

Christmas Means Bringing Light and Hope to Everyone

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I would like to take you to one passage in the Gospel according to Matthew (Matthew 5. 14-16), which, I believe, contains the whole Christmas aspect. Verse 14 says:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house [15]. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven [16].

Christmas is all about bringing light and hope to everyone. I hope some engineers, doctors, and other well-educated and well-placed people are present here this evening. Now, suppose you are an engineer and a baby is given to you in your family. That is to say, a child is born and your wife says, 'Look at my child'. Then, what do you do? Do you say as an engineer, 'Well, this thing is about twelve inches long and maybe one and a half kilograms in weight and the texture of its skin . . . etc? Do you talk like this? No. I see so much of smile on your face as soon as the word 'child' is mentioned, for that is contagious. That means God is coming to us everyday and asking us to 'smile' and telling us that there is 'hope', hope, through obedience and that there is life still going on and we need to harness that.

So my question is: Would it not be nice for God, Jesus, to be born in the wealthiest

family? Why should he be born in a poor family? Things would have changed certainly, if, suppose, he were born as the son of a person like Donald Trump, the most powerful man now. But that did not happen. Why? Why would God incarnate in every religion in the most simple manner in a very humble family? Take the example of Sri Ramakrishna. When he was alive, how many could recognize him? So, the question that distresses our mind is that why should these great people be born in wretched families? The answer that I get is this: If Jesus were born in a royal family we could always say, Jesus could become Jesus because he was born in a royal family. Can we do things the way he did? On the contrary, if the child is born in a really poor family and we find him coming up, we gain confidence and become sure that it is also possible for us to be great.

No wonder we got Dr Abdul Kalam. Whenever we are at any educational institution we say, look at the life of Dr Abdul Kalam. He was on the streets studying and ultimately he turned out to be the President of India, and a great scientist. This beckons me personally to come to God. Yes, if God as a person can be humble, give hope, and be obedient to his elders and to God, possibly I can also do the same. That is one reason I think why Jesus decided to be born in a poor family. All of you know he was born in a manger, amidst utter despair; yet he became Christ. So whenever you are surrounded by utter hopelessness, remember

you too can rise again. At times some worries grip you in such a way, you think this is the end of all; you have come to the end of everything—no solution, no hope! It is then that someone comes and tells you: Why worry? There is hope. Similarly, the question is, can I be a person who can bring hope to others?

What is the second intervention of Jesus Christ in the life of humanity? In the Old Testament, you will find God as a person who is very powerful, very angry, very ruthless. And there comes the intervention of Jesus Christ. Since then, there is a complete paradigm shift. Jesus says: What you are thinking of God is not real God. The real god is He who is loving and forgiving even to the point of death. Follow My example. If you look at the famous story of the ‘Prodigal Son’, you find that the boy sells everything, lives lousily and then, at one point, comes back. But God forgives him. We, parents in Calcutta need to send so many students to the Homes for the aged. And I myself also go there often. It is a sad story because many children nowadays throw their parents out and they are forced to pass their last days in such Homes! When you hear such stories you naturally feel very angry. But if you say anything against the sibling then the students would say, ‘No, no, Father, please do not speak like that. Maybe he has got some reasons. Maybe the son is an engineer or a doctor and staying abroad’. *That is love*, which Jesus is bringing out. No matter what you do, the moment you ask forgiveness, forgiveness is given. Similarly, you too ought to forgive others unconditionally whenever they ask you to do so. That is the whole message of Jesus Christ.

Can I be like Jesus?

The important question is, can I be like Jesus Christ? Well, if someone asks this question, give him or her hope. You can say,

two thousand years ago the situation was very bad, now it is a lot better. However, the truth is, if you look at the books of history, you find the situation still remains the same, probably it has grown worse. Nevertheless, we need to keep on smiling just as we look at the baby that is gifted to us in our family and smile.

I do not know why God always said, ‘Love your neighbour’—for that is really a challenging task. When you open the door of your flat and see your disputatious neighbour, can you forgive him and be happy? Forget about that quarrelsome neighbour. Suppose, you are living with your wife with whom you had a tough fight a few days ago. Can you still come out of this clash? It is probably difficult. But far easier is to tackle the situation when by mistake we push a stranger or step on him on the way and very humbly say ‘sorry’. We are then very polite and show compassion for him. We may then almost look like another ‘Mother Teresa’ walking down the road. But, it is a pity that when I come home I cannot reconcile with my own wife or husband or children, or my parents! Thus God is challenging us today and asking if we can be a little more loving, a little more open, a little more hopeful, and a little more forgiving.

Now I would like to share a couple of things with you and in this sharing of mine if I sound haughty, please forgive me because it is by sharing that one begins to learn how good things are happening. I ask you one question. Do you want to see the biggest sinner? If you do, you just do not have to look anywhere; just look at me. I am not worthy enough to be here before you, dear devotees. But sometimes God beckons you and therefore you stand here to tell your experience that really happened. It is not false humility. To find out the answer whether Jesus is helping me today, I have to

go back to February 2007, when I was a Vice-Principal at St. Xaviers. I remember, it was a very bad week for me because I was flooded with work. For example, I was supposed to say the Mass in the evening in the St. Xaviers' chapel. The Mass was to begin at 6.30 and I said to myself that after the Mass I would go back to my room and take rest as I was suffering from a splitting headache. I said the Mass and about 7 o'clock I tried to go out when I met a man. He said: 'I saw you in the chapel doing vesper. I want to ask you some questions. Can you please give me some time?'

