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Christmas

Humanity's indelible landmark

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Jesus of Nazareth born two-thousand years ago in Bethlehem of ancient Judea in Israel leaves indeed not only footprints in the sands of time but a uniquely indelible mark on humanity's horizons and in the history of civilisation. The last Catholic Ecumenical Council of Vatican II in the document on the Church in the modern world made a significant statement about Jesus Christ, when it declared poignantly: "The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilisation, the centre of humanity, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations" (n 45).

No philosopher, religious thinker or mystic has ever reached that height of insight and interior illumination enabling to delve into such an august truth about the pivotal and incisive place of Jesus Christ who embraces the mystery of man and his world. In fact, the mystery that surrounds the enigma of man can be fully understood only when we gaze at the luminous figure of Jesus of Nazareth. He was wonderful in his teachings, imposing in his lifestyle and immortal in his message that goes beyond space and time.

The hope of a liberator

The Celebration of Christmas focuses on the festival of the Incarnation of God once and for all, in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. Hidden within his human frame appearing in space and time, within a Jewish culture and religious tradition, an ancient-east civilisation which really is west-Asia, with its socio-political background, a colony under the imperial rule of Rome's Caesar, the historical scenario is set according to the Bible, for the birth of the world's Messiah.

The popular expectations of the people living under a foreign rule, with the country's natural and financial resources exploited by the colonial power of Rome, were indeed focused on the appearance of a religious-political liberator, who would not only make Palestine, the land given by God one freed from the idol worship of Caesar, but also a country that is free politically to manage its national affairs on its own. The intervention of the long-expected Messiah would restore the sanctity of the land and its people while at the same time bestow a free and independent society giving way to a new landscape of national identity. Contrary to these popular yearnings, Jesus of Nazareth came announcing a kingdom that is not of this world.

When questioned by Pilate, the Governor of Judea at his trial, the worst ever travesty in the history of legal jus-

tice, the humble son of the carpenter from Galilee, the religious guru and the miracle worker, undauntedly gave a clear reply that he was a king indeed but added that those who belong to that kingdom are people who are guided by the truth and are worthy to inherit the blessings of the great Sermon on the Mount he preached by the shores of the sea of Galilee.

They included those who are poor in spirit, those who are meek, those persecuted for the sake of justice, those whose exemplary lives would impact on society as good transforming leaven, salt that gives taste to living midst suffering and challenges and finally those who would serve him by caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the prisoners.

Teachings

These were the beneficiaries of the kingdom he brought. Naturally, to a governor of Pilate's calibre, who was accustomed only to power, prestige, domination and authority, this language was strange and incomprehensible. St. Paul, once a die-hard religious leader but later converted to the faith, enunciated very clearly in his later life and teaching that the kingdom of God does not consist in eating, drinking and merry-making seeped in opulence and abundance of goods and pleasure, but in joy and righteousness coming through a life of holiness, self-restraint and justice. He challenged the roman culture of greed for power and relentless pleasure, by exhorting people not to live as those who do not know God: a goddess and erratic lifestyle that is wholly worldly.

We see already, that many who embraced the teachings of Jesus were ready to let go of their material possessions and position and live a life of sharing with the poor and being ever ready even to lay down their lives in defense of what they believed.

