

A Few Reflections on Christmas

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My salutations to Jesus, to Sri Ramakrishna and all other Incarnations. As you can all understand I am neither a Christologist, nor a clergyman, nor a Reverend *Father*. They, in that capacity usually deliver the 'Message of the Christmas' to you on the Christmas Eve here in this Vivekananda Hall. But I am only an ordinary, insignificant *son*, a lay devotee; what can I say? Yet I have been asked by Revered Swami Suparnanandaji Maharaj, Secretary of the Institute, to speak a few words on the subject. I confess I can't do that. Instead, I shall try to share with you, dear friends, a few personal reflections on the subject.

Today is 23 December. This is not exactly the Christmas Eve. Probably for convenience, the occasion is being celebrated this evening. However, the date is not so important as the event itself. What is the event? The birth of Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, or as the Christians say—the Son of God.

However, before talking about that blessed event, I must tell you briefly my first experience of witnessing the celebration of Christmas Eve more than fifty years ago in Budapest. On December 24 I had just reached the city of Danube from the then Soviet Union in the afternoon. The temperature was minus 23 or 24. The city was covered with a thick endless blanket of snow. Exhausted as I was, I entered into the room provided by my host and fast fell asleep. I didn't know it was Christmas Eve. A few hours had passed. Suddenly I felt a

tap on my shoulder and heard the sweet voice of an old lady—'Get up son.' I opened my drowsy eyes and found the lady holding a glass in hand. Smiling, she said, 'Drink this.' 'What's this?' I asked in wonder. She said, 'It's red sweet wine—a holy thing. We drink this on this day when Jesus was born.' 'Oh, is this Christmas Eve!' I exclaimed. She nodded, and I was thrilled! As if a divine inspiration seized me immediately. Within a few minutes I dressed myself warmly and along with a friend came out on the street.

Oh! it was really a spectacular sight! I was overwhelmed. I still remember vividly the scene. Thousands and thousands of young and old, men and women, were on the illuminated pathways walking hand in hand, braving almost knee-deep snow hugging and kissing each other in love. The church bells were ringing constantly and everyone was singing carols in deep voice. We too joined them and started walking without knowing where we were going. I forgot I was a Hindu! I forgot they were mostly Catholic Christians! Only I felt in my heart that all of us were going towards God like the shepherds hastening to the place where the Holy Babe was born. It was this religious fervour in the name of Jesus, or God, the expressions of joy, hope and goodwill that inspired me most.

There is no authoritative and chronological record of Jesus's life, although the Holy Bible, the 'Gospel' in particular, contains the life of Jesus and only some of his principal and very valuable

teachings and some parables recorded by disciples and followers more or less about 2,000 years ago.

The backdrop

Now let us look at the backdrop of the birth of Jesus as we find in the Bible. It was a silent night. The shepherds were abiding in the field and keeping watch over their flock, when the *angel* of the Lord came upon them. As the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were afraid. But the angel comforted them saying, ‘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. And this shall be a sign unto you, you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.’

The shepherds came to the place and rejoiced at the sight of the Holy Babe they were looking for. They also related to Mary and Joseph ‘the good tidings of great joy’. Then came the Wise Men from the East guided by the heavenly *star* that stood motionless in the blue vault right above the Babe, shedding its serene rays upon Him. As soon as they found the Child, the Magi knelt on the ground before the manger and worshipped Him with gold, frankincense and other things.

Now, what is a *manger*? It is a long narrow open box for animals to feed or drink from. Imagine, the Divine Babe found no better place than this to descend on earth to redeem humanity out of infinite compassion! Even no place in the inn! Also we find there crowds of men and women who were hurrying about, engrossed in their own mundane affairs, without even caring to notice the child lying in the manger under their very eyes! What is the significance of this neglect and humble birth of Jesus in a manger? I think, it was to demonstrate the paramount importance of spiritual values and utter insignificance of the material. We

also find in this, God’s coming amidst the poor and the dismal scenario, a ray of hope, that God loves the poor and the pure (like Mary). He takes such a birth to show us that we too can raise ourselves from our present pitiable state and grow to become ultimately one with the Divine. Manger represents the animal level. From this level we have to rise to the Divine or spiritual level. The birth of Jesus reminds me of this tremendous human possibilities and development.

