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Last Christmas the pandemic doomed Christmas celebrations. Although vaccines hold promise this year, it will not immediately eradicate the threat of the virus. The lights of Christmas may look dim due to the consequences pandemic has brought about yet the spirit of Christmas cannot be overlooked. Thus the shops and streets are once again flooded with people shopping for clothes, Christmas decorations, Christmas trees and Christmas goodies.

While all festivities happen in and around the city, it is also the time of the year for all Christians to think about the significance of the incarnation of Christ. Christ's birth occurred during a time when greed, ignorance, hatred, superstition and hypocrisy prevailed in the society. Thus His birth reveals a deep truth of the spiritual life. To seek this deep truth of the spiritual life, one must be humble and poor in spirit.

Christmas and paganism

Christmas is typically celebrated on December 25 and this traditional date goes back as far as AD 336 during the reign of Emperor Constantine. Before the birth of Christ people around the world celebrated light and birth in the darkest days of winter. Winter solstice was a celebration where people rejoiced as they awaited the extended hours of sunlight ending the worst of winter. In Scandinavia, Norse celebrate 'Yule' from December 21 and winter solstice through the month of January.

Celebrating this festival, fathers and sons would bring large logs home which they eventually set on fire symbolising the return of the sun. People used to feast around this log until it completely burned out. This took 12 days the least and the Norse believed that each spark rising out from the burning log is a new calf or pig that will be born in the coming year.

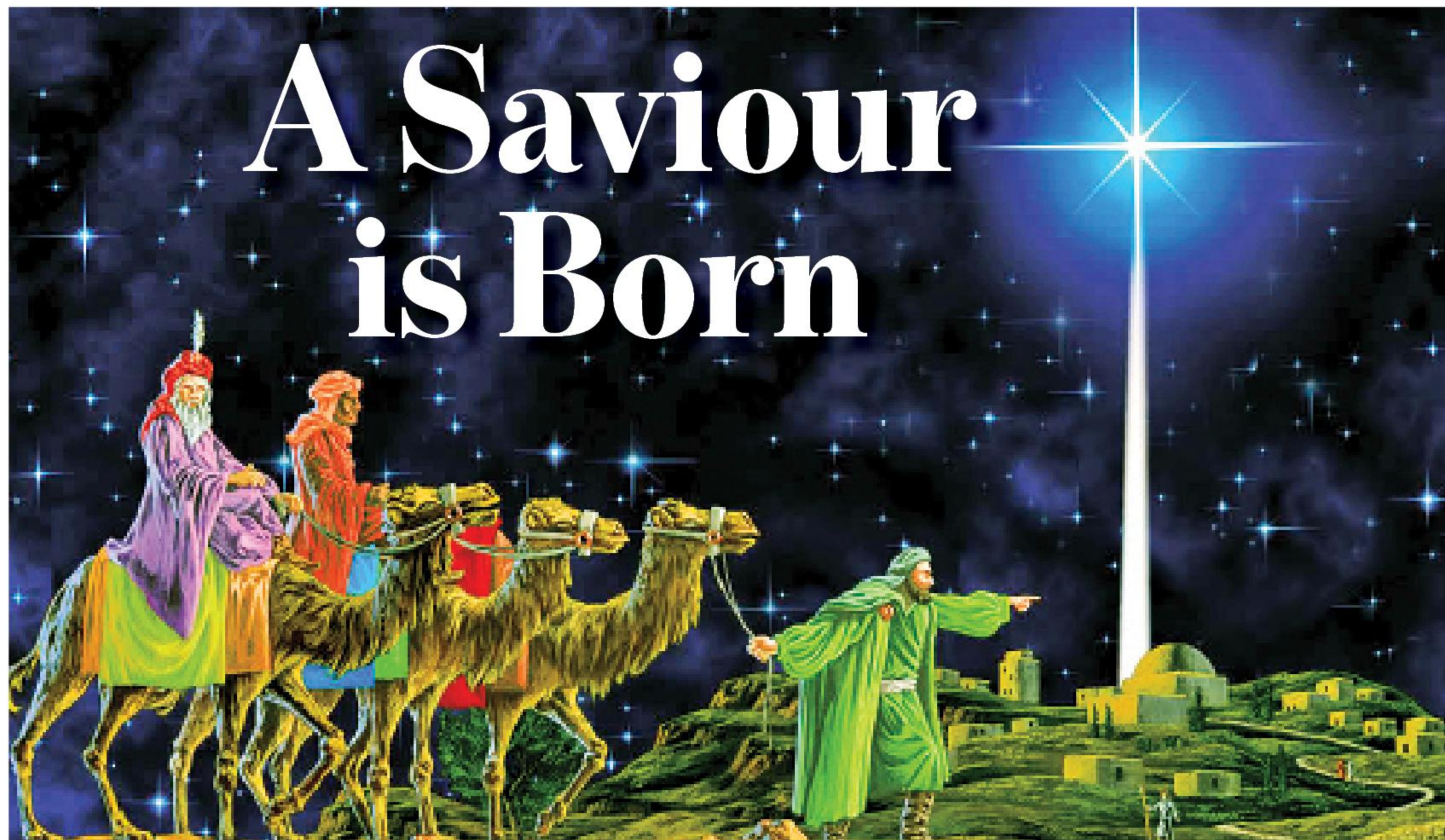
At this time in Europe cattle were also slaughtered so that they do not have to be fed during winter. Thus provided people with fresh meat and this was also the time when the wine and the beer made during the year was fermented and was finally ready for drinking.

