

Christmas for **Missional** **Disciples**

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Christmas: changing the world, or “time out”?

The disturbing truth is that it's possible for church people to “do” Christmas year after year - sing carols, attend services, celebrate Jesus' birth - and miss the whole point. Christmas can be reduced to a key festival in the church's calendar, rather than something that God did to change the world forever. Is that really possible? I want to look at Christmas through a missional discipleship lens - to re-read the gospel Christmas narratives and scrutinise our Christmas celebrations in their light.

Picture the typical church nativity scene: a crib with a doll; Mary, dressed in light blue; Joseph and the shepherds in dressing gowns and tea towels; cardboard sheep and cattle; a star, an angel, and three kings kneeling at the crib. It's a tableau that has been built up over Nine Lessons and Carols. It's beautiful because of its familiarity. If your church is anything like the one I grew up in, the costumes and props are the ones that have been used year upon year, packed away at the end of the service to be taken out and re-used next Christmas.

And this is the point: Christmas doesn't change. And neither does the world. It's a season: it comes round, year after year, in an endless cycle. Those of us who are parents or grandparents sigh with pleasure as we watch the latest generation entering into the magic and excitement of the Christmas season.

That isn't to say that Christmas doesn't transform people. The German, French and British soldiers who climbed out of their trenches to play football with one another on Christmas Eve, 1914, were never the same because of their experiences. They couldn't see one another as enemies any longer. They warned each other when the shelling was about to resume; they swapped addresses and arranged to meet up after the war. They were changed. But it didn't stop the war; millions more were to die before that happened. And the powers that be successfully contained what threatened to become a rebellion in the ranks.

That is what I mean about the world not changing. Christmas didn't somehow stop us from taking 2,000 years to realise that women were not inferior human beings to men, to be regarded as possessions and prevented from realising their God-given potential. It didn't prevent the Inquisition, the slave trade, the oppression of people of colour, the persecution and murder of gay people, Apartheid and the Ku Klux Klan. All of these were movements supported, run and justified by the church. 2,000 seasons of peace and goodwill have not brought an end to war, or the defence industry that means that the UK sells arms to nations like Saudi Arabia because it is hugely profitable. It hasn't brought an end to global

poverty, or climate change. It hasn't provided an answer to the biggest and most urgent Big Questions of our time.

Christmas is "time out" from the ordinary. It's a temporary ceasefire from life as it usually is - a time for generosity, love, giving, charity, and talking longingly of "peace and goodwill". It's an "if only" time: if only the world was *really* like this! Because we know it isn't and won't be. By Twelfth Night (if not before), Christmas - its dreams, its sentiment and its longings - will be packed away with the crib and decorations for another year. For all our sermons and New Year's resolutions, we have no real intention or expectation of taking Jesus into the rest of the year - the rest of our lives, and the rest of the world. Extending the season of "peace and goodwill" into the rest of the year feels as unseasonal as singing Christmas carols in February or August. Christmas doesn't change the world, because it is essentially a time out from the reality of our world and the way it works.

The Christmas stories of Jesus: God's revolution

God came in Jesus at Christmas to turn the world upside down. To quote Mary's Song (the Magnificat): "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty!" (Luke 1: 51-53).

We must not let the beauty of the poetry disguise the fact that Christmas is the beginning of God's revolution. The gospel Christmas stories are anything but sentimental. They are hard-edged. They engage deeply and directly with the way we human beings have made our world - the structures that make it a place that continually deals despair and death rather than the creation God intended it to be. Look for a moment at the themes in Matthew's and Luke's Christmas stories. As you do, ask yourself how frequently and how prominently they feature in the typical "Church Christmas".

Revolutionary themes in Luke's Christmas story

1. Taxation

Luke's Christmas message addresses a world under Roman political and military occupation. It opens with an imperial decree announcing a census to determine the level of punitive taxation to which oppressed and occupied people will be subject, in order to fund the continued subjugation and administration of the Empire (2:1). It is brutal; treats people as pawns to be moved around the imperial chessboard at will, without regard for their circumstances - especially its effect on the poorest and most vulnerable. It sets in train a mass movement of people on the same sort of scale that we are witnessing in Syria, with all the attendant chaos and misery (2:4-5).

