

advent special - one

The story we all know

re-examining the Christmas Story and the Gospels

This is the first of two 'advent special' Bible conversations that probably should have been available at the start of Bible Year but don't seem to have made it onto the website, so here it is now at the start of Prayer year, to help groups that are still engaging with the Bible even whilst they are extending their explorations in prayer. This conversation aims to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** by actively exploring the Christmas story in the Gospels
- **make connections** between the biblical stories and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from talking freely with each other about popular ideas of the Christmas story and comparing them with the versions we find in Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

We start by sharing in assembling "The Christmas Story" we have all inherited from the more religious end of popular culture. We'll explore the traditional Nativity Scene and what it implies. Next we'll look at what we find in the text of the early chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and what the stories in those chapters seem to be saying. Then we'll go back to the familiar "Christmas Story" and think about how it has changed the meaning of Christmas and why it might have done so....

STRUCTURE

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Constructing and questioning a typical nativity scene
3. Recovering and Questioning Matthew's Story
4. *(optional)* Song
5. Recovering and Questioning Luke's Story
6. Explaining what Christendom has done
7. Seeing where this leaves us
8. *(optional)* Rounding it off with a song

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1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

Ask everyone to take a moment to think about "The true meaning of Christmas" – invite them to write down for themselves, or remember for themselves what they think that is... but don't share your ideas with each other – not now, anyway!

2. CONSTRUCTING AND QUESTIONING A TYPICAL NATIVITY SCENE

Using everyone's memories of a typical Nativity Scene (often modelled in wooden, knitted or pottery figures), try to place all the elements of a such a scene, using an actual nativity set or cut-out figures (fuzzy-felt?) or by writing and placing labels on a sheet of paper. Who is there? Who is where?

It is likely that your scene will include Mary; Joseph; the baby Jesus; a manger; a stable; animals; shepherds; three kings bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh; a star.

Having constructed together what you take to be a typical Nativity Scene try to answer this question together:

- **What message does this Nativity Scene, with its shepherds and kings, give us about God, the world and the meaning of Christmas?**

Record all the ideas that your group contributes, so you will all be able to look at them later

3. RECOVERING AND QUESTIONING MATTHEW'S STORY

Share together Matthew's account of the Christmas story. Find it at **Matthew 2.1-18**

REMOVE from your previous nativity scene, whatever doesn't appear in Matthew's story.

manger; stable; animals; shepherds... but also those THREE KINGS

Now ADD to your scene what does appear in Matthew's story but isn't there yet...

You will need to add 'the astrologers from the east'

- **What difference does it make replacing kings with dodgy foreign astrologers and leaving them as the only visitors who come and worship?**
- **Where is the king in this story and how does he react to news of the birth?**
- **So, what's the message of Matthew's version of the Christmas Story?**

Record the ideas your group contributes about Matthew's version of the Christmas Story

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4. (optional) Song – Matthew's Challenge – tune: Sussex Carol

a sort of carol based on Matthew 2.1-18

(as you sing, see if you can spot the 'deliberate mistake' – something from Luke's version of the Christmas Story that has strayed into this supposedly Matthew-based carol)

In Bethlehem, with Jesu's birth
the God of heaven came to earth;
a babe who left us free to choose;
a gift of love we could refuse.
What will we do? What will we say?
Will we welcome our God today?

First doubtful strangers saw a star
and seeking, travelled from afar,
they journeyed, questioned, gave their all,
met God in Beth'lem's cattle stall.
Will we, with them, both kneel and pray?
Will we welcome our God today?

King Herod found this quite absurd
although he had the prophets' word;
defensive, wary, trapped by fear,
he ordered slaughter far and near;
Will we, like him, push You away?
Will we welcome our God today?

This challenge still confronts us all -
this Christmas will we heed Your call?
Will we be open to Your care,
or fight against the love You share?
God help us now, that we may say –
"We will welcome our God today!"

words by John M. Campbell

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5. RECOVERING AND QUESTIONING LUKE'S STORY

Share together Luke's account of the Christmas story. Find it at **Luke 2.1-20**

Quickly RESTORE your version of the typical nativity scene with all its elements present

now REMOVE from the typical nativity scene, whatever doesn't appear in Luke's story.

three kings and a star

Stop and think about the life and status of desert shepherds working near Bethlehem...