History

In Germany, people honoured a pagan God called Oden of whom Germans were terrified. They believed he had nocturnal flights to decide who would prosper and who would perish. So most of the Germans decided to stay indoors to avoid Oden.

The midwinter celebrated by the Romans called Saturnalia lasted for at least five days of feasting and was fêted long before the arrival of Jesus Christ. It was a time when all the usual rules about rank and etiquette were overturned. Businesses and schools were closed during this time to enable all to participate at the festivities. Slaves were served by their masters and they were given temporary freedom and were treated as equals.

Romans also observed 'Juvenalia',



a feast honouring the children of Rome. In addition members of the upper class also celebrated the birthday of *Mithra* the God of unconquerable sun, on December 25. It is believed that Christmas was celebrated on the same day to counteract these pagan festivals.

According to records of history, medieval people celebrated twelve full days of Christmas which reached a crescendo on January 6 called the 'Twelfth Night'. On this day presents were exchanged. These celebrations commemorated Christ's birth and the name Christmas (Christ's Mass) is first recorded in England in 1038. Medieval celebrations also combined the servants-as-masters antics and gift-giving of Roman Saturnalia with customs belonging to the midwinter feast of Yule including the Yule Log burning and decorating houses with evergreens.

Victorian times

The Christmas we know today took shape during Victorian times, when the unruly celebrations of earlier periods were toned down into a quieter family-focused festival. Many other elements of Christmas that have familiarised at present also originated in this period, including Christmas cards, Christmas crackers, and Christmas pudding. Most Victorian families went to church at Christmas, and the many popular carols also evolved during Victorian times. Better-off people also provided gifts or Christmas feasts for poorer neighbours which is a tradition promoted by Charles Dickens' 1843 'Christmas Carol' Scrooge story.

However, some people to date feel uncomfortable with Christmas because they think it is somehow tainted by the pagan festivals held on that day. But Christians believe that the birth of Christ gives a new meaning to Christ-

mas. Christ represents the light replacing the honouring of the sun, people instead began to honour and celebrate the son of God. According to Theologians, the gospels not only transcend the pagan culture but also transform it. Theologians say "We hold this day holy, not like pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of him who made it."

The Christmas Story in the Bible

The Christmas story is recorded in the Gospel of Luke 2:4-19 in this manner.

"So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger.'

"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to

men on whom his favour rests.'

"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what they had been told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

The nativity of Jesus has immense significance. Christ's birth emanates compassion and love. The virgin birth of Jesus shows the pureness amidst the darkness and sin that prevailed in the society at that time. The baby represents innocence and vulnerability and being born in the lowliest of surroundings, the birth of Christ shows that all men and women are equal on a spiritual level despite being rich or poor, strong or weak. The baby's first bed is a manger or a trough used to feed animals. Thus it symbolises that later on this child will become the food for the people, turning them away from their sinful lives, creating a world just for everyone.

