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## God Has Come Close



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I$n$ the town of Anuradhapura in northern Sri Lanka stands one of the island's most sacred shrines. A Bo tree grows there that is said to be a direct descendant of the one under which the Buddha was enlightened. This old and sacred tree is surrounded by a metal fence, and hundreds of pilgrims come every day to meditate in front of it. During a recent visit I saw scores of people with hands folded in sampeah facing that tree, many with eyes closed. I asked my guide, "Are they praying to the Buddha?" "No," she replied. "The Buddha has passed beyond this life into nirvana. He cannot hear or answer prayer. These people are rather meditating on the Buddha's sayings and showing their respect. If they have a need and want to pray, they go to a devada."

The same kind of thing happens elsewhere in the world and with religions other than Buddhism. Many people intuitively understand that there is a Creator God, who designed and made all we see. The

This article was first presented as a Christmas message in Phnom Penh on 20 December 2002.
world is too well designed, and living beings too complex, to simply have emerged by chance or through endlessly-repeated cycles of history. If I see a computer, I know that somewhere there must be a computer designer; a watch requires a watch maker; a moto a moto manufacturer. Likewise, a rice seed that knows how to send its roots down for water and its leaves up for sunlight and air; a bird that soars the winds of heaven; and a human who can think and create; all mean that a wise designer and maker has been at work. We are not accidents, and most people recognize that. But many who know that there is a Creator fear that he is distant, perhaps unconcerned about us, virtually unknown and unknowable. We his creatures have been estranged from him. So if we need help in our daily lives we turn to lesser but closer deities and spirits.

Some of us worry about ghosts or ancestors that may harm us; others sacrifice to a neak ta; Thai people sacrifice to spirits called phi; in Myanmar coconuts and red cloth are offered to nats. Many Muslim people take care not to offend the jinn. And the list goes on and on. A common feeling around the world is that the most important and powerful god-the Great God who created us-is too big or distant or offended to care any longer for the people he made, and so we try to find help from lesser sources.

We find this attitude even in the Bible. The young man Daniel belonged to the nation of Israel. He worshiped the true and Great God, but his nation had been defeated in war by its enemy Babylon. So now Daniel was forced to serve the pagan Babylonian king. One night this king dreamed a dream and wanted to know its interpretation. He summoned his wise men and demanded, "Tell me what I dreamed, and then tell me what it means." They answered, "O king, you tell us the dream, and then we will interpret it for you." The king replied, "No, you tell me the dream. Then I will know that you are not just inventing something in your minds, but can tell me the true interpretation." The wise men protested in dismay to the king, "There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men." Do we hear
what these wise men said? There are gods who are wise and powerful, and even know such things as what people dream. But they are far away; they do not live among people or speak to us; we have no way of interacting with them. When we are in trouble we have to seek help from lesser (and sometimes false) spirits.

So this is a thread of thought throughout history-a Great God (or gods) exists. But he is too great or too distant. We can't contact him; he can not or will not help.

It can be terrifying to be separated from the wise and powerful who can help us. I have read several accounts of life in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, and have just started reading another. In this the author was a nine-year-old girl on that fateful day of April 17, 1975, when Pol Pot's pawns pushed Phnom Penh's people to the provinces. As this girl and her family shuffled with the crowds in their flight from the city, they passed an unattended three-year-old boy screaming and searching for his parents. He was lost and alone in a new, strange, dangerous, and terrifying world. His strong parents who had always comforted and protected him were nowhere to be found.

How like that little boy we sometimes are! We find ourselves alone, having to rely on our own limited (and sometimes faulty) wisdom and resources in'a world where we face droughts and famine and wars and corruption and terrorism and AIDS and sick children. We cry out, but no one stops to help. The Great God, if he is there, is distant and silent. So we grasp for anything close by we think might help, like a drowning man who grasps at bubbles or sticks on the surface in a desperate attempt to help him float.

