aquifer that has been supplied to Jerusalem from here since 200 BC. Solomon pools are also there around the city. That signifies the Lord Jesus as the Living Water.

5) To fulfill prophecy: Prophet Micah foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2) Though Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, they were forced to go to Bethlehem to fulfil the census documentation, when Mary gave birth to Lord Jesus.

6) Davidic covenant: Messiah was called the 'Son of David'. Bethlehem was also known as the city of David, where he was born and later came to rule from Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus, also born in Bethlehem, will die in Jerusalem and rise up again to demonstrate his deity.

7) Lamb of God: Migdal Eder, watch tower outside Bethlehem. Near that were meadows, where sacrificial lambs were reared. Those sacrificial lambs were tied with swaddling clothes to identify as special lambs. 'Lamb of God' is the term used by John the Baptist to identify the Messiah.

'Come Let us Adore Him' on this Christmas day.

Meditation - 37

Highly Favored Mary!

There are many who think 'favored' and 'blessed' people have comfortable, easy lives. They look cheerful, great and reading their biography is exciting. However, they go through suffering with grace and grit. Angel Gabriel greeted Mary as 'highly favored' by the Lord. (Luke 1:28)

1) Spiritual:

Those favored must encounter intense spiritual warfare. Simeon stated that a sword will pierce her heart indicating spiritual struggle. (Luke 2:35) Satan will always attack people who fulfill the purpose of God. Daniel also was highly favored by the Lord but had to go through immense spiritual turmoil. (Daniel 10:11,19)

2) Emotional:

Mary had to bear this burden of being the virgin-mother of Jesus alone. Loneliness must have been so difficult for her. Hence, she went to Elizabeth to get spiritual and emotional support she needed. (Luke 1:39-45) When she delivered Jesus, probably there was none to assist her except Joseph.

3) Physical:

Mary had to endure great physical suffering. Pregnant Mary had to travel nearly 100 km to deliver Jesus in Bethlehem as there was a commandment from Caesar to register for the Census. The journey must have been very difficult without modern transport. Without a place to stay, she delivered in a manger.

4) Social:

Certainly, she would have endured social stigma as 'gossip' about her pregnancy would have been going rounds. She must have experienced agony as Lord Jesus was branded as 'friend of sinners,' 'out of mind,' as well as 'Prince of Beelzebub.' (Matthew 12:24-27)

5) Political:

Joseph and Mary had to flee to Egypt to protect newborn Lord Jesus from Herod's evil intention. (Matthew 2:13)

Receiving God's favor does not mean favor of people and this world. In fact, Lord Jesus warned that the people will hate us without any valid reason. (John 15:25) Nevertheless, the suffering of this world is not comparable with that of the eternal glory that is to be revealed. (Romans 8:18) Mary endured 'hardness' like a good soldier for the Lord. (II Timothy 2:3)

Do I remember that I am favored of the Lord when I suffer?

Meditation - 38

Government Upon His Shoulder

Government is described as a system or a group of people who manage the affairs of the country. People around the world long for a government that is wise, powerful yet tender like father and guarantees peace. Generation after generation, people are disappointed with governments. Prophet Isaiah states 'a child' and on his shoulder will be the government. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6) That means, the government of a person - Lord Jesus Christ. Paul joyfully declares that ALL is created by him, for him and is sustained by him. (Colossians 1:16) His governance has the following intrinsic values.

1) Wonderful counsellor

The Lord of all earth is not only wonderful, and is wise to solve all problems, curses and consequences of sin in the fallen world. During the months of pandemic Corona around the world; political leaders, medical professionals, management experts...etc did not have knowledge or wisdom or skill or counsel to tackle the problem. It ruined lives, livelihoods and economies of nations.

2) Almighty

"Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God," (Psalms 62:11) He has all authority in heaven and on earth. (Matthew 28:18) Political and religious authorities cannot shut the tomb of Lord Jesus. No closed door before resurrected Jesus.

3) Eternal Father

Lord Jesus is the source of all life and new life. With love of father and tenderness of mother, he deals with his children, citizens of His Kingdom. His governance is marked by tenderness, sensitivity, care, compassion, mercy, steadfast love and kindness.

4) Prince of Peace

Where Lord reigns, there is Peace. Lord bring peace between God and human beings and with one another. Peace in contrast to war, strife, hatred, rebellions, shootouts, terrorism, riots, violence, landmines and explosions.