Who was the ‘angel’ and who were the ‘wise men’ of the East? The angel is the messenger through whom God speaks sometimes and the ‘wisemen of the East’ are advanced spiritual souls who are competent to hear and understand an oracle. In response to their prayers, God intervenes and appears in human form from time to time to drive away unrighteousness from the world. Remember Krishna’s declaration in the 4th chapter of the *Gītā*—‘*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati Bhārata, Abhyuthānam adharmasya tadātmānam srijāmyaham*’ (4.7)—‘Whenever there is decline of Dharma and ascendance of Adharma, then I manifest / incarnate Myself in a body.’

Now the ‘star’. Perhaps it symbolizes the advent of Jesus on earth as the founder of a spiritual kingdom and bestower of heavenly light. In fact, all Incarnations of God—Jesus, Rāma, Krishna, Buddha, Chaitanya, Ramakrishna and others—are like dazzling stars shining in the spiritual firmament and shedding divine light upon men and women of different races and countries. The same God incarnates Himself in different ages, among different people to establish a new order and fulfil the old. Jesus was one such wonderful manifestation of God.

Christ’s historicity

There are many scholars in the West who have from time to time expressed their

doubts about the historicity of Christ. But the Christian saints and mystics who had visions of Christ, and of course, millions of devotees harbour no such suspicion. To them Christ is a *palpable reality*. I, for one, don't have the slightest doubt about the authenticity of his divine existence. Apart from my personal faith, I like to cite *three instances* that prove beyond doubt that Christ was and *is* very much historical, not just a myth or imaginary character.

The first instance relates to Sri Ramakrishna's encounter with Christ. I quote extensively from Christopher Isherwood's book *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* to prove my point. Writes the famous British Novelist and playwright Isherwood:

Shambhu (Charan Mallick) was a devout student of the scriptures of various religions. He was the first to read Ramakrishna from the Bible and speak to him of Jesus of Nazareth; *Sri Ishā*, as the Hindus call him. Ramakrishna's thoughts began to dwell upon the personality of Jesus. As it happened, he often took walks to a garden-house which was situated to the south of Dakshineswar Temple grounds, and rested there; and the parlour of this garden-house was hung with pictures of holy personalities, including one of the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus, sitting on her lap. Ramakrishna became especially attached to this picture. One day, while he was looking at it, he felt that the figures of the Mother and child began to shine, and that rays of light struck forth from them and entered his heart. As this happened, he was aware of a radical change in his attitude of mind. He felt—just as he had felt during the time of his initiation into Islam by Govinda Roy—that his Hindu way of thinking had been pushed into the back of his mind and that his reverence for the Hindu gods and goddesses had weakened. Instead, he was filled with love for Jesus and for Christianity. He cried to Kali, 'Oh Mother, what are these strange

changes you are making in me?' But his appeal did not alter his condition. And now he began to see visions of Christian priests burning incense and waving lights before the images of Jesus in their churches, and he felt the fervour of their prayers. Ramakrishna came back to Dakshineswar under the spell of these experiences, and for three days he did not even go into the temple to salute the Divine Mother. At length, on the evening of the third day, while he was walking in the Panchavati, he saw a tall, stately man with a fair complexion coming towards him, regarding him steadfastly as he did so. Ramakrishna knew him at once to be a foreigner. He had large eyes of uncommon brilliance and his face was beautiful, despite the fact that his nose was slightly flattened at the tip. At first Ramakrishna wondered who this stranger could be. Then a voice from within told him, 'This is Jesus the Christ, the great yogi, the loving Son of God and one with his Father, who shed his heart's blood and suffered tortures for the salvation of mankind!' Jesus then embraced Ramakrishna and passed into his body. Ramakrishna remained convinced, from that day onward, that Jesus was truly a divine incarnation.

