

ADVENT BIBLE STUDY 2021

'tis the season ~~to be jolly~~ to reflect on the untold stories of Christmas



The Bethlehem Wall

INTRODUCTION:

I love Christmas! But I dislike the materialism and greed that surrounds the festival and especially this year and last headlines that 'Christmas is cancelled' due to lockdowns or food shortages. As Christians we know that Christmas cannot be cancelled because it is not about the gifts and the food, it is about our God being born as a vulnerable baby – the Incarnation.

While hopefully we do better than the wider society in praying for the homeless and refugees, making special charity collections, giving to foodbanks and maybe as individuals buying charity gifts, our worship during Advent and Christmas tends to bypass some of the less comfortable messages in the Christmas story. We amalgamate the gospel readings to create a nativity scene where shepherds and Wise Men stand side by side (they did not come at the same time, in fact it wasn't until around two years after the birth of Jesus that the Magi arrived, and we don't know how many there were, only that there were three gifts). We have carol services with little content except sweet songs with inaccurate lyrics. We have Christmas morning services where children bring one of their gifts and talk about the presents they have received or hope to receive. There is nothing wrong with any of that, as long as we don't forget what really happened – there was arduous, forced travel, there was a birth which however the gospel sanitises it would have been painful and not without danger, there was a massacre of innocent children, and all against the backdrop of an oppressive empire. The fact that I could not find a Bible Study that focussed on these issues speaks volumes in itself. However, I found inspiration, and quote from:

Journey to the Manger by Paula Gooder, Canterbury Press, 2015
Walking Backwards to Christmas by Stephen Cottrell, SPCK, 2014

Paula Gooder says, "Christmas can raise for us serious problems about the nature of this engagement [imaginative engagement including the mixing of stories from Luke and Matthew]. For those of us who know the biblical stories, one of the greatest barriers to deep theological reflection is overfamiliarity. When we know the stories too well, it is very difficult to read them with fresh eyes. When the narratives become too much a part of our inner world, we come to them encumbered by half-remembered reflections of years gone by, years of interpretation through nativity plays and crib services...so that it becomes almost impossible to read them as they are for what they might have to say to us."

My hope with this Bible Study, is that it opens up conversations about the real message of Christmas and how it relates to the many pressing concerns of the 21st century.

Week 1: Luke 2:1-5 The Census

Week 2: Luke 2:6-7 No room at the inn ?

Week 3: Luke 2:8-20 The Shepherds

Week 4: Matt 2:13-18 Fleeing to Egypt

Week 1: Luke 2:1-5 The Census

According to Josephus in 6 CE the Roman Empire deposed Herod Archelaus, who ruled the largest section of Judea as a Roman client king and converted his territory into the Roman Province of Judea. The governor was assigned to carry out a census of the new province for tax purposes. This was not like a modern-day census to gather data to provide services, this was an imposition of an invading Empire. Registration of oppressed populations is usually an indicator of even more oppressive actions – it is often the first step in oppression. Think of the registration of Jewish businesses in Nazi Germany and the subsequent categorization of different minority groups.

Think of Apartheid: The Population Registration Act No 30 of 1950 required people to be identified and registered from birth as one of four distinct racial groups: White, Coloured, Bantu (Black African), and other. It was one of the 'pillars' of Apartheid. Race was reflected in the individual's Identity Number.

And right up to the present day:

Human Rights Watch Report 2021 <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/israel/palestine> :

“Israeli authorities in 2020 systematically repressed and discriminated against Palestinians in ways that far exceeded the security justifications they often provided.

For a 13th consecutive year, the government enforced **a generalized travel ban** on Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip and sharply restricted the entry and exit of goods. These restrictions, not based on an individualized assessment of security risk, **robbed with rare exceptions the 2 million Palestinians living there of their right to freedom of movement**, limited their access to electricity and water, and devastated the economy. Eighty percent of Gaza’s residents depend on humanitarian aid.”

Discussion Questions:

- **Why was it important to the Jewish people, that Jesus be born in Bethlehem?**
- **It is important to us?**
- **If Jesus were to be born now, Christmas 2021, where do you think would be a good place, theologically, for him to be born?**

While censuses did occur in the Roman Empire, as far as we know from historical records, one did not take place while Herod was king and Quirinius was governor of Syria, and even if one did take place, it would not have been of “all the world.” Luke might have used it as a literary device to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, because the Messiah needs to be born in the city of David. But, there was a Roman Empire, there was oppression of the local people, and there was at some point a registration, probably for tax purposes, but also quite possibly to know where people were, and where any trouble-makers were.

- **Does it matter whether Luke uses a literary device, rather than sticking to ‘facts’?**
- **Do we think about the role of the ‘registration of all the world’ when we read this passage?**
- **Do we ever think about the similarities for Palestinians today – Christians as well as Muslims?**
- **How can we read the Christmas story in new ways, to raise awareness of injustices?**

Further reflection:

Watch the trailer for the film Open Bethlehem: <https://youtu.be/aivDpXxMhaA>

If anyone would like to see the whole film, I have the DVD and would be happy to organise a viewing.

Week 2: Luke 2:6-7 No room at the inn ?

I am sorry to have to tell you that there is no inn in the Christmas story! The Greek word *kataluma* translated as *inn* in Luke 2:7 does not mean a commercial building with rooms for travellers. It is a guest space, typically the upper room of a common village home. A simple village home at the time had two rooms - one for guests, one for the family. The family room had an area, usually about four feet lower, for the animals. They are brought in last thing at night and taken out and tied up in the courtyard first thing in the morning.

Bethlehem was a small town – there would have been no commercial inns or guest houses. Anyone arriving there for the census would have stayed with extended family.