Am I under His governance and care?

Meditation - 39

Sign: Swaddling Clothes

The angel gave a sign. Was it God's sense of humor? The Messiah - anointed one would be born in a feed trough of cattle. Maybe this was the only child in history to be born in this manner. Swaddling clothes were like this - they consisted of a square of cloth with a long, bandage-like strip coming diagonally off one corner. The child was first wrapped in the square of cloth, and then the long strip was wound round and round about him. What a welcome wait for babies born today? So many items from 'Just Born' shops are bought days before the child is born.

Swaddling clothes are used for babies to sleep better and not to scratch themselves. There are various interpretations.

First, the swaddling clothes are clothes in strips that refer to His death and burial.

Second, mothers create swaddling bands to be wrapped around the child with symbols of the tribe of Israel. Mary could have had the lineage of Judah such as a lion, a lamb or a tree of life woven or embroidered in it with royal colors of blue and white.

Third, swaddling bands speak about creation as in Job: "when I made clouds it's garment and thick darkness its swaddling band." (Job 38:9) Father God's concern and care for the Son of God.

Four, the Lord spoke through Ezekiel to the Nation of Israel. The Nation was like an abandoned baby without a swaddling band. (Ezekiel 16:4) In contrast, here the Baby Jesus is owned, embraced, loved and cared for.

Five, The Shepherds to whom angels appeared are called: "Levitical shepherds". They usually cared for the Passover lambs. These shepherds used swaddling clothes to protect lambs. Shepherds were given a sign that the baby Jesus is indeed the 'Lamb of God.'

Have the Savior born in my heart, soul and mind, what is the sign?



Meditation - 40

Three Titles: Saviour, Christ and Lord

The vulnerable baby is not just another baby but Saviour, Christ and Lord. The term Saviour means the mission of Lord Jesus Christ to the world. He will die for the sins of humanity that those who believe will know him as Saviour. Through His death on the Cross of Calvary there is forgiveness of sins. The Saviour brings peace to humanity and is the glory of God. The title 'Christ' means the anointed one. The Israelites were expecting the Messiah - the anointed one - the Christ. In the Old Testament the priests, the kings and the prophets were anointed. Lord Jesus Christ transcends all these offices as the Son of God. He is also the Lord of Lord and King of Kings, having absolute authority over all humanity and heaven.

Sign

The angel gave a sign. Was it God's sense of humour? The Messiah - anointed one would be born in a feed trough of cattle. Maybe this was the only child in history to be born in this manner. Swaddling clothes were like this - they consisted of a square of cloth with a long, bandage-like strip coming diagonally off one corner. The child was first wrapped in a square of cloth, and then the long strip was wound round and round about him. What kind of welcome waits for babies born today? So many items from 'Just Born' shops are bought days before the child is born.

Response of the shepherds

1. Wonder: They were amazed or wondered about the message. They received the message with great joy (2:10). The shepherds obeyed the angel's message and rushed to Bethlehem. Today, the Christmas message is the same. A call to come to Lord Jesus; acknowledging him as Saviour, Christ and Lord.

2. Worship: The shepherds reached the manger and found the newborn King and worshipped Him. He is the only one worthy of worship. Today, we are called to kneel down before him and confess him with our tongues as Saviour, Christ and Lord.

3. Witness: The shepherds shared the news and experience with others (Luke 2:17). They spread the Word.

True Spirituality is Searching and discovering the truth - Lord Jesus Christ; Serving and worshipping Him; and sharing and testifying about the truth. Christmas brings home true spirituality.

Meditation - 41

Lord humbled Himself

Lord Jesus becoming man to redeem humanity is beyond human comprehension. That he had choice and options but chose humility and simplicity. Lord Jesus humbled Himself. (Philippians 2:8)

1) Not angel, human: Lord Jesus chose to become a man. Of course, man had more limitations than angels. In God's plan it was essential that Son of God should become human.

2) Birth, unhygienic place: When he was born the Roman Empire was reigning the world in glory. He could have chosen to be born in the Roman palace. He chose Bethlehem an insignificant city and that too a cowshed an unhygienic place for childbirth.

