

# Happy Christmas

## આગંદી નાતાલ



ESP, Newman Hall, St. Xavier's College Rd, Post Box No. 4002, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad 380009, Gujarat, India  
Tel: +91 79 66522333 / 27455913 Fax: +91 79 27489018 Email: espoges@gmail.com / sjprashant@gmail.com

Dear *Erika & Andras*.

**Christmas is here:** we wish - your family, colleagues, collaborators, friends - the peace, joys and blessings of this season right through **the New Year 2016!**

It has indeed been an eventful and perhaps traumatic year for several of us: many have experienced violence and other hardships; people have been left homeless and have sought refuge in foreign lands. The Christmas gifts of love, peace, joy, tolerance, goodwill seem to have been forgotten. Our prayer is that these gifts be realised in the hearts and lives of all!

'**Christmas is about a Refugee Family**' is a reflection which I recently wrote for a National Catholic magazine; I wish to share it with you:

"The reality of Christmas is ensconced in a "no-room" opening and a heart-rending closing!

When Jesus was born, the multitude of angels sang '*Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to all in whom he delights*' (Lk 2:14). Yes, a Saviour is born who pitches his tent among us; who becomes like us in all things but in sin; before the "Good News" is announced, we are reminded that "*Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger; because there was no place for them in the inn*" (Lk 2:7).

"No place" in what "inn"? "*At that time, the emperor, Caesar Augustus, issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This first census was taken while Quirinus was governor of Syria*" (Lk 2:1-2). So Joseph had to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of 111 kms; difficult terrain which they would have walked. Mary 'was with child' so after the ordeal of getting themselves registered, Joseph would have looked for some comfort for their child to be born; but the inns were just 'too crowded' or the inn-keepers were not willing to take in strangers from elsewhere.

In October, Associated Press highlighted the current refugee crises with a powerful picture entitled '**The Long walk to a new life**' showing a huge column of refugees moving through fields after crossing from Croatia, in Rigonce, Slovenia. It depicted the grim reality of thousands of people fleeing violence in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan and in what is now accepted as the worst migration crisis since World War II. Mary and Joseph would have had a similar experience. Pope Francis recently gave an unequivocal call to every Catholic Parish in Europe to take in at least one refugee family; urging all Christians to stand up and help those people who are fleeing persecution and violence.

After the birth of Jesus, the wise men from the East came to worship him; but on their return, they don't allow themselves to be trapped by cunning King Herod—they just avoid him! Then, "*an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."* Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod." (Mt 2:13-14)

The distance from Bethlehem to the border of Egypt is about 120 kms. For a senior citizen and his young wife who has just given birth to a child, the journey must have been traumatic. As they fled



that night, what did they take as belongings? Were they able to carry sufficient amount of food, water and even clothing for their exile? Did baby Jesus perhaps carry that 'little toy' which those poor shepherds gifted him the night he was born? The thoughts and prayers of Mary and Joseph were surely with the other innocent children who were being massacred by Herod's army. *"The words of the Prophet Jeremiah were being fulfilled: A cry is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation: Rachel weeps for her children. She refuses to be comforted, for they are no more"* (Mt 2:17-18)

In September, the lifeless body of a three-year old Syrian child Aylan Kurdi was found face down on a Turkish beach. That tragic picture which tugged at the hearts of millions the world over was a shocking reminder of the dangers children and families face as they try to flee from violence and persecution. An experience which was also the lot of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!

Christmas is a moment of grace - to help us transcend crass commercialisation and to realise that the festival is about the birth of Jesus rather than Santa Clauses and Christmas trees; good food and merry-making.

Christmas is about the courage to reach out to the other: to make our hearts a home where the other can find acceptance and warmth; it is about the joy we experience when we try to lessen the hardships of internally displaced people who live on our pavements and on the margins of our society; it is the ability to transcend the comfort of our own selfishness and to seek him in the poverty, grime and dust of today; it is the openness we need to realise that the refugee crisis in this world is created by the greed and power of vested interests who, like the Herods at the time of Jesus, do all they can to deny others of their rightful place in society.

It is above all, a time to realise that the story of Christmas is the story of a refugee and of his family: Jesus, our Lord and Saviour!"

Violence continues: in Paris and Beirut; in Syria and Palestine and other parts of the world and in India too. We are also aware of the great sacrifices being made by individuals and institutions to respond to the refugee crisis. Our mast-head depicts **Mary with the child Jesus seated on a camel** from a Shrine we have in Gujarat, **Unteshwari Matanu Mandir** (Temple of Our Lady of the Camels). Most western artists have portrayed Mary with the baby Jesus seated on a donkey in the flight to Egypt. The New Testament has no reference to any animal as they fled persecution. So why not a camel which could have been presented to them by the magi?

The United Nations has proclaimed 2016 as the '**International Year of Pulses**'. The focus is important for us; in our Chhatralayas together with the chapattis (local bread) and / or rice, we feed the children daily with either lentils (dals) or some other pulses like beans or peas; they are surely a great source of nutrition contributing immensely to growth of the children.

Our work in the **Education Sponsorship Programme** continues with the usual vigour. Thanks to each one of you who have been supporting us: through your sacrifices, prayers and solidarity. Your presence in our lives and initiatives mean much to us. We look forward to your continued support in the years to come

Warm wishes and prayers from all the children in our Chhatralayas and all our colleagues and collaborators here!

Love and prayers,

Your brother

  
Cedric Prakash

Christmas 2015

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Kindly note: If you have been sponsoring a child / children through our '**Education Sponsorship Programme**', the Annual Progress Report/s is / are enclosed herewith. We are grateful for your sacrifices, generosity!

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Donations to the Education Sponsorship Programme by cheque / draft, payable to:

**Gujarat Education Society** or by Bank transfer to:

The Bank of Baroda, (The Gujarat Education Society), A/c. No. 03420100002049

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