Paula Gooder says, “Much has been made, over the years, of there being no room for Jesus at his birth...The visual reason why people are reluctant to accept that *kataluma* might have been a guest room not an inn is because all our nativity plays would look different – but there is a theological reason too. If there was an inn, someone refused Jesus room; if it was just a guest room, no one refused him room – he just didn’t quite fit in.” The spare room, the sofa, and the blow up mattress on the floor were all already taken – all that was left was where the animals slept.

Discussion Questions:

- **How might the fact that Jesus was not refused room change our interpretation of the story?**
- **Why do you think translators chose to interpret *kataluma* that way?**
- **Was it simply a mistranslation or did they want to project a particular message?**

That Jesus simply didn’t fit in is surely “a profound theological statement itself and maybe even closer to the truth? So often we assume that people’s lack of acceptance of Jesus, and all he came to be, is deliberate, thought through and clearly stated. The reality is that more often” it is that he doesn’t quite fit in our lives. “When we are busy, when so many other concerns press in all around us, it is not so much that we make a decision about what to accept or not but that things slip by unnoticed.” (Gooder)

- **If Jesus actually was welcomed by distant (unmentioned) relatives, what difference does that make to how we welcome people to our churches?**
- **In the flurry of gifts to buy, carol services to attend, food to buy and cook, and yes maybe relatives coming to stay or at least for dinner, do we let Jesus and his birth story slip by unnoticed?**

Luke provides very few details – who do Mary and Joseph stay with? How many shepherds came to visit? How did they find Mary and Joseph? How long did everyone stay? Was there enough food for these unexpected guests? (they couldn’t phone ahead to say they were coming) This lack of detail may be why we have used our imagination to invent an innkeeper and other details that we now know so well we can’t think of any alternative details.

If we were telling the story now, in 2021, who would the characters be? Where would they be travelling to and from? Where would they stay? Would it be a happy family party? Or a really awkward visit?

Week 3: Luke 2:8-20 The Shepherds

Shepherds were outsiders. “The requirements of caring for flocks and of following them to food put them outside the tight-knit communities of small villages like Bethlehem.” Because of their semi-nomadic lifestyle, they were often seen as disreputable and untrustworthy. They were unable to observe purity laws fully and so were regarded as sinners. (Gooder)

The work of shepherds was (and still is) extraordinarily difficult. They had to wrangle obstinate sheep. They had to ensure their flocks were well fed. And they had to fend off predators: wolves or even larger animals, like bears or lions. Sometimes unsavoury characters would come in and try to steal the sheep. This is why shepherds were awake on this night. Most likely they were sleeping in shifts, ensuring the livestock was not compromised.

There is something significant and powerful about the inclusion of the shepherds in the Jesus story. Luke is reminding us, by mentioning the shepherds, that the kingdom of God isn't just for the insiders, but for outsiders, like shepherds, like the poor classes of which Mary and Joseph were part. (www.christianity.com)

“Luke's emphasis on Jesus' care for the outsiders makes them the appropriate first visitors of Jesus.” (Gooder)

The presence of the shepherds in the Christmas story also tells us a little bit about just what kind of Messiah Jesus would be. Scripture usually portrays shepherding as a high calling, perhaps the most repeated image of leadership in the Bible (despite the view that they were disreputable). King David, from whom Jesus is descended, was a shepherd. God refers to himself as Israel's shepherd (Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Jer. 31:10). To shepherd, in God's world, is to sacrificially care for the vulnerable ones under your protection. Shepherds in those days didn't drive their herds but gently led them.

We always include shepherds in our nativity plays, but do we really think about what their lives were like? They were essentially homeless. They lived outside society. They had a very hard physical job and they were terrified of the angels.

Discussion Questions:

- **We seem to view angels as something nice and sweet, but when they appear in the Bible, people are usually afraid of them. The shepherds also had ‘a multitude of the heavenly host’ – if you were them, how would you have felt? Would you have gone to Bethlehem to investigate, or would you have run away in fear?**
- **Who would be the shepherds in our modern-day, 2021, Christmas story?**
- **How can we use the Christmas story to include outsiders? To welcome them in?**
- **How do you reconcile the dissonance between the positive portrayal of shepherds in the Bible and the commonly held view in the first century that they were often disreputable?**

Week 4: Matt 2:13-18 Fleeing to Egypt (refugees)

More bad news for the nativity plays, I'm afraid – we don't know how many wise men there were, the Bible doesn't say, only that they offered gifts of myrrh, frankincense and gold.

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, barely mentions the birth, there are no shepherds, only later the arrival of wise men from the East. Matthew's gospel focuses on making sure that previous prophecies about the coming Messiah were fulfilled, so that people would be in no doubt that Jesus was the one – 2:6 "from you [Bethlehem] shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

2:15..."This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'"

2:17 "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:"

2:23 "There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled"

What we tend to forget when we enjoy the wise men bringing their fancy gifts is that after they had left Joseph is warned by an angel to leave because Herod is searching for the child and kills all male children under two years old. Mary, Joseph and the toddler Jesus flee as refugees to Egypt to escape violence. And they stay in Egypt until Herod had died. We do not know how long that was, but it was probably years, just like refugees now. And then, if we read to the end of chapter two, we find that Joseph was afraid to go to Judea and so they made their home in a town called Nazareth.

Refugee by Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons* Canterbury Press, 2012

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.

Discussion Questions:

- **Why do you think we tend to gloss over this part of the story?**
- **What do you think of Matthew's use of prophecies in his gospel?**
- **If we were to focus more on Jesus being a refugee, would we be more welcoming to refugees?**
- **Should we take Jesus as a refugee as a call to act more against the way our government treats refugees?**

Further reflection:

Read A Refugee's Christmas Carol - <https://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/Christmas-Carol-refugees/index.html>