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9) Spiritual agony: Lord Jesus went through the spiritual turmoil in the Garden of Gethsemane pleading for the removal of the cup of God's wrath. (Luke 26:36-56) His cry to Father of being left alone was great spiritual agony. (Matthew 27:46)

10) Death: His death was humiliation by his own creation, curse, brutal and undeserved.

Should we not humble ourselves like him?

Meditation - 42

World Owes to a Stable

God's most significant intervention in the history of humanity is incarnation. It happened in a simple, humble, and unadvertised atmosphere. Amazingly, the birth of Lord Jesus was in an unhygienic place, wrapped in swaddling clothes, without basic facilities. He was placed on the hay in the fodder trough, manger. The World today needs the influence or touch of the 'Stable' more than at any time in the history of the world.

1) Uncertainty to hope: We are living in unstable, uncertain, and volatile times. The future seems dark, dangerous, and disoriented. The Christmas message is hope. Without hope, there is no stable present.

2) Moral relativism to convictions: Morality has been degraded to individual subjective preferences and choices. More and more young people are confused and are going astray. The birth of Lord Jesus Christ brings the Law, Love and Grace personified. There is no ambiguity but firm and stable moral and righteous convictions.

3) Fear to Faith: The shepherds were terrified to see the angels appear. The message of the angel was assurance that helped them to move from fear to faith. They went to Bethlehem to express their faith in worship. In the world of fear, faith is the anchor that provides stability - the marvelous result of the Stable.

4) Stress to Joy: The 'Stable' is a picture of joy, humility, and simplicity. The Creator of the world chose a stable instead of a palace. Contentment in the barest minimum is the greatest joy. Today, the world dominated by consumerism is stressed out. Christmas reminds us that stability and joy do not come from the abundance of riches or gadgets.

5) Fake news to Good News: Mass media is filled with false news, and social media is filled with fake news, however, Christmas is the good news.

Do I have a stable life because of the Lord born in Bethlehem?



Meditation - 43

Lord Borrowed for His Mission

Lord Jesus Christ became man in incarnation to identify with all humans. His humility, simple lifestyle, and sacrifice is beyond human comprehension. In the world, he owned nothing beginning from his birth to death. He had to borrow from others for his ministry or do a miracle or demonstrate truth. Perhaps, his only earthly possession was His robe which was given to a soldier who won the lot. (Matthew 27:35)

Space for birth: When Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, there was no room in the Inn. Perhaps, none of the houses in Bethlehem was open for this couple. The cows spared their space for Savior's birth when the humans refused to give a place. (Luke 2:1-20)

Boat: On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Lord wanted to preach and teach. He borrowed a boat from Simon Peter and made it his pulpit. (Luke 5:3)

Boy's meal: The generous boy lent his meal of five barley bread and two fish to the Lord. Yes, Lord multiplied it to feed the five thousand. (Matthew 14:13-21)

Mule: Travel was expensive in the first century. Lord did not own a donkey or horse. Lord Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on a donkey that was borrowed. The owner was generous to give him. (Matthew 21:2)

Upper Room: The Lord celebrated the Passover feast and initiated the New Covenant with the disciples. (Matthew 26:1-29) This room also was borrowed by the Lord to give this sacrament to the Church.

Coin: Lord did not carry a money bag or a wallet for himself. He had to borrow a coin used to pay taxes, to demonstrate, to give what belongs to God and Caesar what belongs to the emperor. (Matthew 22:19-22)

Tomb: Lord Jesus Christ died in Jerusalem. Probably, as residents of Nazareth, Mary did not have any clue about a burial place, and so was John who belonged to Galilee. Joseph of Arimathea, a devout disciple, and a rich man could lend his tomb for the weekend. (John 19:38-42)

Do I lead a simple lifestyle as my Master Lord Jesus Christ?



Meditation - 44

Song of Fools?

It was a Christmas gathering in a church. One person was invited as a guest for the occasion. The only reason was that he was a relative of a rich member of the church. As a singer-musician, he sang some classical carols. Then he said that he fasted, prayed, and wrote a few songs. Then he began to sing for the next hour or so. The songs were poorly written, contradicting biblical truths and with trendy music. Sadly, as time was running out, he prayed and closed the meeting. Since there was no preaching, many did not hear the gospel. "It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools." (Ecclesiastes 7:5)

Pastor or Pleaser? The pastor of the church was not shepherding his flock instead he was a spectator. He was not exercising discernment or authority to feed the flock. Pleasing the donor friend was more important than pleasing God or serving the congregation.

