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WHOSE MERRY CHRISTMAS?

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

-Isaiah 9:6

Christmas period is a very popular season all over the world. Christmas Day (25 December) is observed as a public holiday in 166 countries, many of which are non-Christian countries [source: www.earthcalendar.net/122500.html]. India and Japan, Malaysia and Syria, and even Communist Cuba are on the list. That Russia and China will one-day join is a matter of time. In the United States, 2.7 billion Christmas cards are mailed each year, making Christmas the top draw among the Ten Most Popular Holiday Cards [source: www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/TM/WS_holiday_cards2.shtml]. Valentine's Day is a distant second (one billion cards).

Why is Christmas so popular today? It is largely because it is the best business season worldwide. Christmas trees and decorations, greeting cards and gifts, and seasonal activities/events bring in billions of US dollars to business owners of every size, creed or colour. That is why they now call it Christmas "saleabration," not celebration. So, "Merry Christmas" now means "good business." To make it much more so, a major Western country has changed the "Christ" in Christmas to "X". So, "Merry Xmas" is Christ-neutral and can, thus, sell in every culture or creed.

*Imagine that your family and friends were organizing a birthday party in your honour but nobody told you about it. You saw decorations, great excitement and gifts. Each time you tried to find out what was happening, you were warned to mind your business. Then, on the day of the event, you heard loud noises (of music, dancing, eating and drinking). Later, you heard a song, "Happy Birthday to -----[your name!]. How would you feel? That is the way we treat Jesus Christ at Christmas. We are supposedly marking the birthday of the Saviour of the whole world [**Jn 1:29**]. We mount a big party, invite everyone else (including an imaginary Santa Claus) and sing birthday songs in honour of Jesus (Christmas Carols), but the celebrant Himself, Jesus Christ, is excluded! Doesn't that look absurd?*

*This Christmas marks the beginning of the next Millennium. The signs and season point to the imminent return of Jesus Christ as King to judge the world [**Matt. 24: 3-31**]. Therefore, it is a unique opportunity for us to return to Christ and the true meaning of His birthday so that our "Merry Christmas" will be a Spirit-filled one. That is the subject of today's lesson.*

1. The Significance of Christ's Birth

We must never forget that Jesus Christ was the Son of God before He took human form as the son of man through Mary [**Jn 1:1; Jn 1:14; Jn 3:13,16; Lk 2:6-7**]. Through Him, all things were made [**Jn 1:3; Ps. 33:6; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:10**]. He was present with God at creation as the "Word of God" [**Jn 1:1; Gen. 1:3, 26**]. He was the rock that followed the Israelites in the wilderness [**Ex. 17:6; Num. 20:7-11; 1 Cor. 10:1-4**]. He is the bread of life, which came down from heaven to the Israelites as manna [**Ex. 16:15; Jn 6:31-35**]. In fact, the pre-Incarnate Christ appeared in human form with two angels to Abraham [**Gen. 18:1-33**]. That is why He told the Jews several hundreds of years later, "Your father, Abraham, rejoiced to see My day: and he saw it and was glad" [**Jn 8:56-58**]. Now, let us see why He had to come in flesh:

- (a) Lucifer, also called Satan, was an anointed cherub who was perfect in beauty. He lived in heaven like the other Cherubim until iniquity was found in him [**Ezek. 28: 12-15**].
- (b) His pride and rebellion provoked war in heaven. God's forces, led by Archangel Michael, defeated him and his evil angels who were all thrown down to earth [**Rev. 12: 7-9**]. Jesus Christ had witnessed this event before He came as a man [**Lk 10:18**]. Lucifer did not accept defeat. Instead, he planned to return to heaven and exalt his throne above that of God [**Is. 14: 12-14**]. So God decided to put the devil permanently in hell [**Is. 14:15**].
- (c) In line with that plan, the triune [three-in-one] God (*Elohim*) made Adam and Eve in His image and likeness to take control of the earth (on to which Satan had been thrown) and everything in it [**Gen. 1:26**]. Unfortunately, Satan overwhelmed Adam and his wife. They fell to his seduction and disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit [**Gen. 3:6-7**]. Consequently, God had no choice but to expel them from the Garden of Eden, God's embassy on earth [**Gen. 3:24**].
- (d) Having got man to lose his citizenship of heaven, as he himself had done earlier, Lucifer thought that he had won the final victory. However, God loves man and He was anxious to restore his citizenship of heaven. He then planned to send His Only Begotten Son [**Jn 3:16**] as the "seed of the woman" who would bruise Lucifer's head [**Gen. 3:15; Rom. 16:20; Gal. 4:4**].

