

Advent Week 4: The Cast of Christmas - 18th December 2022

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Now, the eagle-eyed among you would have spotted maybe the knitted nativity out in the foyer. A nativity, if you will, made, they get worse, made by Jane's mum, I think, many moons ago.

It's nicely done, and it's gone down well with children who've been in our building this week. I know. But if a knitted nativity is not quite your thing, don't despair, though, because this year other versions of nativity scenes are available.

In particular, there's a whole host of animal-themed sets, so ranging from a dog nativity for a canine Christmas, which is particularly tasteful, I think.

Alternatively, if dogs aren't your thing, if you're more of a cat person, I know there's a few among us, you can have a cat nativity or a cativity, I guess. But it gets better or worse, depending on your view.

You could pick up a penguin nativity, if that's your thing. There's even a rubber duck nativity, although watch out for the bill with that one. I know, I know.

[1 : 07] And for reasons beyond me, you can even get a fox nativity. I have no idea why Mr. Todd in the middle there or something, we don't know. But if animals aren't your thing and you're just into the food side of things, there is at least a chocolate nativity to chomp your way through.

Although you would feel a little bit guilty eating baby Jesus on Christmas Day, wouldn't you? I imagine. But if the whole nativity cast, if that's too much for you and too overwhelming, I guess you could just stick with Mary, Joseph and the wee baby Jesus by getting a salt and pepper set of the three of them.

And you can see that at the bottom there, it says, it's the reason for the seasoning, which, yeah, maybe stick that in your stocking. Alternatively, though, there's a masked nativity for us in these times.

Feliz Covidad and all that, I imagine. Or if it's just Mary and Jesus you're after, how about this snow globe, which is particularly fetching?

Now, for some reason, it's just Mary's head in the snow globe. Bad case of dandruff there for the Holy Mother or something. And look at baby Jesus' face.

[2 : 15] He's very shocked that his mum is in this space helmet. It doesn't really make sense, does it? I guess that if you're not into the whole Mary and Jesus thing, you could, in a sense, do away with Mary completely and get this one, which is Father Christmas holding the baby Jesus, which kind of mixes things up maybe a bit too much for us.

We'll see. But there's one more I want to show you because this one is my favourite. If not on grounds of taste, then on grounds of inventiveness. And it's this, which is a meat nativity.

Now, dubious kosher qualities aside, what's not to love about pigs in blankets on Christmas Day, I tell you? Maybe you could concoct, maybe that's a Christmas lunch special we could do and serve.

We'll see. Now, despite, I guess, the naughtiness, perhaps, of some of these nativities, I guess they all go to show how iconic the nativity scene is.

You know, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, shepherds, wise men, angels, and so on. And for us here, we'll be celebrating this kind of Christmas scene, our Christmas special service, which is coming up on Christmas Eve, complete with a casting.

[3 : 23] We've got 30 or so kids involved in that. We'll be dressing up as characters and singing all sorts of seasonal songs. If you fancy a traditional nativity service, the place will be packed up. It'll be great to see you, though.

Half past four, Christmas Eve, do come on down for a fun afternoon. And yet, I know other places do kind of less traditional nativities, sticking in space aliens and so on. I'm more than happy for us in this church to continue the traditional nativity play, the classic, if you like.

But at the same time, I think it's also equally, if not more important, that perhaps each year with this familiar story, if we invite God to speak to us through perhaps the actual characters that we encounter in that first Christmas story.

So this morning, I just want to go through some of the cast members very briefly. And we're going to start with Mary. What can we say about Mary? Well, as you may have gathered over the stories in the past weeks and over years of coming, perhaps, we've been seeing that the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

And she says this. She says, OK, Gabriel, I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said. And it's a pretty remarkable reply.

[4 : 39] Reveals, perhaps, not only a deep faith and trust in God, but also a remarkable degree of strength and of courage, maybe a kind of sense of adventure, you can imagine.

She's a woman of real character and integrity. And she's brave as well. May it be to me, as you have said, knowing that that was going to turn her life upside down.

Indeed, she's willing, it seems, to endure the scandal that would come at the time with her being an unmarried, pregnant teenager. And the fact that we're told she leaves her hometown of Nazareth to go and stay in the countryside with her cousin Elizabeth for a few months while pregnant.

I wonder why she did that. It maybe suggests she wanted to be out of sight and lie low for a while. But we're not told. But it may also indicate that perhaps she was no longer welcome, initially at least, in her parents' home.

Maybe she had to go and stay with a relative. We're not told. But you have to ask yourself why she would do that. What else? Well, we know she was incredibly politically engaged, declaring of God, as Ruth was saying the other week, in this poetic but hugely powerful language, saying, he has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

[6 : 05] He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. Now, she's someone, it seems, with these kind of words in this, again, Ruth mentioned it earlier, what we call the Magnificat, this poem, perhaps this song of praise.

She's someone, it seems, who wants rulers to be brought down from their thrones, others to be lifted up. She wants revolution in many ways. She wants social justice in this verse.