There is some truth in the idea that the Great God is distant. It was not always so, but is now. When God created the first man and woman he used to stoop to walk and talk with them. But one day they rebelled against his command, and so lost their close fellowship with the Almighty. Centuries later God said to his people the nation of Israel, "Surely the arm of Yahweh is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." Just as you and I do not wear into our houses sandals in which we have slogged through the sewerage on the streets, but leave them outside, even so
the clean and holy God does not allow wickedness and rebellion in his presence. Our sins have separated us from our God; our sins have hidden his face so that he will not hear. We are three-year-old boys screaming for help unheard in a world gone wild.

If that were the only message the Bible teaches, it would be sad indeed. But this is Christmas. Christmas is the story of how the Great God -the one who made us, knows us, and is wise and powerful enough to help us-has come close. He has indeed been offended by our sins, more than we are by filthy sandals, but in his love he has come near. He has come near to show us who he is, to cleanse us from our $\sin$, and to restore us to the closeness we as a race once enjoyed. The Old Testament of the Bible predicted the coming of a deliverer whose title would be "Immanuel." "Immanuel" is a Hebrew word consisting of three smaller Hebrew words that together mean "God with us." The New Testament of the Bible tells the story of how this Immanuelthis one whose title means "God with us"-has come. But how has he come'? In what way, and how close, has the Great God of Creation come to us?

Two weeks ago I attended the Third World Buddhist Conference at the Veang and Chaktomuk Theater. High monks and dignitaries from sixteen countries were there. At the opening ceremony our own King Sihanouk gave a speech, and then with the queen stood on the steps of the Silver Pagoda to have his photo taken with the delegates. I saw him-but only from two hundred meters away. The king was surrounded by officials, invited guests, and security guards. Most days I am not near the king at all. The closest I get is to hear about him on the radio or see his picture in the newspaper. I saw the king two years ago on Independence Day, but at the Conference was the first time I had ever heard him speak. So on December 5, 2002, for me the King of Cambodia had come close ... but not very close.

How close has the King of Heaven come? If kings of this earth rarely come near, but usually surround themselves with guards and dignitaries and finery, surely the God of Creation will keep himself at greater distance from us still. But Christmas is the story of how God came very, very close.

The one whose title is Immanuel--God with us-was born as a baby. But he was not born in a palace to a royal family, so that only a privileged few could ever hope to see him. He was born to a poor, traveling couple that found themselves with no place to sleep for the night. They were temporarily homeless; there was no place even for his mother Mary to give birth. So apparently she did so in some kind of feeding room for animals. It may have been a barn of some type, or a cave, or a place outside where animals are fed. But after Jesus was born his mother laid him in an animals' feeding box. If this baby, Jesus, is truly Immanuel, then God has indeed come very close.

The baby's first visitors were not prime ministers or court dignitaries, but shepherds. Shepherds were common figures in Israel in those days. They performed an important role in that society, because sheep provided both wool for clothing and meat for food and religious sacrifices. But shepherds were not generally wealthy people. It would be today as if the angels announced the baby's birth to motodups or cyclo drivers. These are people who are familiar to us, they perform an important role in our society, but they are not generally wealthy or influential people. Not people we would expect to be the first to be informed that a king has been born-that God has come close to us in human form. But it is a symbol of just how close God came that first Christmas that Jesus was born to a shelterless, traveling couple, and that his first visitors were not the wealthy politician or merchants, but shepherds. God has come so close that he is available to everybody.

The fact that Jesus was totally human-so like us in every way-caused many people in his day to doubt that he was Immanuel. In John I we hear Nathaniel grumbling, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" In John 7 the people of Jerusalem debate among themselves, "Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah? But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from." In Mark 6 and Matthew 13 we hear people ask, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers'? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?" And so they took offense at him and refused to believe that
he was God With Us, because God had come so close as to seem indistinguishable at first glance. The book of Isaiah says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Only when we look closer and hear his wisdom and watch his deeds and observe his sinlessness do we recognize that the scriptures that had predicted Immanuel have been fulfilled in this man.