*Shepherds were dirt poor and at least semi-nomadic
They were distrusted by proper townfolk
They survived by craft and cunning in the harsh desert environment
They kept animals and were religiously unclean – they were probably very smelly
They were nobodies for whom nobody else cared*

- **What difference does it make having desert shepherds (sent by an angel and a heavenly choir) as the only visitors with the only official invitation?**
- **Where's the king in this story and how does he react to news of the birth?¹**
- **So, what's the message of Luke's version of the Christmas Story?**
- **Is the message of Luke's version more like Matthews version or the message of the typical nativity scene?**

Record the ideas your group contributes about Luke's version of the Christmas Story

IF you have time, you might like to take a few minutes to think about the four other people that Luke has introduced to the story of Jesus' birth...

BEFORE THE BIRTH – there's Zacharias and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist)
Luke 1.5-25

*Faithful, pious, poor people, with a fine whiff of the Old Testament about them,
Priestly, but with low social status*

AFTER THE BIRTH – there's Simeon and there's Anna, both in the Temple in Jerusalem
Luke 2.25-38

*Faithful, pious, poor people with a real Old Testament flavour to them
Prophetic, but with low social status*

¹ If you're struggling with this question, look at Luke 2.1 – there you will find Caesar Augustus, the Emperor of Rome himself, the ruler of the whole civilised world (or so he thought), who also saw himself as the divine Son of God on earth. He's in at the start of this story, but he is completely oblivious to it – he may not even know where Bethlehem is, never mind what is happening there.

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6. EXPLAINING WHAT CHRISTENDOM HAS DONE TO THE STORY

So, we have in our Bible two edgy, difficult stories of the almost hidden arrival of Jesus, only spotted by people on the very edge of the known and acceptable world... stories that tell of a birth that implicitly challenges the way things are and undermines people who think they are in control.

These seem to have been overwritten with a softer, safer story that threatens no-one...

- **Why might Luke and Matthew's Christmas Stories have been replaced with the blended Nativity Story we all know? Who benefits? What is lost?**
- **What did we think the 'true meaning of Christmas' was before we began this conversation? Do we still think the same now?**

7. SEEING WHERE THIS LEAVES US...

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways do the Gospel Christmas Stories speak to us today?**

Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the stories like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help with living now can your group find from what you have considered?

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the Christmas Stories raise. Honestly address what the stories seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.

(there's another optional song on the next page....)

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8. (optional) SONG – The Shepherd's Song – tune: God rest you merry, Gentlemen!

a sort of shepherd's ballad based on Luke 2.8-20

A Shepherd's always with his sheep –
on guard both night and day –
unwashed, unkempt, our smell is strong,
so nice folk keep away.
They make it clear we must not mix
lest we lead them astray –
unfit for the Glory of God (so they say)
untouched by the Glory of God!

And yet one night by Bethlehem –
where David had his call –
the very angels sang to us
and held us in their thrall,
so we were God's sole prophets now
with news for one and all –
embraced by the Glory of God (shepherds all),
engulfed by the Glory of God!

At once we ventured into town
to see what we might see –
and found the child the angels said
would rescue you and me,
so street by street we woke the town
to share what had to be-
endowed with the Glory of God (joyfully)
empower'd by the Glory of God!

And then outside another town
when thirty years had passed
we heard he'd called forgiveness down
before he breathed his last,
and somehow in that awesome death
death's own defeat was cast –
o'erthrown by the Glory of God, (joy at last!)
o'erwhelmed by the Glory of God!

So now the news we shepherds brought
those many years ago
is truly news for all of you
if you're prepared to know
that God himself has come to earth
to make his Kingdom grow –
you're reached by the Glory of God, (did you know?)
you're blessed by the Glory of God!

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

There should be a continuing stream of Bible Conversation materials appearing on the Vision4Life website all through Prayer Year – only, after Advent, they will be Bible conversations focussed on Prayer and Praying as it is presented in the Bible.

Look out for it and use it!