

THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD

(Taken from a local Christian magazine in Kenya published following an interview with Mr. Kigame))

WHAT IS THE MEANING AND THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS?

The word "Christmas" does not appear anywhere in the Bible, yet the appearance of a word does not imply that what it refers to does not exist. This is the case with terms such as "trinity", "incarnation" and "rapture."

Whenever the Church uses the term "Christmas", it is with reference to the commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ to whom all Christians direct their allegiance. Events surrounding this birth such as the recitation of the Messianic prophecies, the virgin birth, the visit of the wise men, the worship of the shepherds prompted by an angelic annunciation, etc, are enchanted and enacted in a celebrant mood. Although we notice the start of the celebration of Christmas in Rome in the year 336 A.D., its significance is evident to the disciples before this date as seen in the Gospels and the Epistles. In a Christmas sermon to an Eastern Roman empire congregation in 386 A.D., St. Chrysostom declared, "It is not ten years since this day was clearly known to us, but it has been known from the beginning to those who dwell in the West."

The following Christmas themes reveal the real meaning of Christmas:

First, the good news that Christ's birth brought with it a sure possibility of freedom from the power and influence of sin. Matthew records the words of the angel to Joseph, "...you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21.) Notably, the name Jesus is the English rendering of the Hebrew name "Joshua" which means "Jehovah is salvation." Hebrews tells us that "...it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. In other words, the usual sacrifices and other salvific efforts made by man could not deal with sin. Christmas announces over and over again that man's biggest problem, i.e. sin or evil can be dealt with through faith in Jesus Christ. Although this possibility is commemorated in another Christian festival referred to as "Easter", the news that this is possible is announced at the birth of Jesus. As one Christmas carol has put it, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," and all that is left of you and I is to echo, "Let Earth receive her King."

Second, Christmas introduces peace and reconciliation, first with God and then among men. The host of heaven declare in Luke 2:14: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests." It is customary at Christmas for family members to come together and recommit themselves to one another, sometimes with confession and reconciliation. This is often solidified by the exchange of gifts and the sharing of sumptuous meals. Paul emphasizes this theme when he urges in Romans that everyone does their best to live at peace with all as far as it is possible.

Third, at Christmas it is reiterated that God is not distant from us because in Christ He took on a human form to reach us at our level. John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen the glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." This is what is meant by the "incarnation." Matthew wrote, "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son and they will call Him Immanuel - which means 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:23). In this sense, Christmas is the reminder that God is accessible both for salvation and in times of need. It is a reminder that God is concerned with our human situation and is willing to help us.

ARE YOU SATISFIED BY THE WAY CHRISTMAS HAS BEEN CELEBRATED?

I think Christians have kept to the meaning of Christmas in their celebration of it. Nevertheless, the inclination to commercialize Christmas has not spared followers of Christ. They have been persuaded to buy a lot of things they do not need, tempted to go to places they ought not for entertainment, and definitely many have been tempted by greed and gluttony among other vices. It is a pity that Christmas is increasingly ceasing to be church-centered and is becoming supermarket-centered. Excessive advertizing is, perhaps, one of the greatest contributors to this state.

- ***CHRISTMAS: SHOULD CHRISTIANS CELEBRATE IT?***

Certain Christians in Church history have altogether stopped observing some events among the special days of the year labeled "Christian holidays" for the reason that they have a pagan origin. Two of these are worth mentioning. The Easter holiday is dismissed as an Eastern event in the exaltation of the Mesopotamian deity, Ishtar, variously the "Queen of Heaven." Christmas is denounced as a Greco-Roman festival exalting the appearance of the Sun-god.

While in the latter case a serious question might be raised as to exactly what part of the year it was when Jesus was born about two thousand years ago, I do not find it a strong argument for anyone to stop observing these events altogether. Truly, Christmas might have taken place earlier in the year, perhaps as early as April or May, but, one may want to think that we do not carry the significance of events in dates but in the essence that lies behind them. It would seem more permissible for me to abandon the celebration of Christmas if what it stood for itself was the magnifying of the religion of the sun god, which it is not. In essence, what do Christians and, indeed the whole world, celebrate in Christmas?

First, every Christian and non-Christian knows it just too well that Christmas focuses on nothing else than the birth of Jesus Christ who stands at the centre of the Christian faith, not the Islamic faith; not Hinduism; not Roman mythology and, indeed, not the sun god. This Jesus is not a pagan god. This is to say that the world knows the central significance of Christmas directly or indirectly.

Second, it is a common fact that at Christmas the birth of Jesus Christ is associated with the salvation of the world from sin. Christians as well as non-Christians are aware of this. This is an important truth to proclaim. Why? Because at Christmas, the entire world is reminded again and again in its shopping sprees, in the music and other presentations in the media that the world is engrossed in sin and that the world needs a Saviour. This is a solemn reality. What better opportunity to proclaim the gospel to the whole world without forcing it on them? People just love to celebrate Christmas. Hardly anyone protests, "Let us do away with this festival that forces all of us to hear the Gospel," and yet, some Christians would rather do without this themselves. They, in fact, take the lead in trying to undo the celebration of Christmas. This, to me, is equivalent to saying that it is unfair for the world to hear the Gospel with such simplicity.

Third, Christmas is known by everyone who takes time to consciously celebrate it as a time of proclaiming love for each other. Families are brought together. Some people take time to mend broken relationships. Many selfish and greedy people are reminded and even make practical efforts to mind the welfare of the unfortunate members of society. The orphans, the street children, prisoners, refugees and all manners of the deprived are seriously considered during Christmas. A common objection is usually raised by this camp of Christmas-objecting Christians: "Why care only now and not during the rest of the year?" This state of things, I believe was best commented on by G.K. Chesterton when he wrote:

"Compromise used to mean that half a loaf was better than no bread. Among modern statesmen (perhaps including the one who objects to Christmas) it really seems to mean that half a loaf is better than a whole loaf." I think this fits neither reality nor an honest pursuit of truth.

For the reason that some Christians are turning away from Christmas, I think several things are bound to happen:

1. The Christian community is gradually going to shoot its own foot in a bid to improve on Christian doctrine.
2. The skeptic is going to find a ready ground to despise Christianity and all the ideals it stands for.
3. Christians may lose a golden opportunity to evangelize a world that is just so well tuned to hear the Good News about the birth of a Saviour. What a wonderful starting point!
4. With time, we may as well put on gloom and indifference when it comes to celebration.
5. We are bound to take issue with such evangelistic approaches as that employed by Paul in the 17th chapter of the book of Acts in his adoption of the pagan "Unknown God" principle and all the "pagan" poetry he employs in this chapter. If this is the case, we must give an account of the numerous people who come to Christ through this approach.

Christmas must be upheld and celebrated for its essence rather than abandoned for what it does not purport to stand for even in the eyes of an average non-Christian. As it has been well said, we should never judge a philosophy by its abuse.

Merry Christmas everyone and may the Lord use you as you employ the common understanding of Christmas to reach many who do not know Jesus Christ!