Customer-friendly church? The church was neither customer-friendly nor seeker-friendly. Whatever is done should be accepted by the crowd that gathers there. For the pastor, it was just a crowd and not a congregation.

Donor-friendly church? The pastor assumed that being friendly with the donor would help him to manage the church. He depended more on donor money than God who called him and appointed him for this sacred ministry.

Clubhouse or church? Paul writes that the Church is the Pillar and the foundation of truth. (I Timothy 3:15) The Christmas service was like a social gathering.

Foolish singer? There were a few faithful believers who had invited a few people to listen to the gospel and understand the meaning of Christmas. There was no sermon or gospel sharing. New people who came to know about the reason for the season were disappointed.

Foolish pastor? The pastor did not realize that the rebuke of the wise is better than the song of fools. Hence, neither he nor the guest preached.

Do I share the reason for the Christmas season?

Meditation - 45

Boxes of Love

Samaritan Purse organizes children in America to fill shoe boxes with gifts, collect them, and send them to various parts of the world, which are distributed among poor children during Christmas celebrations. However, that has been stopped for various reasons in several countries including India. In a good initiative in the South of India, one organization mobilized churches to motivate families to fill a shoe box with gifts for children. The boxes would be according to age groups and for girls and boys. Families are encouraged to place dresses, toys, stationeries, story books, geometry boxes, atlas, dictionaries...etc. These boxes are collected and given as gifts at Christmas outreach events in smaller or rural churches. About 5000 children benefited from this initiative in 2021. It is a good way to teach children to share and care for others who are more underprivileged than them.

1) An Inspiring boy: A small boy was cheerfully willing to share his lunch, five loaves of barley bread and two fish, that was accepted and used by the Lord to feed a mass of five thousand men, more women, and children. (Matthew 14:13-21) All our children should grow to be like this sharing and caring for others in the community. This initiative of filling boxes with gifts is training children to share with strangers.

2) A Helpful girl: Miriam was vigilant, concerned, and worried about her three-month-old baby brother. Will he die? When she saw Pharaoh's daughter seeing Moses, rushed to speak to her. She was not permitted to speak as a slave to royals. Yet, her love and concern for her brother compelled her to speak wisely and smartly. Caring for brothers and sisters should be taught by parents. (Exodus 2)

3) A Wise slave girl: A slave girl became a missionary in Naaman's house and shared about her faith, living God, and how he could be healed. (II Kings 5)

It is more blessed to give than receive. (Acts 20:35) Giving is not about an abundance of material, but the abundance of love, compassion, generosity, and kindness in the hearts.

Do I experience the joy of giving?



Meditation - 46

What is the Mission?

The reason for the season (Christmas) is God sent His Son into this world to redeem humanity. (John 3:16) However, the mission continues until the gates of grace are open and until the Lord comes again. The followers of the Lord Jesus Christ are commissioned and commanded to be involved in missions. What does it mean to be engaged in God's mission?

Declare His Glory: The mission is to declare the glory of God. Believers by being salt and light could provoke all others to glorify the Heavenly Father. (Matthew 5:14-16) The deeds of believers create a thirst for truth. Whatever, disciples do it should be for the glory of God. The lifestyle of a Christian is worship, giving glory to God. (I Corinthians 10:31)

Display His Majesty: The mission is to help people understand the truth: God is Sovereign, King of Kings, Lord of Lord, Eternal, Almighty, Omnipresent, and Omniscient. There are no other gods, no counterfeits, equals, or competitors.

Deploy His presence: The Great Commission is to go to the ends of the earth. All geographical areas extend to all continents, hills, deserts, islands, cities, villages, and all human habitations. Wherever the soles of feet of God's people touch would be transformed. (Deuteronomy 11:24) God's children are bearers of God's presence, in the dark world.

Demonstrate His Power: God confirmed His Word by signs and wonders. (Hebrews 2:4) Globally, wherever the gospel is preached, God's power is manifest. The world has been turned upside down. Freedom for slaves, healing for the sick, educating superstitious people, biblical values changing culture, and government policies that represent Biblical values. Satan intends to rob, kill, and destroy, but the gospel brings reconciliation, restoration, and redemption.