Let me now give you the *second example*. Swami Brahmananda, the spiritual son of Sri Ramakrishna, was then in Madras. When December came, he said to Laura Glenn (Sister Devamata): 'Sister, you are the Christian member of the [Ramakrishna] Math, you should give us a Christmas Party.' 'What kind of party do you wish, Swamiji?' she asked. 'As much like a Western Christmas party as you can make it,' was his reply. So everything was arranged—A Christmas tree, the altar, flowers, plum cake, glacé fruits, some bread and wine as a symbol of the Christian Eucharist.

At four o'clock, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Ramakrishnananda and the Christmas party arrived at Devamata's residence. Swami Brahmananda took his

seat at the far end of the hall opposite the altar and asked Devamata to read the story of Christ's birth and she chose the account of St. Luke. When she had finished reading, the intense stillness in the air led the Sister to look towards Swami Brahmananda. His eyes were open and fixed on the altar, there was a smile on his lips, but it was evident that his consciousness had gone to a higher plane. No one moved or spoke. At the end of twenty minutes or more the look of immediate seeing returned to his eyes and he motioned to Devamata to continue the Service. Lights, incense, and burning camphor were waved before the altar, the evening chant and hymn were sung, all those present bowed in silent prayer and the Christmas Service was ended.

'As he was eating', writes Devamata, 'he remarked to me: "I have been very much blessed in coming to your house today, Sister. . . . I have had a great blessing here this afternoon. As you were reading the Bible, Christ suddenly stood before the altar dressed in a long blue cloak. He talked to me for some time. It was a very blessed moment."'

The third incident

The *third incident* took place before our very eyes, when a few of us accompanied Swami Lokeswarananda, the then Secretary of this Institute, to the St. Paul's Church at Amherst Street in Kolkata. The incident had taken place one or two years before his passing away. It was the same church where Sri Ramakrishna once went to see how do the Christians worship and pray to Christ. At the invitation of the Church fathers, the swami went there and spoke. After his speech, as he was sitting on the dais beside the head clergy, his face glowed in a rare brilliance. Later, being asked by a devotee, he said, 'Yes, at that moment I had the

vision of Jesus who was dancing rapturously hand in hand with Sri Ramakrishna.'

So, in my view, there is no doubt about Christ's historicity.

Before I stop I want to mention some of the qualities of Christ I personally adore. These are his renunciation, spirit of sacrifice, forbearance, humility, dependence on the Father and, above all, his pure love. Christ was, so to say, a disembodied Spirit. That is why his resurrection was possible. The crucifixion symbolizes on the one hand his love and sacrifice for humanity and the triumph of Spirit over matter. Through his self-sacrifice he sought to raise our consciousness that we are not just a lump of flesh, a body, but undying immortal, imperishable Spirit and, in Spirit, we are one with the Father (God).

So this is a great occasion that we have assembled here to celebrate Christmas Eve. To a child, Christmas means cakes and cookies, pastries and delicious food. In that sense we are all children. But the occasion represents or reminds us a profound truth which Swami Vivekananda expressed in a few words. What did he say? 'We are potentially divine.' We will be born as Jesus, we may be humiliated, suffer hundreds of tribulations, but we have to become Christ or Christ-like. Being Christ means to me, to be able to attain a state, the highest state which a human person can aspire for and attain to by the grace of God, wherefrom one can declare 'I and my Father are one.'

So, let us open our hearts to Jesus and let us receive His light with all humility, reverence and devotion. May His grace descend upon us. May he inspire us with divine love. May we be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect, because to attain perfection is the ultimate goal of spiritual life.

Thank you all. I wish you all a Merry but *spiritual* Christmas. ■

* Speech delivered at the Institute on 23 December, 2017.