

A Diwali Reflection



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Catholic Institute of Education

Introduction

Diwali, the festival of lights, is celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains. It is a multi-faceted event: a new year, a harvest festival, an opportunity to express the desire for prosperity and well-being, an occasion for Jains to remember Mahavira's enlightenment (liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth), a time for Sikhs to recall the release of Guru Hargobind and others from prison, and to retell stories from the Hindu scriptures known as the **Ramayana** with its epic narrative of the triumph of good over evil.

As we mark this celebration of Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains, we will consider what Diwali might mean for us. We recall that Hindus first came to South African shores as indentured labour for sugarcane plantations and mines in the 19th century British colony of Natal. We also recall our endorsement, along with virtually all recognised structures in the Catholic Church in South Africa, of the Hope and Joy campaign's efforts to celebrate Vatican II. **Nostra Aetate**, the **Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions**, is particularly pertinent to our reflection.

In **Nostra Aetate**, the Catholic Church affirms that 'Humanity forms but one community' and that all 'share a common destiny, namely God'. (See section 1.) It goes on to say the following about the Hindu religion:

'... in Hinduism people explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love.' (See section 2.)

And it continues with:

'The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women.' (See section 2.)

Thus, today, in the spirit of Vatican II, we turn to Hindu myth, the epic **Ramayana**, to see if we might discern that ray of truth that can offer enlightenment to us.

A Call to Worship (with the help of suitable background music)



Take time.
Settle.
Become quiet.
Be present to self, and to those around you.
Be present to the Holy One among us.

A Diwali Story about Rama, Sita, and Ravana

Ravana, the ogre king of Lanka, was a Brahmin and a devotee of Shiva. He was granted a boon by Brahma that he could not be killed by gods, antigods, ogres, or any other creatures. But he despised human beings so much that he forgot to include them in his request to Brahma. So, the god Vishnu took human form, as the prince Rama, in order to kill Ravana. And Sita, who had been born from a furrow of the earth, became Rama's wife.

However, Rama's father, Dasharata, chose to put Rama's younger brother, Bharata, on the throne. Because of this, Rama went into exile in the jungle with Sita and another brother, Lakshmana.

Ravana kidnaps Sita and keeps her captive on the island of Lanka for many years. Eventually, helped by an army of monkeys and bears and, in particular, the monkey Hanuman, who leapt across from the mainland to Lanka and then built a causeway for the armies to cross over, Rama kills Ravana and brings Sita back home with him. Lamps are lit to guide them; Bharata gladly vacates the throne.

But Rama hears talk that Sita's reputation, and her chastity, has been sullied by her long stay in Ravana's house. So, he submits her to an ordeal by fire which she passes. When this gossip surfaces again, he banishes her. She bears him two sons, who come to him when they are fully grown. She returns briefly to Rama's household, before disappearing forever back into the earth.

Rama's reign, characterised by peace and justice, lasts for many years.

A Guided Reflection

Hindu mythology is complex and not familiar to many of us. But we can relate the characters in the Ramayana to our own lives. Some possibilities are offered here. Take a little care to think about each – but linger with those that touch you most.

- ❖ It took a long war to defeat and kill Ravana. Temptation and evil are sometimes only overcome after a long struggle. And allies are needed. Have you experienced such a conflict? Are you sometimes at war with yourself? Is there a particular issue, habit, or challenge that threatens you?

*Ask God for help if it still troubles you; consider where you are likely to find support.
Give thanks to God if you have surpassed it.*

- ❖ Rama ruled justly, yet he doubted the fidelity of Sita. How might this resonate with your experience?

Has someone questioned your honour and intentions at home or work? Ask God for courage and perseverance.

Have you questioned someone's honour and intentions at home or work? Ask God for fresh eyes with which to review the situation.

- ❖ Rama's reign brought an era of peace and justice – yet his relationship with Sita was troubled. We might do good at work and in the wider society, and yet find it hard to hold household and (religious) community together.

If this finds resonance in your life, hold the situation before God. Ask for forgiveness and healing.

- ❖ Ravana so despised human beings that he forgot to name them in his request to Brahma for the protection of his life. Thus, the story comes to affirm the importance of a human role in the overcoming of evil. In Christianity, the incarnation is a sign of God's great love for the world; in Philippians Jesus humbly empties himself of divinity to take on our earthly nature.

Do you find yourself invited to reaffirm your humanity, and to recognise the work to which God calls you?

- ❖ Bharata rules in Rama's absence but does not give in to arrogance or lust for power. He gladly gives the throne to Rama on his return.

How might power and arrogance be temptations in your life? Ask God for grace and humility, and a clear path to holiness.

- ❖ Rama and Sita are guided home by the lights lit for them. We all need the help of others. We all need light to guide us on our way to God.

Who has lighted your life-path? Quietly name some of those who have blessed you on your way. Offer them a blessing in return, and give thanks to God.

An Invitation

Jesus said to his disciples – but probably to crowds who came to hear him as well: 'You are the light of the world.' We have acknowledged our need for light. But we are told that we have light to share with others. This light is needed at home and at school, in Church and faith communities; it is needed among the teachers, learners, and caregivers. What light does each of us have to offer? Is this light able to shine clearly? Does this light show the work of God in your life?

Quietly name some aspects of the light you have to share with others to yourself. Then, light a candle and place it in the sandbox.

A Closing

Creator God,

We thank you for the rays of light available to us in the religions of Hindu, Sikh, and Jain.

On this Diwali we are able to acknowledge that your light shines through all darkness

And that the darkness has not overcome it.

Amen.