Why take human form? Here are some reasons, among others:

- ❑ That would enable God to empathize with our weaknesses [**Heb. 4:15-16**]
- ❑ It makes Jesus our blood-brother which makes it possible for us to become His Father's sons and joint-heirs with Him, when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour [**Jn 1:12; Rom. 8:17**].
- ❑ Jesus wanted to teach us that the key to His success lay in His humility. The Creator Himself took on the humiliating form of His creation [**Phil. 2:8**].

- Christ's coming in flesh makes Satan's defeat most humiliating. Here is somebody who had defied God and upset His plans for man. He was even still respected by God and his former colleagues in heaven [**Job 1:6; Zech. 3:1-2; Jude 9**]. Now, God set up the seed of Adam to defeat Satan and his forces and make a show of them all [**Col. 2:15**]. That is why the false spirit never admits that Christ came in flesh [**1 Jn 4:1-2**]! That is why we are more than conquerors [**Rom. 8:17**].

2. His Earthly Life was foretold in details

Hundreds of years before He came, numerous prophets foretold details of Christ's earthly life and ministry. This was necessary so that there would be no doubt when He finally came. Let us take some examples:

- (a) He would be born of a virgin [**Is. 7:14**] in Bethlehem [**Micah 5:2**] as heir to the throne of David [**Is. 9:7**], and do His Father's will [**Ps. 40: 7-8**].
- (b) In an attempt to kill Him in childhood, innocent children would be slaughtered for His sake [**Jer. 31:15**]. Therefore, He would be taken to Egypt for protection [**Hosea 11:1**].
- (c) He would be preceded by a forerunner [**Mal. 3:1**] who would come in the spirit of Elijah [**Mal. 4:5-6; Matt. 11:13-14**].
- (d) He would have a Galilean ministry [**Is. 9:1-2**] to heal the brokenhearted [**Is. 61:1-2**].
- (e) He would be rejected by His own people [**Is. 53:3**] and betrayed by a close friend [**Ps. 41:9**] for thirty pieces of silver [**Zech. 11:12**]. Nevertheless, He would ride in triumph into Jerusalem [**Zech. 9:9**], but He would not be believed [**Is. 53:1**].
- (f) He would not defend Himself during His trial [**Is. 53:7**] and would be spat upon and smitten [**Is. 50:6**]. He would be sacrificed in our place [**Is. 53:5**]. His side, hands and feet would be pierced [**Ps. 22:16; Zech. 12:10**].
- (g) He would be crucified among thieves [**Is. 53:12**] but buried with the rich [**Is. 53:9**].
- (h) As the firstfruits from the dead [**Lev. 23:9-14; 1 Cor. 15: 20, 23**], He would ascend to God's right hand [**Ps. 68:18**], and His Kingdom shall last forever [**Dan. 7: 13-14**].

From the foregoing, the significance of Christ's birth becomes obvious. If He was born exactly as foretold, even at the very time prophesied [**Dan. 9:25**], then everything else shall come to pass. His birth is the beginning of the fulfilment of our salvation, the return of our passport to heaven, seized by Satan from Adam in the Garden of Eden. It is not by coincidence that human history has been dated before (BC) and after (AD) that event. Therefore, it is quite significant!

