

WAS JESUS A CHRISTIAN?

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Christmas 2013 is at our doorsteps as a welcome ‘refresh’ of the lives of the humans. 25 December warms up the minds and hearts of Christians, the world over, as the greatest festival. It also brings a pleasant ‘flash back’ to persons of all backgrounds, who received inspiration from Jesus and found their lives different, in some respect or other. 24 days of spiritual preparation makes devotees of Jesus eligible to welcome him anew to the diverse corners of their lives and to take to heart once again the sublime values he lived for, for a more thorough homework. Witnessing the scenes of the birth of Jesus and re-living those fulfilling moments, towards the midnight of 24 December, marks the grand finale of the hopeful waiting for the advent of Jesus.

Celebrating the birth of Jesus includes a variety of engagements. Participating in the special prayers in the church is the central part of the celebration. Seeking blessings for not only Christians but for all the citizens of the country and worldwide is the spirit of the prayers. Viewing the soul-stirring tableau that illustrates the birth of Jesus adds flying colours to the entire episode in the church. Greeting one another and sharing the joy of Christmas is the social aspect of the event. Sharing ‘cake’ with the dear and near ones of all communities is a symbolic gesture of good will, love and brotherhood with one and all. Get-togethers that overwhelm with ‘humane spirits’ last for the entire week, leading to the dawn of the New Year that indeed marks a new beginning in life.

Christmas is the festival beyond religious affiliations. Celebrating Christmas as a closed community affair of the Christians is an ancient and out-of-date mode. Of late, on the occasion of Christmas, people of other communities especially the younger generation, that too in millions when taken together, are seen visiting churches, viewing the tableau of the birth of Jesus and taking blessings from the child Jesus. The devotion they display is highly motivating even for Christians. This phenomenon appears to have captured not only the cities, but also towns and villages. The story of ‘Santa Clause’ who distributes gifts to children and the auspicious ‘Christmas Tree’ that gives surprise gifts to everyone attracts people of all persuasions. According to a survey, Christmas has emerged as the festival that brings the highest number of people together, not only outside India but also in India.

The name ‘Jesus’ stands for a universal meaning. The word ‘Jesus’ derives from ‘Yahoshua’ or ‘Joshua’, meaning ‘God takes care’ or ‘God saves’. Another source of the word ‘Jesus’ is ‘Emmanuel’, who means ‘God with us’. During the time of Jesus, the idea of God was that of ‘a power that is so far and unreachable’. Jesus brought God not only close to the human being, but revealed him as an ‘intimate companion’ who lives in him or her. He also exposed God to be ‘father’-like, whom human beings can approach like a son or daughter, in a spirit of filial freedom. That would amount to state that the name ‘Jesus’ stands for the fact that ‘God is closer to human beings, more than one is closer to oneself’ and that ‘there is a spiritual thread that fastens God the father and the children of God’. Observably, the implications of the name of ‘Jesus’ go beyond the borders of all traditions and understandings of God. Christmas is a celebration of such cross-cultural perceptions of divine-human dynamics.

The personality of Jesus is non-communal and secular. It transcends the limits of space and time. Obviously, the Christian community has committed a major slip-up by considering Jesus the founder of Christianity and keeping him as the patrimony of the Church. But, the irony of the fact is that ‘Jesus never founded a religion’. He never imagined a ghetto group of disciples in a closed up campus. He only lived a life-style and initiated a revolution; in other words, a spiritual, human and ethical movement. ‘Jesus is not a Christian’, he was never so. He was not a catholic or a protestant, too. The

God he revealed as 'father' is 'not a Christian God', either. His God is the 'God of all human beings, God of all faith perspectives, religionists and non-religionists alike. Who authorized Christians or the Church to baptize him a 'Christian' and to monopolize him? I am not able to understand. 'Jesus is a friend of people from all backgrounds of faith'. As other God-men and women, he is the 'shared heritage of the human society'. To deprive Jesus of that cross-border status and freedom and to confine him to a certain community with a communal status, I consider, is a crime not only against Jesus, but against the entire human society. Jesus was a 'humanist and spiritualist', to the core, that too in a perfectly harmonized way. Jesus is the name for a 'new vision of life, an ideology, a tradition and a life-style'. The teaching of Jesus is a 'spiritual light, energy, inspiration and strength', which serves as provisions for the journey of life, irrespective of any tag or trademark.

Jesus is 'good news' to every human being. He is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty and shelter for the roof-less. He is healing for the sick, freedom for the shackled and huntsman for the lost. He crutches the disabled, gathers the scattered and is a sign-post for the traveller. He is hope for the disappointed, mirror to the defectives and wisdom for the foolish. He is the way that leads those on the margins to the mainstream, is strength for the weak and voice for the voiceless. He is master to the disciples, lesson for the learners and companion to the travellers. He is rising to the browbeaten, consolation to the suffering and a new life to the dying. He is rest to the tired and heavy-laden, direction for those who have lost the way and support to the suppressed. He is everything to everyone. He is capable of giving whatever anyone is in need of. He becomes 'good news', par excellence, to everyone, himself. The one who recognizes the 'messiah' in Jesus and follows his footsteps with a single-minded devotion will find one 'blessed', irrespective of all backgrounds and affiliations.

The message of Christmas is love, service, forgiveness, brotherhood, harmony and peace. The teachings of Jesus are values lived by him. These values are not Christian values as such. They are 'human and spiritual values' that crisscross all religious and non-religious persuasions. They apply to all human beings alike. The dearest disciple of Jesus is not necessarily a Christian. He is the one who lives the values of Jesus, may he or she be a member of any community. The teachings of Jesus bear witness to this fact. Jesus says, 'love has not to be limited to one's friend and neighbour, but has to be extended to the enemy, as well'. The logic behind this new ruling is that the 'heavenly father does not discriminate between the righteous and the unrighteous', but 'sends sunshine and rains on both in an equal measure'. Even after having received the worst of the ill-treatment from the world, hanging on the cross, Jesus prayed thus, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing' and thus set a high ideal of 'unconditional forgiveness'.

Besides, even as Master, Jesus knelt before his disciples and washed their feet and set a sublime model of service, with a brilliant lesson 'you also should wash one another's feet'. He asserted that the 'service of the other is worship of God' stating 'whatever is done to one's brethren is in fact done to God himself'. 'Do to the other what you wish the other do to you' is his 'golden rule' for maintaining harmony among individuals and communities. Moreover, peace is God's gift, but only the one who is committed to love, service, forgiveness, brotherhood and harmony is eligible to enjoy it. The ideal human life Jesus portrayed through his words and deeds emphatically prove that 'Jesus' is not merely a person but an 'integral style of life' that stands beyond the borders of all attachments. Christmas is the golden time for 'renewing one's commitment to making a more harmonious society', in India and around the globe.

Could Christmas 2013 make a key in difference for the better in the lives of the humans? The first Christmas indeed did it, in a far-reaching manner. The birth of Jesus struck the history of the humans into two halves, before and after. Now, it is our turn and the ball is in our court. Could this Christmas liberate Jesus from the clutches of the religious systems that dared to monopolize him as a private property? Could it allow him to stand on his own merits beyond the boundaries of divisive forces? Could his image be refreshed as a 'shared divine spark' of the entire human species, beyond the enslaving grip of community interests? Could the elevating values he lived for be considered the

‘collective ethical heritage’ of the human society? Could this Christmas motivate Christians and people of all communities to commit themselves anew to ‘making a better country and a better society’? These are a few of the core questions that are posed to the human society as well as Christians all over, as they pass over the birth of Jesus and are nearing the threshold of the New Year 2014, in the 21st century and in the third millennium!

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