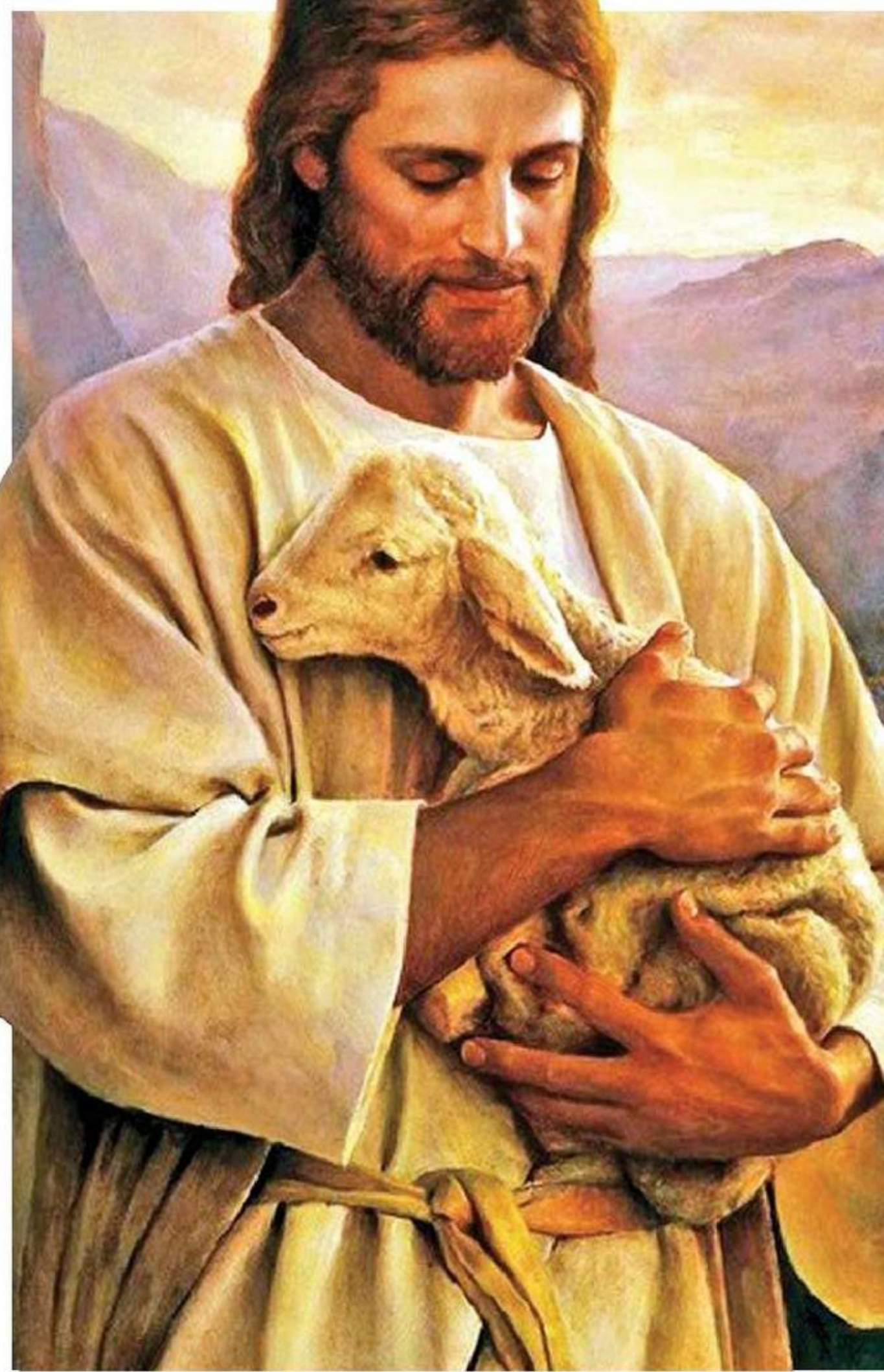
The equality of all people devoid of social class, cultural differences, language and even that of gender, was eminently in vogue in many of the great cities of the middle-east following the missionary journeys and the teachings of the earliest of missionaries. Thus, the imperial city of Rome which was the epi-centre of emperor-worship and that of Athens, the highly influential centre of culture and learning, that of Philosophy, rhetoric, literature and fine arts became gradually transformed into new cultural centres and social institutions that became channels of Christian values, ethics and philosophy.

THERE WILL NEVER BE IN HISTORY A BIRTH SECOND TO THAT OF JESUS OF NAZARETH. HIS TEACHINGS OVERTURNED THE WORLDLY WAY OF THINKING AND DECISION-MAKING. HE BROUGHT A NEW ETHIC OF HUMAN RELATIONS, SOLIDARITY AND BROTHERHOOD THAT SHOCKED EVEN THE ETHOS OF HIS DAY TEACHING HOW THE RICH CAN COME TO THE SUCCOUR OF THE POOR, GO BEYOND THEIR COMFORT ZONES AND REACH OUT TO OTHERS OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL, RACIAL AND SOCIAL CLASS LEVELS.

