

Forgiving is divine

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Today is Christmas Day – and it is also the birthday of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. I congratulate you on the two days in one.

Christmas is celebrated among Christians to commemorate the birth of Jesus. Since Jesus is a significant prophet also in Islam, Muslims, too, can celebrate Christmas. Yet, there is no tradition for it, unless there is a large group of Christians in the community, which also gives a great opportunity to hold inter-faith gatherings and common prayers. After all, God is one.

This year, after the devastating tragedy at the Army Public School in Peshawar, we have come to realize that there are more things that bind human beings together in the same land and beyond. Religious, class or other differences don't matter little when tragedies strike. Everyone was devastated and everyone could feel empathy with the victims and their grieving parents, sisters and brothers, and other relatives and friends, as well as acquaintances, neighbours and strangers, too. Tragedies of the kind and magnitude that happened in Peshawar last week are rare. But when they happen, we put aside our differences, either they are petty or more profound.

The Peshawar tragedy was worse than most other man-made and natural disasters; it was planned and targeted to inflict pain on the victims and their families and friends. When other tragedies happen, such as the devastating earthquake in Kashmir and KPK on 8 October 2005, it was a natural disaster beyond human beings control; it wasn't planned by evil-doers. Terrible as it was, affecting many more people than the Peshawar tragedy, it was easier to accept. The Peshawar tragedy was evil and done on purpose.

Yet, I would urge us all to see if we can find a place in our hearts to feel with the perpetrators, too. It is much to ask, especially if we have borne personal loss. But could we still not try to do so, even forgive? That would also be in our own interest; it would lessen our pain.

We should remember that forgiving is divine; revenge is not. In addition, to err is human, and sometimes we do terrible wrongs. In Peshawar last week, I believe the perpetrators were hired mercenaries. They didn't follow their own will and conscience, but behaved like hangmen and executioners in war, following orders and acting without choice.

To those who wanted to execute Jesus, and were ordered to do it, Jesus said: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). And Jesus also said, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). They are indeed tall orders and difficult to follow. But if we manage to do so, we should also know that the wrongs done should not be accepted; we should love the sinner, but hate the sin.

Today is Christmas Day, the beginning of the New Covenant between God and human beings, the new foundation for Christians, Muslims and other believers, when Jesus teaches the milder understanding of God's commandments, how we should obey God and live with fellow human beings. The Bible's Old Testament emphasizes the principle of retaliation, 'an eye for an eye'. In the 'Sermon on the Mount' in the New Testament, Jesus says: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn him the other also" (Matthew 5:39).

If this could be the Christmas message this year, as every year, humanity would have come a long way. But is it wishful thinking? Is this goal too difficult to reach? Probably, but that doesn't mean we should not try. We should follow the teachings of forgiveness, peace and unity. We should try to come closer to God, even if we cannot reach the divine entirely.

Christmas and the end of the calendar year is a time when we all reflect on how well we have done in the year which is coming to an end, and we ask ourselves how we can become better human beings, especially in our

everyday life with family and friends. Thus, Christmas has a universal message that all human beings can relate to and learn from, irrespective of what religion we belong to. The message is more secular than dogmatic.

When I for the first time had the opportunity to be in Muslim Pakistan before Christmas, about fifteen years ago, it was during Ramadan, leading up to Eid-ul-Fitr. I realized how similar that month was to ‘advent’, the Christian term for the month from Thanksgiving up to Christmas. Similar, too, was all the shopping that everyone was involved in; buying gifts and new clothes, making the home festive, preparing food dishes and inviting relatives and friends. No, I don’t think that this is wrong and that the feasts have become too secular and commercial. I don’t think we forget the real meaning and message neither of Christmas nor of Eid because of commercialization, all the fuss and preparations for family and friends, yes, also including unnecessary activities, overdoing it perhaps. If we didn’t do all this, the feasts might have passed more unnoticeably, especially the Christmas season.

And then, Christmas is certainly both a religious and a secular feast. Its main message of forgiveness and doing good becomes stronger and deeper for most of us when it is based on religious faith. Therefore, it is important to find time for sacred reflection and prayer in the midst of the hectic Christmas time.

This year in Pakistan, our thoughts go to the many victims of the tragedy at Army Public School in Peshawar. There are empty seats at the table; there is grief and sadness in many homes, even if we have not been directly affected. And those who have been spared will be grateful. We can pray that tragedies will not affect us and others in future, and we must do what we can to prevent pointless and evil tragedies.

We will ask for God’s mercy and strength, and the kindness of fellow human beings to comfort those who were affected in Peshawar and in other tragedies. If we can find in our hearts to pray also for the perpetrators in Peshawar and other terrorist situations, we will do the right thing. We will then also come to realize that all of us have done wrong and sinned. We all need God’s forgiveness and that of fellow human beings. In the Lord’s Prayer, in Luke and in Matthew, as part of the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, we ask God to, “Forgive us our sins, and forgive those who sin against us; Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

With the thought that “forgiving is divine”, let me wish you, dear reader, a Merry Christmas, hoping that we can all live more in accordance with the Christmas message and the spirit throughout the year.

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