Dispense His Love: When the Lord Jesus Christ saw the crowd, he was moved with compassion. (Matthew 9:36) When he saw the rich young man, he saw him and loved him. (Mark 10:21) Throughout history the church has dispensed the love, merch, and compassion as the Lord did during his earthly ministry.

Do I engage in this Christmas mission?

Meditation - 47

Wise Men Search for Truth

Matthew records that wise men from the East came to worship the new-born king. (Matthew 2:1-11) Some scholars think there was a great delegation of over twelve to sixty, while others state they were just three. Legends state their names are Gaspar from India, Melchor from Persia, and Balthasar from Babylon. They were scholars and astronomers, probably belonging to royal families. Some scholars think that these wise men were aware of the prophecy of Balaam, who later became a false prophet, and linked the new star they observed to the King/Messiah. (Numbers 24:17)

1) Search: Wise people are those who search for truth. These wise men understood Lord Jesus as Truth, and asked: Where is he? Ignorance of truth is no excuse, everyone born in this world should long and belong to the Truth.

2) Why this search: Their search had a very clear purpose, they wanted to worship the New-born King. It was not just an academic exercise, but a life search for the Truth.

3) Do not be distracted: As academic scholars, they reasoned that the king should be born in the palace and reach the home of Herod. World and its principles, philosophies, and even religions like king Herod will distract seekers away from the Truth.

4) Ask for direction: Wise men are not afraid to learn. They were not proud to reject suggestions, but humble to receive directions. The scribes summoned by Herod quoted from prophet Micah and gave them direction. (Micah 5:2)

5) Pursuit: Getting destination, as guided by the star they pursued to reach Him. They did not stop or give up until they reached.

6) Give the best: They not only worshiped him, but they also gave their best. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning: gold indicating royalty, incense symbol of deity, and myrrh signifying the death and resurrection of Lord Jesus Christ.

7) Go in the other direction: After meeting the Lord, they cannot pursue an old lifestyle, they have to take a new direction and so should everyone who meets him.

Am I wise to follow Lord Jesus Christ?

Meditation - 48

Most Favored of the Lord?

Most of us like to be favored by the Lord. In the town of Nazareth, Archangel Gabriel visited Mary to give her the news that God had chosen her to be the bearer of the Messiah through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit as she was the favored one. (Luke 1:28) The life of the favored one was not a bed of roses but a rollercoaster ride.

1) Danger of Divorce: Mary was betrothed to Joseph to be married. According to Jewish customs, it was as binding as marriage. “And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.” (Matthew 1:19) She could have been stoned to death too.

2) Long walk: As Caesar Augustus commanded all citizens to go to their native place to register; Joseph and Mary had to travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Certainly, Mary was not carried by slaves in palanquins like royals. The distance is about 100 miles, uphill, and downhill. They could have traveled just 10 to 20 miles a day as Mary was pregnant and ready to deliver the child. (Luke 2:1)

3) Refugee: Paranoid Herod, knowing the King of Jews was born in Bethlehem through the wise men from the East, wanted to kill Lord Jesus. Mary and Joseph carrying the infant Lord Jesus had to escape to Egypt. (Matthew 2:13-23) It is believed that they stayed as refugees for about six years.

4) Widow: After Lord Jesus was twelve years old and their visit to Jerusalem, it is believed Joseph died. Lord Jesus had to take care of the family until he was thirty, helping younger siblings.

5) Violent death of son: Watching the death of Lord Jesus as a mother would have been the greatest tragedy endured by any woman in the world. She was helpless when Lord Jesus had to endure a violent death at the hands of evil men. (John 19:25-27)

The favor of the Lord is for those who are steadfast in their faith and commitment amid immense tribulation and trials.

Will I choose to be His favored person?

Meditation - 49

Christmas Enlightenment!

The birth of the Son of God in this world is a great event in the history of humanity. Apostle John states: “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” (John 1:9)

Plight of humanity: First, Satan has blinded the eyes of humans, so that they do not perceive and receive the gospel. Second, the world is an intellectual, moral, and spiritual darkness. People grope searching for reality. Third, there are fools, they reject that God exists or disregard God’s laws. Without light from God, humanity will perish.

