

# What can we take from the Christmas Story

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[ 0 : 00 ] What can we take away from this story? It is the story of the genesis of Jesus Christ, as we said right at the beginning.

! And we read about wise men following a star coming to honour this child, having been prompted by this very unusual astronomical or astrological occurrence.

And what are we to make of this as we've gone through it this morning? So I've got three answers. One is nothing much. Two is what we already thought.

And three is what we didn't already think. So those are the three possible answers. So let's look, first of all, nothing. What are we to take away from this? Nothing much. You might be thinking, I'm not going to take away very much from this.

And here are a couple of reasons why you might be thinking that. You might be thinking because it's just a story about things long ago, far away, and hasn't got anything to do with me.

[ 1 : 26 ] Whatever effects it had at people at that time, the effect has long been diluted and there's nothing much left. A little bit like Ribena if you put too much water in it.

Well, is it really too long ago and too far away? It was 2,000 years ago. I don't know how long you think world history has lasted. Wikipedia says that the Earth has lasted four and a half billion years old.

And we know that Wikipedia is always correct. If that were the case, 2,000 years ago is just the blink of an eye yesterday. It's not too long ago. It's just yesterday.

And it's not too far away actually. It's about 2,000 miles away. If you've been to Cyprus on holiday, I know some of you have. It's just a hop, skip and a jump across the water from there.

So four hours, 40 minutes I think on the plane to Cyprus. It's not that far away. It's in our backyard really. And we went to Malmesbury for a little holiday a few weeks ago.

[ 2 : 35 ] And we drove on the A46, which goes from Leicester to Cirencester. And the A46, which we drove on, is actually an ancient Roman road, which is about the same antiquity as this story.

And I think we would be very foolish to think that because things happened 2,000 years ago, they're of no relevance to us today. Or because they happened 2,000 miles away, we can safely say they're without relevance.

So I'm not going to accept that. It's too far away and too long ago. You might be thinking, well, it's a great story, but it's no different to Father Christmas and elves and the Hobbit.

Because science proves that stars, like the one we've been reading, and the birth of kings foretold by stars and angels and God and all of that doesn't happen.

I don't know whether I should have put don't happen or doesn't happen. I ended up with doesn't happen. And you might be thinking, well, it's just a story.

[ 3 : 52 ] Well, it's certainly supernatural, and it's certainly unrepeatable. And in that sense, it can't be brought within the limits of science, because science is things that you can test in a laboratory, things that you can repeat, things that you can do statistics on, things that you can measure, put under a microscope, calculate on a computer.

It would be a philosophical fallacy to think that the only things that exist are things that come within the realm of science.

And if you are thinking that the only things that exist come within the realm of science, and the way I've defined it, then I admire you for your marvellous leap of faith. Because you are saying that you live in a world in which love does not exist, because love can't be proved by science.

Beauty does not exist, because there is no formula you can put into a computer to calculate beauty. Truth does not exist. Truth in the sense of something that we aspire to and stand up for.

It's just what is, isn't it? Human value does not exist, because there is no scientific basis on which to say that you are any more valuable than the chair that you're sitting on.

[ 5 : 12 ] Freedom does not exist. Mind does not exist. Hope does not exist. Prayer does not exist. Nobility does not exist. If you're going to say, this is nothing because I only believe the things that are scientific in the way I've just described it, well, not only is that a fallacy, but I have to admire your faith.

So I'm going to not let us get away. I'm going to argue against the idea we take nothing from this story. Number two, maybe, so this is another possible answer, we take away what we already thought.

Well, I don't know what you're already thinking, but I'm going to have a couple of guesses. I'm going to have a guess about the default view of Christianity. You're going to take away, perhaps, what you already thought Christianity was about.

And you might have thought it was about religion, being about God as an old-fashioned headmaster. Notice I didn't put head teacher to be politically correct because the person I'm thinking of would be not politically correct.

Somebody who writes the school rules, insists on the highest standards, and disciplines any pupil who doesn't live up to those standards. Maybe that's what, that's the sort of default view of Christianity.

[ 6 : 37 ] It has rules to keep, and you might have a certain relationship with those rules, you might dismiss them, or you might think they're a very good idea.

You could define those rules in all sorts of ways. Because you could say, for example, the Sermon on the Mount, which back in the day, people used to say, oh, I don't like Christianity, but I love the Sermon on the Mount, as if that actually portrayed a set of rules which it would be a good idea if everybody kept.

I'm not really quite sure that's fair on the Sermon on the Mount. Although it does say, do to other people as you would have them do to you, which I think is a remarkably powerful piece of ethics. I think the world would be a better place if people did to others as they would have them do to them. Just think how that would transform the ethics of what you do to prisoners of war. And it takes the view that Jesus simply came to set us an example, or it says that Christianity is a ladder, a ladder that we climb.

I have to say, that's the sort of default view of all sorts of religions, that this is what they tell you to do, to do better, work harder, climb up the ladder, achieve a certain level.

[ 8 : 02 ] Lots of people believe this, lots of people have been taught it, and lots of people have rejected it. I have to say this view isn't entirely incorrect.

It's not entirely incorrect, because the God of the Bible does make demands, but we'll come and look at those in a moment. But, I think there's a very big but, has the story that we have touched on this morning, does that teach us this view of Christianity?

Christianity. So, if it is really, if God is the head, head master, with rules to keep, and a ladder to climb, then why does the story say that God comes down to earth?