A nativity scene in contrast

The nativity scene is on purpose nar-

rated in relation to a carpenter's family that had to journey a long way from their home to Bethlehem for a census ordered by Augustus Caesar. The Gospels insist on the



census being historical, the city of Bethlehem being filled to capacity with its inns overcrowded and the infant being born in the backyard of the inn, where the cattle used to lay.

To take the drama of poverty to its extreme, the story is of the new-born infant being laid in a manger from where the cattle eat their food and swaddling clothes to have been used by the mother for covering the child.

Yet, this was the greatest birth of the greatest human being ever known and he is destined to bring the good news of liberation from evil for all mankind.

The angels alone sing their song from the heavens with the shepherds watching their flocks by night becoming the first beneficiaries who hearing the news of the birth of the world's savior hasten to see and adore. A strange cosmic star led three wise men to the stable where the infant Jesus lay fondled by his parents.

They are enthralled to have kings come by dead of night to worship their child. All these will sound strange and incredible in the hearing of a godless society and a soul-less science that can only rely on technology and secular vision of life and the world.

The indelible mark of the infant of Bethlehem who continued to contend with sin, evil and demonic forces in the society of his day, forgiving sinners, bring physical healing to the sick, word of consolation to those in anxiety and defending the dignity of women, continues to be seen in the way Christians all over the world carry on in many ways, the work of Jesus Christ.

They defend human rights, propagate pro-life movements, raise their voice on behalf of the workers, defend the dignity of women, have compassion on those who are waylaid through exile caused by fleeing from dictatorial governments and rulers, immigrate in millions in search of greener pastures, supporting lawful trade-union action and foster generosity towards those who are indigent in many ways and poor.

Love and compassion

Many are the hospitals, the caring centres, the orphanages, homes for elders and disabled, correctional centres or errant youth, rehabilitation centres for addicts of all hues, leper colonies run, hospital and youth chaplains..... the works of charity pursued by various Christian bodies of various churches globally. These are all inspired by the teachings of Christ who showed mercy and

compassion to the indigent and even worked miracles in the deserts of Galilee to feed the hungry crowds that flocked from far and near to gaze at his face, receive healing and comfort. Love of neighbour is being made to include even love and forgiveness for one's enemy and doing good to those who hurt you.

A transformed humanity

There will never be in history a birth second to that of Jesus of Nazareth. His teachings overturned the worldly way of thinking and decision-making. He brought a new ethic of human relations, solidarity and brotherhood that shocked even the ethos of his day teaching how the rich can come to the succour of the poor, go beyond their comfort zones and reach out to others of different cultural, racial and social class levels. The widow's mite that was thrown into the treasury of the temple was far valuable than the bundles of denari thrown in there by the rich.

The children and women are important sectors in society and therefore are to be loved and heard. No harm should befall on children due to the callousness and scandal perpetrated by the adults and their world and so he blessed the children brought to him by their mothers and indicted strongly those who injure and hurt little ones.

Indeed, Jesus was pro-life having declared himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. He also wishes to share the power of his risen life over sin and death with his disciples and invites them to be the salt, the light of the world and the leaven in society.

He promises solace and compassion to all those who come to him when in anxiety and distress feeling life and its challenges a burden and a cause for despair. He assures that people must trust him, since he has overcome the world and saw the Evil One fall like lightning from heaven in utter defeat.

Such is the future world that the Infant of Bethlehem vouched for humanity. The world has never been the same, ever since the birth of this miraculous baby as we see year after year the entire world going into a frenzy of joy, feasting and sharing. He was destined to enter the history of mankind and human civilisation in a manner that no one had done ever before.

His is a landmark birth and as a religious luminary and inspirer, he belongs not only to Christians but to the entire humanity at large.

His appearance made humanity and the world richer and beautiful. At Christmas we can gaze at Jesus Christ as a universal Light and a treasure to be embraced letting the spirit of Christmas last well beyond just the Christmastide.