Intellectual darkness: People do not know the truth. The world is filled with lies as the Father of Lies, Satan has propagated lies. The truth of God is revealed in His creation. They do not have the discernment to perceive invisible attributes: God’s power and divine nature. Sadly, they exchange the truth for a lie. This ignorance of truth is no excuse, for they will perish. (Romans 1:20-25) The truth is hidden by using false religions, culture, traditions, myths, legends...etc.

Moral darkness: People do not have the discernment to understand the Holiness of God. Hence, they do not know justice or righteousness. Hence, their choices are wrong and futile. Even their righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6) There are millions who cannot say the difference between left and right i.e., right and wrong, like the people of the city of Nineveh. (Jonah 4:11) Sadly, many call evil as good and good as evil. (Isaiah 5:20) others believe in nihilism, that everything will become zero or naught or nothing.

Spiritual darkness: Humans are spiritually dead, as descendants of Adam and Eve. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their relationship with God was detached. Their spiritual faculty to connect with God was dead. Though created in the image of God, sin marred them. That legacy passes on to all individual humans born in this world. Lord Jesus Christ came to dispel this darkness and reconcile humans with God. The gospel ministry of reconciliation is the hope of humanity. (II Corinthians 5:18)

Am I enlightened by the gospel?

Meditation - 50

The Scepter of Judah

God Promised a Saviour to the first human couple in the Garden of Eden that Messiah would come as the seed of woman. (Genesis 3:15) Jacob gave prophetic utterances regarding his sons. He declared that the scepter would not depart from Judah, until he to whom it belonged. That person, the Messiah shall demand obedience of nations. (Genesis 49:10)

Double application: Certain prophecies could have multiple applications. This prophecy is about the dynasty of King David and later the Messiah who is also termed as the Son of David.

Scepter: The word scepter used here could be translated as club or staff or rod. All were used as weapons. The scepter symbolizes the civic and military power that a king command.

King David: In the Promised Land, the children of Jacob became a nation. God chose King David, and his descendants continued to rule until Zedekiah, the last king of Judah. The scepter will not depart from Judah, in particular, it did not depart from King David's descendants until Shiloh comes – which means until the Messiah comes.

Lord Jesus Christ: As a descendant of David from the maternal side as well as from his stepfather Joseph's side, Lord Jesus fulfills the prophecy. His Kingdom is eternal and is known as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. (II Peter 1:11; Revelation 5:5) The Scepter could be lost, stolen, broken, or set aside. The scepter of Messiah is eternal, and rules by justice. He loves righteousness and hates wickedness. (Hebrews 1:8-9; Psalm 45:6-7)

Wisemen: The wise men from the East were looking for the King of Jews. They saw a special star, which they could understand as his birth. (Matthew 2:1-12) Balaam foretold that a star would rise from Jacob. (Numbers 24:17) The wise men were Chaldeans, and scholars opine that they came to know about Balaam utterances during Babylonian Captivity.

Promises fulfilled: The First Christmas marked the fulfillment of God's Plan of sending His Son, the Messiah, the Redeemer into this world.

Do I celebrate Christmas remembering God's love, Promises, and fulfillment of Prophecies?

Meditation - 51

Deliverance and Liberty

People are in search of different kinds of emancipation.

Political: People living under an oppressive king want deliverance. There are nations invaded and the victims long for independence. They wish to escape from the tyranny of the sins of the dictator or ruthless ruler.

Economic: Some people are exploited by powerful and rich people. No fair wages, no safe workplace, no bonus, no increment...etc. They desire deliverance from the sins of such exploiters.

Social: Social oppression in the form of Caste, Clan, and Class systems are in all places. Many are sold as slaves or life-long servants. These people aspire for social liberation from the sins approved and celebrated by society.

Family abuse: Some children are abused verbally, emotionally, and physically. They seek deliverance from the sins of their parents or step-parents. Spouses who are victims of domestic violence, verbal abuse, and emotional oppression seek liberation from the sins of their own family members.

Parochialism: Others are victims of racism, parochialism, linguistic chauvinism, religious fundamentalism, and even skin color. They long for deliverance from the sins of such people who are paranoid.