3. Key Events at Christ's Birth

- During Mary's pregnancy, she and her husband, Joseph, lived in Nazareth in Galilee [Lk 2:4], about 80 miles (128 km) north of Bethlehem. When she was close to term, the then Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar, decreed that a census of the whole empire be taken, and that people should be counted in their places of origin [Lk 2:1-3]. Since Joseph came from the city of David, Bethlehem, they had to go there [Lk 2:4]. We are not told how they travelled but it was certainly not by car! You can then imagine the hardship that the nine-month pregnant woman and her inexperienced husband had to bear over that 80-mile stretch of rough roads.
- Tired, cold and hungry on arrival in Bethlehem, there was no hotel accommodation for them in any of the inns [Lk 2:7]. To make matters worse, the labour pains had come. A young and anxious couple expecting their first baby. No doctor or nurses to supervise the delivery of this precious baby. No sterilized equipment. No ambulance. Only curious animals in the stable. But thank God. There were swaddling clothes and a manger [Lk 2:7]! And the heavenly hosts were there to keep off the satanic forces of a breached birth [i.e., legs presented first before the head] and severe blood loss.
- Imagine the humble but humiliating circumstances under which the Creator and Saviour of the world was born. With the possible exception of the curious animals, nobody even noticed. But His Father did! He sent the hosts of angels to announce the good news to the lowly shepherds in the field who were "keeping watch over their flock by night" [Lk 2:8]. The glory of God shone round the frightened shepherds, and the angel told them "fear not, for behold I bring you *good tidings of great joy* which shall be *to all people*. For unto you is born *this day* in the city of David *a Saviour which is Christ the Lord*" [Lk 2:9-11]. He then gave them direction on how to reach the newborn King. More angels joined and praised God, saying, "*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men*" [[Lk 2: 12-14].
- *It was by the grace of God* that the shepherds met Jesus, not by their righteousness. The three Wise Men also received the grace to meet the newborn King when God used a star to lead them to Christ's manger [Matt. 2:1-2]. They fell down and worshipped Him "*with exceeding great joy*" and left Him gifts fit for a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh [Matt. 2:10-11]. What a merry Christmas they had!

4. Lessons learnt

- (a) Christ's birth was not reported in the day's issue of "*Bethlehem Herald-Tribune*" nor did the government of the day know about the new dignitary in town. But for the three Wise Men, King Herod, an agent of Satan, might not have known of Him [Matt. 2:1-8]. Therefore, it should not surprise us that 2000 years later, Christmas is not Christ-centred.

- (b) True Christmas is a spiritual thing and it is only for those that God has given the privilege to mark it. As Jesus Himself has put it, “no man *can* come unto Me except it were given unto him of My Father” [Jn 5:65]. Once we acknowledge Jesus as our personal Lord and Saviour, His Father will choose us [1 Jn 2:23].
- (c) The privilege to come to Jesus is easy but not cheap or common. The Wise Men gave their best as gifts in appreciation of the privilege. They undertook a long journey in cold weather, with a star for direction, to come and see the King. The shepherds abandoned their flock to go and see the King. Old Simeon had waited in prayer and fasting for the coming of the King and, when he held Him in his hands at His presentation in the temple, he blessed and glorified God, saying, “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word” [Lk 2:25-32]. Are you ready to forgo your human vanities to go and see the King?

5. How you can have a Merry Christmas this Christmas

Independent of my notes, I asked one of my colleagues (an Internet member of the Chaguanas Bible Study Class), Mrs. Sandra Agarrat, to put on paper how she and her family were preparing for this Christmas. Her write-up is attached. I am sure that you will love it as much as I did.

In order to have a merry Christmas this Christmas, think of including the following activities in your celebrations:

- (a) *Review your relationship with God and His Son, Jesus Christ. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God [Rom. 3:23]. Therefore, don't hesitate to confess your sins and ask for His forgiveness [1 Jn 1:7-8].*
- (b) *Ask God to renew a right spirit within you [Ps. 51:10], the spirit of hope and love that Christmas evokes.*
- (c) *God has loved you by sacrificing His Only Begotten Son for you [Jn 3:16]. He has restored your heavenly passport lost to Satan by Adam. Once again, you have become a citizen of heaven [Phil. 3:20] and an ambassador of Christ on earth [2 Cor. 5:20]. So, plan to offer special thanks and gifts, as the three Wise Men did. Do you know why they were called wise? The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom [Prov. 1:7]. The wise shall inherit glory [Prov. 3:35].*
- (d) *As you buy gifts and cards for family and friends, don't forget the poor and those who can't repay you. Make a feast for them [Lk 14:13-14]. Flush your wardrobes of those clothes, shoes, handbags, etc, which you no longer need, and give them to charity. Whatever you do for Christ's brethren, you have done for Him [Matt. 25:40].*
- (e) *Like the shepherds and the Wise Men 2000 years ago, spread the word of God's glory to those who don't yet know about Christ and His redeeming mission. Remind non-believers and lukewarm Christians that Christ will soon return to judge the world [Matt. 25:*

*31-46]. They should not behave like the five foolish virgins who missed the bridegroom at the crucial moment [Matt. 25: 11-13].
(f) Finally, make everyday of the rest of your life a Christmas day. Let Christ live within you [2 Cor. 13:5; Col. 1:27], and by your fruits, the world will know that you are indeed the child of God [Gal. 5:22]. Let the joy of the Lord remain your daily strength [Nehemiah 8:10].*

I wish you a very Merry Christmas.