My dear brothers and sisters, I was definitely not interested in giving some time to that stranger. But my cassock made me smile and tell a beautiful lie, 'Yes, sir'. For some reasons I thought let me listen to him.

He said: 'I will talk to you only for five to ten minutes'. But we went on talking for nearly forty-five minutes! I was absolutely honest to answer some of his questions about religion that I knew, and said 'no' to questions, the answer of which I myself did not know, for instance about why this or that was happening etc. Initially his face was so dull, but then slowly it lit up. After some time he said: 'Sir, you have thrown a real atomic bomb at me. I was actually going to commit suicide today, this very evening. And as I was passing by, I saw the church and I thought let me go and sit there for a while and then go back and do what I intend to do. I have got a beautiful wife and a beautiful daughter. For some reasons I felt I have reached the end of the road; I will wind up the whole story. But now I will go back home and tell my wife that I love her and the daughter and *I will live for them.*

I really froze there! For the first time in my life I thought being a human being has some worth in it. Forget about being a priest, etc. Being a *human being* has some worth in it. Still I had some doubts in my mind if the

man has really gone back home because people can change their mind. So the next day I opened the newspaper and tried to find out if any suicidal death case has been reported. I found none. Two days later the gentleman came and said: 'Sir, I am alive. I just wanted to tell you this' and then went away.

So, you see, God is using you and me every moment. Can we be the light of hope?

Another incident

I give you another incident. This happened about a year ago. One of the parents of my school, who is a hawker at Hazra, came to me crying and eventually said, 'Nothing can be done any more, I am ending my life, Father'.

I did not know what to do. But some formula by divine grace works. So I asked the man, 'Your son is in which class?' He said, 'Class IV'. I called the boy and talked to him for the next five minutes in English. And as I was talking to this boy, the parent was crying. Afterwards I said, 'Okay you go back to your class'. As the boy was going back I said to him, 'Your father is here and you are not saying bye to your daddy?' He said, promptly, 'Bye daddy', and went away. Then the man said, 'Father, I am not going to end my life, instead *I shall fight for this son of mine.*'

I am not trying to trumpet how good and holy I am. Please do not think thus. Take it away from your mind. What I lay stress on is that God in all His greatness can always use all of us in this or other manner. That is real Christmas. Are we ready to obey God?

If you look at the Christian theology, the whole thing of Trinity—God, the Father, the Holy Ghost and the son, up in heaven looking at the world going through so much of problems, you find God saying to the Son—we need to redeem humanity. Jesus says promptly: Yes, I am ready to

give up to the extent of being crucified.

That is perfect obedience. All of us know that obedience is a much-talked-about ideal all over the world, but very few carry it through. Only when you practise that you realize how great and important it is. If there was no obedience in the life of this little baby born, Jesus, you and I would not be here. But for the obedience of Swami Vivekananda we would not have been here in this auditorium. If obedience to Krishna was lacking, there would have been no Arjuna. The whole *visvarupa* is not for everybody to know or see; it was reserved only for Arjuna to say—this is it. Krishna advised Arjuna to do what he was supposed to do. So, obey without expecting any kind of a fruit. The fruit will follow. The question is, can we be like Jesus and be agents to people on the streets of Calcutta? Can we be more obediently hopeful to others?

I suppose you all know about Judas Iscariot. There is a story about him. It was the year 137 A. D.—one hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ when all the disciples of Christ, including Judas, were then up in heaven. It is said that they came together to Jesus and said: See, this is the hundredth anniversary. Let us all go for a picnic.

Jesus said, I cannot do all these things. We will have to seek permission from God, the Father. All the disciples went along with Jesus and said: We want to have a picnic all by ourselves. Will you allow us? God, the Father said, yes, I permit you to do so.

All the disciples then packed everything. When they were about to go, Jesus said: Take two stones, each of you. All the disciples took two big stones, but not Judas. He thought—why should I take two huge stones? It looks ridiculous. So he took two little stones and walked along. All day they

walked and walked in heaven and felt tired and hungry. There were no pizzas or some such delicious food available at that time! So they told Jesus that they were hungry. Jesus replied: Why ask me, you have got two stones. Pray and those will become bread. And lo and behold, it really became bread for everyone to eat, except Judas. Judas had only two little stones that turned into two small slices. Jesus again told them to obey and pray. So they continued to walk and as they continued, Jesus told them again to take two stones. Now Judas wanted to teach Jesus a lesson! So he took two huge rocks, put them on his back and started walking. After some time they again became hungry and told Jesus about their hunger. Jesus said: Why are you asking me? You are right in the middle of the mango grove! So many mangoes are there and each of you have got two stones. Then everyone threw their stones and got the mangoes. But Judas had with him two big rocks which he was unable to throw to get the mangoes!

My dear brothers and sisters, it is true that the story sounds very funny and perhaps nice when it happens to others. We think, oh! If we were there during the time of Jesus, we would not have committed such silly mistakes. But no—possibly, we would have done worse.

So you see, lack of obedience is the biggest stumbling-block for all of us and it is this *obedience* which brought this Christmas into life. And it is t-h-e obedience which brings hope, joy, happiness to everyone in a very special way. I pray to God for each and everyone present and your family members that your life may be filled with joy and happiness especially in moments of trial and despair, for it is at that time that God gives you that mysterious hope not only to go forward but take others along with you. ■

* This is the edited text of the Christmas Eve lecture delivered at the Institute by Reverend Father Sebastian James, S. J., St. Lawrence High School, on 24 December 2016.