The New Testament goes on to describe how close God has come to us in Jesus. The Apostle John begins his first letter by saying, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaim...." He begins his gospel by telling us that "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.... No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." When Thomas doubted that Jesus had been raised from the dead Jesus appeared to him and urged him to put his finger where the nails had been in Jesus' hands, and to thrust his hand into where the spear had pierced Jesus' side. That's very, very close. In fact, the book of Hebrews says that God's Son "had to be made like [us] in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest ... and make atonement for the sins of the people." As a result "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we areyet was without sin." At Christmas we celebrate the birth of one whose title is Immanuel-God with us. The Great and Powerful God of Creation has indeed come very, very close.

All of this is Good News for us. All of this means we don't need to fear or seek help from all kinds of spirits and other forcesreal or imagined. The Great God himself cares for us, and he is powerful to save. Jesus taught that God loves us so much that even the hairs on our heads are numbered. He told his disciples that "the Father [that is, God] himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God." Therefore "my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." Jesus promised that if anyone loved him he
would obey his teaching and "My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." Our bondage to the spirits is broken because the Great God loves us and lives in us as Christians, and he is greater than any other power. Christmas is Good News-the Great God has come close and lives with all who accept the pardon purchásed by his Son.

Have you accepted God's love to you in Jesus yet'? Have you said, "All my life I have been serving shadows and spirits-either things that I have imagined but that aren't really there, or things that are evil and should not be served. But now I turn from them to the Great God who has come close and shown me who he is in Jesus"? Have you understood what Christmas is-not a fat man with a white beard in a red suit who gives presents, not a decorated tree and special songs, but the birthday of the man in whom God has come close?

This Christmas message that God has come close to us in the person of Jesus not only has something to say to people who are not Christians, but also to those of us who are. How do we Christians think of Christmas, and how do we celebrate it'?

We are gathered today in a large stadium with many people in attendance. We have banners and music and dancing and a powerful sound system. We have invited dignitaries and special guests, and many of us are wearing our nice clothing. It is good for us to celebrate Christ's birth in this way, and show how important it is to us. It is good for us to meet together in a large meeting as Christians from different churches and denominations to show how our common faith in Jesus and love for him unites us, and is more important than the denominational differences that we sometimes allow to divide us. It is good to worship and be glad together like this in a big way.

But is that the only way we can celebrate Christmas? Is a big meeting the only way we can show how important it is to us that the Son of God has come among us to be our savior?

Let us remember that Christmas commemorates the coming of Immanuel-"God With Us." Let us remember that when God came to us in Christ he came close-not as presidents and kings and prime ministers do today, surrounded by guards to keep common people away, and dressed in fine clothing. He came close-born to a shelterless
couple, wrapped in strips of cloth, and laid in a box from which animals eat their food. His first visitors were shepherds. He looked so much like ordinary people and grew up in such an unimportant village that many could not believe he was anything special. John says he came so close that his eyes looked upon him and his hands touched him. Christmas is not primarily about big meetings and expensive programs, although, as I said, these are good and certainly have their place. Christmas is first of all God coming close to everyday people in the everyday concerns of their daily life.

So, as Christians, if we want our non-Christian neighbors to know this Jesus whom we love, we need to be little "Immanuels" to them. Jesus said to his apostles, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." He sends us the same way God sent him-to live among people and show them by our lives what God is like. To care for them where we can in their everyday needs and problems.

So when a Christian takes a meal to a young mother dying of AIDS, that is Christmas for that woman. That is someone coming close to her in her poverty, and ministering to her in God's name. When a church gets together and decides to clean up its neighborhood streets, or teach local street children how to read, or donate rice to a family that lost their whole crop to a flood, that is showing what Christmas is. God coming cilose to us where we are, where we can see what he is like and experience his practical love and care. Our celebrations like this one can be very encouraging to us and honoring to God. But if that is all we do then our non-Christian neighbors are likely to say, "The Christians are celebrating one of their religious festivals again. That has nothing to do with me; I have my own religion and festivals." On the other hand, if we serve them up close, where they are, in practical and meaningful ways, then they will understand that Christmas is the coming of Immanuel-"God With Us"-right to where we live and work and play and struggle. Perhaps in time they will feel encouraged to abandon their fear of lesser spirits, because they will realize that the Great God himself has come close.













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