Because that's what the story says, that's the claim of the Christmas story, isn't it? If God's the head, head master, just thrashing his cane at us, why on earth does he come down to earth? Why does he come down to be one of the pupils?

And if Christianity is really just about climbing a ladder, to get up to God, why is it that God climbs down the ladder to come to be with us? Doesn't make sense on that view, does it?

[ 9 : 26 ] Why does the story contain the vocabulary, saviour? So, I don't think that it tells us what we already thought.

I think it tells us news that we didn't already think. I think it tells us something we weren't thinking, and that's why the Christian message is called good news.

That's what news is, isn't it? Something you didn't know, kind of tells you something you didn't know. So, I think this story tells us something we didn't think. So, did you notice that the baby had two names, actually?

Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins, and Emmanuel, which means God with us. God with us.

God with us. In the Luke reading, it talks about favour, humankind upon whom his favour rests.

[ 10 : 31 ] This story is not about a headmaster waving his stick at us, about a God who's trying to catch us out, but a God who does something for us.

If you want to stick with the educational analogy, this is more like the tutor who gives up extra time to spend with the pupils, helping them to do their homework.

I remember when I was a student, and I was studying, struggling with, I think it was quantum mechanics, or something like that, and the tutor said to us, tell me if you're struggling, tell me what you're struggling with, I'm here to help you.

I have to say, I didn't, because I didn't believe him. But, I was struggling with it, and I could have used some help, actually, but I wasn't, I was afraid to own up.

But this is a story of God who's come down to us, who says more or less the same thing. I've come to help you. Tell me what the problem is. Tell me what you're struggling with.

[ 11 : 40 ] Because God is for us. God with us. God for us. And then, another feature of this story is the name of Jesus, as I referred to earlier.

He will save his people from their sins. Let's just take it a bit at a time. He will save people. That is not in the default view.

He's not come at this point to judge us, but to save us. To intervene. To deliver. So if you were a drowning person, and you have the rescue helicopter above, with the rotor blades wearing, and the rope dangling down to you, what would you make of that?

You say, go away, I'm drowning. You'd say, that's the help I need. And Jesus comes in that way, as a saviour.

And we could go further than that, because the story doesn't end with Christmas, of course, does it? It ends with Easter, where Jesus dies on the cross. What do you make of that?

[ 12 : 55 ] What are we to take away from that? The way Jesus tells it is, that he's come, and what we needed, was him to die on the cross, so that our sins could be forgiven.

That's an act of huge sacrifice, and selflessness. And so, I think it's something we weren't expecting, that he comes to save.

And to save his people from their sins. And that bit we weren't expecting either. We didn't think that. You know, you might be saying, don't really like this idea, I know I'm not perfect, but I'm better than a lot of people.

I don't really want to be rescued from my sins. I've lived a good life, never murdered, never stolen, never cheated, which may well be true. And are you going to go on to say, I've never made a promise, which I've broken?

Never thought things in my heart, that I'd be ashamed of other people, to know about? You might say, well, I have my own moral code. But I'm perfectly sure, that if you're totally honest, you know that you haven't lived up to your own moral code.

[ 14 : 13 ] This is the bit we weren't thinking, that people that Jesus came for are the sinners that he came to save. And you might say, well, you started off this quite cheerfully, telling us that this is good news, and now you've just made us all feel terrible.

Well, I have to say, I don't think, I've done that deliberately, I'm just being realistic, about the sort of people we are. And I'll tell you from me personally, I think this is terrific good news.

Because I need a saviour, to save me from my sins. And I need my sins to be forgiven. And to me, this is wonderful good news. Rosemary's husband passed away.

How old was Martin when he died? 93. And I had the privileges of visiting him just a few hours before his death.

And we shared together about Jesus, who has the power on earth to forgive sins.

[ 15 : 20 ] And I don't honestly know whether Martin heard it or took it in, but it was a good thing to talk about. And I'd like to say, as and when each of us reaches the age of 93, and we may well do, and we look upon 93 years of the things that we've done, and the things that we've said, and the things that we perhaps regret, and the things that we should have done better, and the things that we omitted, what would you, what would you find a relevant truth?

Would you like it to be said that your looks were comparable with those of Angelina Jolie, or George Clooney, or your power was equivalent to that of Barack Obama, or your bank balance was as big as a Russian billionaire, or would you prefer somebody to say, your sins are forgiven?

So this is something that we weren't expecting, but it's something that the story confronts us with. He came to earth because God is for us and with us.

His name is Jesus because he saves people, and what he saves people from is from their sins. And one other thing, which again we weren't expecting, is the wise men who worship Jesus.

Now why does Matthew put this into the story? I think he puts it into the story, well because it's true, and because he wants to model to his readers the response that Jesus wants.

[ 16 : 59 ] He comes to save us, he comes to bless us, but he does insist that he is God. And the wise men worshipped him, whether they really understood the depth of what they were doing, I don't know, but it's there as a model.

Jesus insists that we worship him. He's not tame in the sense that he will gladly fit in with whatever agenda we set him and pat us on the head.

He won't do that. What he does do is to say, if I'm in your life, I will be your saviour, but I insist on being at the centre.

And Jesus is not satisfied with being one God among many, one interest among many, one support among many.

He does insist that we worship him. And those are the things that perhaps we didn't think, and those are the things, perhaps, that we weren't expecting.

[ 18 : 21 ] Perhaps it comes as news to us, but whether, and to many people, it comes as good news. And I'd really like it if you were one of those people.

Let's sing together to close.