Sins of others: All experience the consequences of the sins of others who are insensitive to others, selfish, proud, and do not recognize the rights of others. It could be from any source. Such people long and even pray for a miraculous deliverance. However, they are not aware of their own sins. They try to remove the speck from others' eyes while ignoring beams in their own eyes. (Matthew 7:5)

True Spiritual deliverance: Joseph was not sure if he should take the betrothal agreement with Mary to a logical conclusion of marriage. Lord spoke to him, commanding him to go ahead with marriage as Mary conceived through the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit. "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) Deliverance from the slavery of sin is more important than deliverance from the consequences of sins of others.

Do I celebrate Christmas experiencing deliverance from my sin?

Meditation - 52

Macro and Micro Preparation for the First Christmas?

God sending his Son into the world, the greatest historical event has two aspects. There was macro-preparation, but micro-preparation was inadequate from a human perspective.

Macro-preparation: God sent His son at the appropriate time. (Galatians 4:4) The world was prepared socially, economically, politically, and culturally to receive the Messiah. God prepared Mary so that The Messiah was born to a virgin as prophesied by the prophet. (Isaiah 7:14) God orchestrated the world affairs through a census by Caesar Augustus that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem, where Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem as foretold by Prophet Micah. (Luke 2:1; Micah 5:2)

Micro-preparation: However, minute details of preparation in the local context were not in place. The earthly foster father Joseph failed even to book a room in Bethlehem. Mary did not visit a Just Born shop to keep clothes ready for the Son of God, so Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes. To deliver the Son of God in an unhygienic place like the stable was beyond human comprehension.

Imperfect world: The Christmas season reminds the people of God, of the First Christmas; that not every aspect was in order; there was chaos, confusion, and disappointments. Lord Jesus was born in an imperfect world and his disciples also live in the same imperfect world.

Wrong expectation: When the Heavenly Father did not prepare for His own Son, why do Christians expect desire or demand certain services and remuneration? What right a Christian does have to murmur about imperfect surroundings and discomfort?"

Right focus: The micro issues can sink the macro mission for which God has called us. The mission (the purpose and will of God) is the most important thing in a believer's life. In the pursuit of that mission, which is an eternal and long-term process, micro issues become irrelevant. The mission of incarnation happened despite all the troubles. Our focus should be the God-given vision and not the minor irritations and distractions.

Am I focused on the big picture of life or distracted by minor issues?

Meditation – 53

The History of The Nativity Scene

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with staging the first nativity scene in 1123 at a medieval village of Greccio, Rieti province about 80 km north of Rome, Italy. St. Francis got permission from Pope Honourius III to set up a manger with hay and two live animals – an ox and an ass. St. Francis desired to “represent the birth of that Child in Bethlehem in such a way that with our bodily eyes, we may see what he suffered for lack of the necessities of a newborn babe and how he lay in a manger between the ox and ass.” St. Francis preached the gospel with the visual aid of live animals and life actors. This became popular throughout Europe. The display today, may not be exactly accurate. The gospel writers Matthew and Luke write about Lord Jesus' birth. Matthew records about the wise men's visit, while Luke the shepherds. However, there are the shepherds and wise men who did not come simultaneously.

God's Communication:

God loves the world and He has communicated with the people of the world again and again. God's revelation to the world is by three means: First, through Nature, the created world. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above[a] proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.” (Psalms 19:1-2) Second, through the Scripture, the Bible, and the Word of God. Third, through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 11:1-2)

Visual and Verbal Communication:

The Great Commission is Great communication. (Matthew 28:18-20) The Church throughout history has been proclaiming the message of the gospel and making disciples. It is essential to use different methods to reach people according to their context, background, and knowledge they have. People learn by hearing, but seeing, helps people to grasp and perceive better. Hence, using visual aids is good for gospel communication. Creatively, St. Francis of Assisi used this method to preach the gospel. The communication tool, gospel proclamation visual aid, has become a tradition in the whole world.

Opportunity:

The nativity scene is displayed worldwide in homes, churches, institutions, parks, malls...etc. St. Francis envisaged that as an opportunity to share the reason for the season with the masses. Today, the same opportunity is to teach children and all curious visitors about nativity display places. One missionary serving in a remote area wanted to communicate the gospel on the occasion of Christmas. Where he served, there were no Christians or churches. There was no pine tree or Christmas tree in the market. One branch of the peepal tree was cut and the nativity scene was set under it in the courtyard. In the night it was decorated with lights.