This humble king would grow and sacrifice his life in atonement for the sins of the world and will nourish the soul of man till the end of times. Christ's birth also indicates the mingling of divinity and humanity. Thus Christmas becomes a time for all people to open their hearts to mingle with God so that they experience the true spirit of Christmas.

Sometime after Jesus' birth three wise men, also known as magi, noticed the brilliant star in that sky that rested over where Jesus was born. The three wise men travelled from a distant east-

ern country to find the new king. During the wise men's trip, Herod the king of Judah met with the wise men and told them to come back and let him know where the baby king was so that he could go worship him as well. The wise men continued to Bethlehem and found Jesus right where the star pointed. They knelt and worshipped the Savior and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The visit of Magi shows how the birth of Jesus was accepted by the gentiles while rejected by the Jews. Magi were Medes from the Median tribe that were part of the Persian Empire. They were experts of all kinds of knowledge at that time. They were astrologers, fortune tellers and interpreters of dreams. Their visitation also shows the universal acceptance of Jesus.

Christmas traditions and symbols

During Christmas most houses, business places and offices are decorated with traditional Christmas decorations which have special meanings.

The candles lit at Christmas signifies the star of Bethlehem. Before electric Christmas lights came into use the families would decorate the Christmas tree with candles. It also has an association to Hanukkah, the festival of lights celebrated in Judaism.

Red and green are the colours associated with Christmas. Red is used at Christmas to represent the blood of Jesus when he sacrificed his life on the cross. It is also reflected in the colour of holly berries, which also had pagan symbolism during the winter solstice celebrations in ancient Rome.

The colour green signifies everlasting light and life. Romans decorated their houses with evergreen branches

during the New Year, and the fir tree symbolised life during the winter. Thus it signifies that Jesus brings everlasting life. Bells that are commonly seen during Christmas is a symbol of announcing Christ's birth. The ringing of bells can also be traced back to pagan winter celebrations used to drive out evil spirits. The wreath is a circular, never-ending symbol of eternal love and rebirth. At present the wreath symbolizes generosity, giving, and the gathering of family.

Mistletoe which is a parasitic plant, lives on the tree that it is attached to and, without it, the mistletoe would die. The plant has long been a symbol of love, and some believe that the Druids used mistletoe as a cure-all or some stories claim that it could promote fertility.

Santa Claus

Father Christmas or Santa Claus is a special figure we see during Christmas. He originates from St. Nicholas who was a Bishop who lived in the fourth century, in a place called Myra in Asia Minor now called Turkey. He was a very rich man because his parents died when he was young and left him a lot of money. He was also a very kind man and had a reputation for helping the poor and giving secret gifts to people who needed it.

In the UK, particularly in England, St. Nicholas was known as 'St. Christmas', 'Father Christmas' or 'Old Man Christmas', an old character from story plays during the middle ages in the UK and parts of northern Europe. In France, he was then known as 'Père Noël'. In some countries including parts of Austria and Germany, the present giver became the 'Christkind' a golden-haired baby, with wings, who symbolises the new born baby Jesus.

In the early USA his name was 'Kris Kringle' (from the Christ kind). Later, Dutch settlers in the USA took the old stories of St. Nicholas with them and Kris Kringle and St. Nicholas became 'Sinterklaas' or as we now say 'Santa Claus'!

Many countries, especially in Europe, celebrate St. Nicholas' Day on December 6. In The Netherlands and some other European Countries, children leave clogs or shoes out on December 5 (St. Nicholas Eve) to be filled with presents. They also believe that if they leave some hay and carrots in their shoes for Sinterklaas's horse, they will be left with some sweets.

Today Christmas has become all about eating more than usual, exchanging gifts and being merry. This Christmas as the pandemic tones down the festivities, it is sensible to give priority to be safe and kind. There may be people who have lost the dear and near ones, lost their source of income or faced difficulties.

People irrespective of religion can reach out to the needy bringing out the true meaning of Christmas. This year Christmas can be celebrated in its essence and in simplicity. The love, joy and peace of Christmas can be spread as people help their families, friends or neighbours out of their worries, losses or heartaches while clinging to the hope for better times ahead.