She wants what we would call these days as perhaps the redistribution of wealth. Now, she's quite the Mick Lynch of her time, we might say. And now Mary is someone who perhaps would do well to give us a lead, perhaps, in how we engage with things in our time.

She is hugely political, and I wonder if her views might help shape our views on all the strikes and the workplace discontent which is going on in our time.

So she's a woman of courage and conviction. She's socially and politically engaged. And really, if that's your mum, no wonder Jesus grew up to be all those things and more with a mother like that to raise him.

[7 : 14] That's a little snapshot of Mary, but what about her partner, what about Joseph? Well, again, there's a lot of depth to him. As when Mary tells him that she's pregnant, we're told this, that because he was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

Divorce here is used as a term to describe breaking off an engagement, breaking off this pledge that they had to get married. So not only is Joseph described here as a righteous man, and that's high praise indeed, when actually very few folks in the Bible are described in such a way.

He's also got a good heart, it seems. He's very compassionate, because he chooses, or he's willing to choose, to go down a route of not publicly disgracing Mary when he would have understandably suspected her of having an affair, but instead suggests actually just go quietly.

Let's split up quietly. And yet when Joseph is told in a dream by God about the circumstances of Mary's pregnancy and how actually he shouldn't be afraid to take Mary as his wife, well, clearly Joseph is also a man of deep faith and trust, just as Mary is.

And he chooses therefore to stick with Mary and become father to a child who is not biologically his. Indeed, when he's told in this dream, he says, you are to give him the name Jesus.

[8 : 51] God explicitly gives Joseph what would normally be a father's right of naming a child. God's way, it seems, of telling Joseph, yeah, you're gonna be his dad.

You can take Jesus as your own. What's more, Matthew's gospel tells us that when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And so again, interesting little detail, I think, because the fact that Joseph was willing, should we say, not to consummate their marriage, well, that indicates, I think, for both of them in their probably teenage years, an impressive degree of self-control in order to ensure that Jesus' identity as this miraculously conceived child couldn't be doubted.

They didn't have sex, basically, as newlyweds. Not an easy thing, I imagine, at all. Indeed, it seems to me that sometimes God's call on our lives is as much sometimes about us not doing something as it is for us to do something.

We often ask God, you know, show me what you want me to do. And actually, sometimes the question might be, God, show me what you want me not to do. And it's not a negative question, because God's guidance can come in that way as well.

[10 : 21] So that might be something from, as with these two, from not sleeping with someone even though we could, to perhaps, I don't know, in our day, not overloading ourselves with debt simply because we want to keep up with those around us.

You know, as Joseph and Mary show, it's perhaps in our obedience and our willingness sometimes to go against the flow and not do things. through which God can do some pretty amazing things.

That's Joseph. Who else in this cast? Well, you've got the shepherds. And these were the first people to visit the newborn Jesus. We talk about these shepherds most years at Christmas, but it's worth remembering, I think, how outcasts from everyday society shepherds would normally have been in Jesus' day.

So we know from other historical sources, aside from the Bible, that buying food or clothing from shepherds at the time was forbidden, because more than likely, they'd be knocking off stolen goods.

Shepherds were dodgy, wheeler-dealer kind of people. It wasn't just their crooks, which were hooky. I tell you, these dodgy shepherds. You couldn't trust a shepherd, basically.

[11 : 37] They were known. They had that kind of reputation. And so you certainly wouldn't want them gate-crashing the birth of your son. And yet, it was precisely these shepherds who God identified as the ones he wanted to encounter Jesus first.

It's a life highlight for them, I imagine. That's a real dear diary moment. But it's also, I think, a lesson for us in that God seems to call certain people in spite of, or actually more likely precisely because of, their dodgy social standing, whether that's deserved or not.

And ironically, perhaps, for blokes usually associated with dishonest dealings, we're told this, that when they had seen Jesus, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. So you think about this. I think it's a kind of delightfully mischievous thing that God does here.

Choosing to pick the dodgiest of geezers to be the very first evangelists. Evangelists, you know, the ones who would share and declare to all who would listen that Jesus had been born.

[12 : 58] And it's a birth which, as the angels who appeared above them said, was to bring good news of great joy for all people.

See, the fact that God had invited these otherwise social outcasts, these shepherds, to witness such a special birth, well, they'd have been bursting, I imagine, with the reality that Jesus was indeed good news of great joy for all people.

But most of all, he was good news of great joy for them personally. You know, their testimony would have been personal. This good news was their own story now to share.

They'd seen Jesus with their own eyes. It'd become their story. And maybe that explains why the people were amazed when they heard what they said. And so again, it strikes me perhaps as we think about these shepherds and what they might mean for us today.

Like we might feel perhaps sometimes on the fringes perhaps of sort of social settings. We might never feel like we quite fit in. We might feel like we lack a bit of credibility, especially with matters concerning our faith maybe.