**The Wonderful Season of Advent
By Sandra Agarrat**

*“Oh come, O Come Emmanuel! And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here, Until the Son of God appear”*

How often we’ve sung these words to signal the start of the beautiful Advent Season! Indeed, Advent is one of the most beautiful seasons in the Christian Calendar. It is a season steeped in tradition and religious symbolism. But what is its real significance to us as Christians in today’s world? Is this Season just about the beautifully coloured candles, and the wreath?

The word “advent” is generally taken to mean “the coming”. Often compared to Lent, Advent provides us with an opportunity to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord. Not just as we reflect on his first coming - as a babe born in the stable in Bethlehem – but as we look forward in anticipation of his second and even more glorious coming.

Preparation

The Church is often likened to the “Bride” awaiting the arrival of her “Bridegroom”, Jesus our Saviour. This is in itself a wonderful analogy. And, as we all know, adequate, and often meticulous, preparation is essential to the success of any grand event. Indeed, our own Christian lives are no different! We must prepare ourselves to meet our Saviour. Mark 13:33 reminds us of the importance of being prepared, and alert, to ensure that we are ready for the glorious event.

But how do we prepare? We can do so by engaging in deep, prayerful reflection and introspection. During Advent, in the same way that we prepare our homes and surroundings for the Christmas festivities, we should take time out for spiritual renewal, a sprucing up of our spiritual beings, in preparation for our Saviour’s coming. How have we failed to live up to his teachings? How active is our prayer life and contemplation? What improvements can be made? These are just a few of the questions we can ask ourselves.

Anticipation

Like preparation, anticipation of our Lord's coming also plays an important part. We should anticipate needs and situations. We should be able to see where our input could be useful, and offer our assistance. Is there someone who needs a helping hand this Christmas? Is there some elderly or sick person to whom we can minister? Is there someone who is "down and out", or seemingly going astray with whom we counsel?

In our Advent reflections we need to look around us and see how we can do our part to make sure God's church (his beautiful bride) is being built up and prepared for his arrival. Is there some role we can play in our respective churches? Are we influencing others positively through our own words and actions? Let's not wait to be asked, instead, let's see where we can make a difference, and take up the challenge.

As part of the Bridal party, we simply cannot leave everything to chance - sitting on the sidelines, and watching on. We should be proactive, pitching in and doing our part to ensure that everything is ready for our special day!

Hope

As the Advent Season progresses, and Christmas Day approaches we are filled with hope. Hope for a change; hope for the better; hope for the coming of the Christ, the Messiah, Our Saviour! Isaiah 40:31 tells us of the promises made to those who put their hope and trust in the Lord.

John the Baptist inspired such hope prior to Christ's first coming. He often reminded his followers that he was just paving the way for the Messiah, preparing them in anticipation of the coming of the Lord Jesus.

But, even though we place our trust and hope in God, the Father, experience has often shown that, in spite of our preparation and anticipation, things may not turn out exactly as planned. We can, however, rest secure in the knowledge that our God will take care of us, providing us with the inner strength to deal with all eventualities (Romans 8: 28). As the story goes, many difficulties cropped up as the Blessed Virgin prepared for the birth of our Saviour. In fact, our Lord's first coming was not at all the spectacular event befitting the birth of a King. On the contrary – we are told he was born in a lowly manger, in a stable, surrounded by farm animals. But the Blessed Mary's wonderful faith and trust in God, and her eagerness to do God's will pervade the entire event. She remains a shining example for us of the preparation, anticipation and hope, which is symbolic of Advent.

Advent, therefore, is a period during which we can take stock of our own lives. Are we prepared for his coming? This is our chance to put our spiritual selves in order, in much the same way that we go about putting our physical surroundings in order. So, amidst all the frantic, frenzied preparations, the hustle and the bustle, the parties, family gatherings and annual obligations, we should spare a moment to look inwardly. We should draw closer to God, as we prepare to heed the call, "*Venite, adoremus, dominum!*" in celebration of Christ's coming!