The gate was kept open all day and night, for people to come and watch. Throughout the day, people will come and stand and watch it. The missionary explained and gave the New Testament to those who visited. The news spread far and wide, people came from far-off places also. During that season, the missionary was able to distribute over 200 New Testaments.

Sharing the gospel in the Christmas season is essential. It is not celebrating a tradition, but an historical event of incarnation, for the redemption of humanity.

Poverty:

The Nativity scene reminds us how Lord Jesus Christ chose to be born as a homeless, unhygienic, stable where animals lived. The Son of God identified Himself with the poor and homeless people. Many people are sick and cannot afford to go to a hospital or buy medicine. During Christmas time, it is good to remember them and, if possible, help them.

His bed was a manger probably on a haystack. Many do not have a bed to lay on. Some sleep under the stairs in cities, under trees, any shelter. Many die of cold in the winter season. Christians should pray and try to help such unfortunate people.

Paul writes that the Lord became poor to make those who trusted and loved him rich. (II Corinthians 8:9) We ought to be grateful for all the blessings God has bestowed upon us. By world standards we may not be rich, but richer than many because of our spiritual blessings.

Humility:

The king of kings and Lord of Lords emptied Himself, humbled Himself took the form of a servant, and was obedient unto death, the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5-8) The nativity scene teaches Christians to be humble. Pride is the cause of the fall of many. But God gives grace to the humble. As the water flows down to the lowest part, the grace of God flows to the lowest hearts of men. Christian leaders must not follow the pomp model of service of many religious leaders, instead follow the model of the Lord.

Self-denial:

Lord Jesus inspires his followers on the importance of self-denial, an essence for taking up the cross. The rich young man could be blameless according to the Law of Moses but could not deny himself and take up the cross to follow him. (Matthew 19:16-30) Selfishness could be described as the core of all sins. Self-glory, self-applause, and self-promotion are also common in the social media. Even a simple selfie desire could be a selfie obsession.

Preparation:

As families and churches prepare for the Christmas season, they should spiritually prepare for the season. Decoration, Christmas Trees, Christmas stars, Christmas cakes, Christmas choir, Christmas gifts, and Christmas dresses are all good preparation. However, needed preparation is a twin aspect of spiritual preparation. First, self-examination, am I born again? Has Christ been born in my heart? Second, prepare a short message – five to ten sentences of Christmas message to be shared with all who greet or wish us or meet us during this season.

Challenge:

Christmas is a season for celebration. It is also a season for spiritual renewal, learning from the Master, the true spirituality of humility, love, mercy, generosity, and grace. However, it is a season for proclamation of the gospel in words, visuals, practical demonstration of love and good deeds.



Meditation - 54

Indescribable Gift!

An old person, probably who fell in a rainwater slush, brought a parcel to deliver to a home. The package was damp, damaged, and ugly with stains. Nevertheless, the person took the package, unwrapped it, and found a gift note from his friend along with a diamond ring set he had desired to own. The hidden product is significant, important, and valuable. The package and person who brought it did not reflect the character and content of the product or gift.

Agent: The agent is the messenger, courier deliverer, or post person. S/he is not the originator of the content or owner of the product. The job is to deliver whatever was handed over to them. In the same way, God sends His people as His messengers. All Christians are called to be witnesses wherever they are. (Acts 1:8) They could be poor or rich; educated or illiterate; healthy or sick; boss or employee; men or women; children or old; eloquent or stammering...Sadly, some give more importance to the messenger rather than the message or the product. Hence, miss the gift.

Package: The risen Lord mandated His disciples, the church, to share the gospel with the whole world. The gospel is taken to many parts of the world by the Church. Some churches are very good, and others have internal problems. Some people love the Lord Jesus Christ but dislike or even hate the church. The church is criticized as intruders, controllers, disrupters, gatherers of wealth, power-mongers...etc. Because of the package, if a gift or product is rejected, it is a great loss for the receiver.

Product: There is an indescribable gift inside the damaged package, delivered by an imperfect person. Those who receive in faith and gratefulness enjoy Eternal Life. Lord Jesus Christ is an indescribable or inexpressible gift. (II Corinthians 9:15) Forgiveness for past sins, power to overcome present sinful temptations, and secure future in God's presence, the Heaven where sin cannot enter is the indescribable gift of salvation.

Shall we celebrate, and rejoice this Christmas with the indescribable gift of Lord Jesus Christ?

May God Bless you!!