[14 : 10] We might feel that doing our job at the moment, perhaps it's a mundane kind of night shift like the shepherds were doing as well. Whatever we feel, however we feel perhaps insignificant or on the margins or on the fringes or so on, the shepherds tell us that God sees us, God sees you.

And he calls you, calls me, to share in our own way, in our own voice, with our own experience. The way in which Jesus is good news of great joy for you and for me personally.

Because if Jesus is good news for us as individuals, if Jesus is good news for me and for you, then we can be pretty sure that other people will cotton on to the fact that Jesus can be good news for them as well.

It makes it personal, not some kind of distant prospect, I suppose. You know, if I think about how I talk about my faith, yeah, I'm kind of up front here, but I don't share my faith really with a kind of church hat on.

I simply talk about and try and demonstrate as best I can through how I live the difference that God's goodness and God's love makes to me in my life.

[15 : 27] And I know many of you do exactly that same kind of thing in your way too. I think the shepherds show us that sharing the good news of Jesus doesn't need us to have particular qualifications or speak in a certain way.

We don't even have needed to have lived a righteous or a virtuous life. No, we simply need to share the difference that we've seen God make in our lives and just as the shepherds did, then trust God to use that testimony to amaze others, to draw people to himself.

That's the shepherds, but one final little group in this cast of nativity characters and I spoke about these last week at a carol service, so catch up online if you fancy checking that one out.

But the arrival of these people, the wise men, magi from the east as they're called, offers us, I think, a very different angle to the shepherds in particular on a way God might surprise us with who he chooses to involve in this most famous of stories.

Now, as I mentioned last week, the fact that these wise men were probably from a different religion and were associated with astrology and even magic, you know, hence their name magi, is rooted in a kind of practice of magic, we'd think they wouldn't exactly be prime candidates to be cast in the Christmas story.

[16 : 52] And yet, here they are. They're drawn to Jesus by a star as their astrology would have told them to offer him three gifts, gifts which each speak of the way Jesus was born, born to be a king, hence the gold, born to connect us to God, hence the frankincense, which was usually used as a smoke rises as an aid to prayer.

But they also gave this gift of myrrh because they believed Jesus was born to die, you know, myrrh being an embalming spice usually rubbed on dead bodies.

So yes, these wise men as we were saying last week, they got distracted perhaps by going to visit Herod first. But by choosing these gifts, I think that reveals their heart, if you like.

Reveals that they'd clocked some pretty key things about who Jesus was and who he would grow up to be with the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh.

And so when they arrived, it's no wonder that we're told they bowed down and worshipped Jesus because they knew somehow that they were in the presence of someone who deserved their worship.

[18 : 07] They were in the presence of God even as a newborn baby. And just as Mary and Joseph and the shepherds have things to teach us today, I'd say, what might we therefore learn from these wise men?

Well, I think for me, it's the importance of us, not limiting God in who he might speak to us through. In fact, maybe it's that we should expect God to be working in and through all sorts of people even if they don't always fit within the neat or the so-called Christian categories.

Again, if we recall we're the shepherds, they shared the news from the angels that Jesus had come as good news of great joy for all people. And that means in the Christmas story and beyond that Jesus was just as much good news for these wise men, you know, these Zoroastrian astrologers from the east as he is for you and for me.

That means Jesus is just as much good news for Muslims as he is for Christians. That means that Jesus is just as much good news for self-declared atheists as he is for those who wear their faith on their sleeve.

Yeah, of course, being that good news for all people means that Jesus will in his own way be drawing, I would say, all people towards himself, encouraging and offering them the joy of knowing him and him alone as the way and the truth and the life.

[19 : 47] But if God makes a deliberate point, as he does, I think, of guiding these wise men to be among the first people to see him in the flesh. Certainly the first people in Matthew's gospel at least to be recorded as worshipping Jesus.

It seems to me that we do well this Christmas and beyond to ask God to keep our hearts and minds open to the ways in which he is already at work in our friends and our neighbours and our work colleagues and how we might hear from God through them as unexpected as that might be.

And I guess for our part, above all, it seems to me we do well to ask God to use us as the wise men, as the shepherds did, to help all people of whatever background of belief they might be to encounter the inclusive, incarnational, inspirational love of Jesus through the way we're able to share the joyful news of his love with those we live alongside.

So as we celebrate the Nativity this Christmas, as we do that on Christmas Eve, as we think about the story on Christmas Day, I think it's good that we do. It's a classic story and it's worth retelling every year.

No doubt about that. And yeah, by all means, whatever you want to do in your own homes, if you want to stick up some kind of nativity, that would be a good thing as well. I don't really mind if it's dogs or not cats. I hate cats. But dogs, foxes, meat, whatever.

[21 : 22] Put up whatever kind of nativity scene you feel inclined to. The story is a great one. But I think perhaps as we see those characters in the story and we watch that familiar tale, I think my prayer is that in amongst all the busyness, in amongst all the cliches that come with the story, my prayer is that we would allow God to speak to us afresh of the wonder of just who he called and why he called them to be the main players at this first Christmas time.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.