This is the action of "the mighty on their thrones" - the Emperor Augustus and his regional "enforcers" like Quirinius. And, according to Roman political propaganda and theology, this is "Good News" (gospel) because the efficient administration of the Empire is "good news of great joy for all people" (2:10). The angel of the Lord who appears to the shepherds (who are doubly oppressed by poverty and religious ostracism) directly quotes the Roman political propaganda!

- *How many Christmas sermons have you heard that address the question of taxation and its burden on the poorest and most vulnerable members of society?*
- *Or about who is bearing the cost of the recession and austerity?*

2. Jesus vs Caesar

The angel goes on to announce the content of God's Good News: the baby in the manger is "Saviour and Lord" (2:11). These were the Emperor's titles! Augustus' great achievement was to establish the Pax Romana (the Peace of Rome) that brought peace to the Empire (the world) for 200 years. For this, he was given the imperial titles of "Saviour", "Lord" and "Prince of Peace". These titles, according to the angel, belong only and properly to Jesus. He is *truly* "good news of great joy to all people" because he is the Messiah - the Liberator - who will free the world from the tyranny of Rome by replacing it with God's Kingdom (2:11,14). It will be achieved by peace rather than military conquest. And it comes to peasants and outcasts first!

Jesus' birth is God's declaration of war on the way in which Empire benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of people on the margins, and his illegitimate claim to loyalty that belongs to God alone.

- *How many Christmas sermons address the limits of claims that nations and governments can make on its citizens - especially the church?*
- *How many question which political parties in our democracy prioritise and address the concerns and interests of the poorest and most vulnerable?*

3. Poverty and wealth

The events of Christmas begin a story of God's revolution that is Good News first and foremost to the poor, the hungry and the marginalised. This is the "upside down" world of God's Kingdom, in which the people who find no room in the world of Empire are welcomed to the head of God's queue, while the rich and powerful are stripped of their power and wealth. As the gospel unfolds, Luke develops this theme.

It is Luke who records Jesus' parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus (16: 19-31). There is no mystery or inevitability to poverty: it is the direct result of the "haves" far more than their share at the expense of the "have-nots", according to Jesus. It is driven by greed and ruthlessness, and marked by the absence of compassion that is prepared to live at the expense of others.

- *How many Christmas sermons deal with the fact that Christmas has become a festival for rich consumers, leaving the structures of global poverty intact?*
- *Why is Christmas typically a time for charity (alleviating the effects of poverty) that assuages our guilty consciences for a season, rather than a time to address the scandal of poverty itself (as in the carol, "Good King Wenceslas")?*

- *How many question whether our free market capitalism is fundamentally opposed to God's compassion, generosity and grace?*
- *How many explore the ways in which the poor in our society are made invisible, regarded as an inconvenient problem to be managed, or portrayed as immoral scroungers who do not deserve our compassion and care?*

4. The role of women

Luke's Christmas narrative is primarily a story about the women involved. If that feels unsurprising, compare it with Matthew's story. In Matthew's gospel, Mary is entirely silent. The angel of the Lord appears three times to reveal:

1. Mary is pregnant through divine agency with a son who will be named "Emmanuel" ("God with us"), and not through infidelity (Matthew 1:20-21).
2. Joseph and the family need to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's imminent slaughter of the Bethlehem infants (Matthew 2: 13-14).
3. Joseph and the family are safe to return home (Matthew 2: 19-20).

In each case, the conversations are held only with Joseph. Matthew does not record Joseph passing these on to Mary. In fact, she is never even told about what is happening to her when she falls pregnant!

In Luke's story, by contrast, all the angelic conversations about her pregnancy are held with Mary, not Joseph. Joseph has no speaking part! Ironically, the only other angelic conversation before the birth occurs with John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, in the Holy of Holies (1:11), and he is struck dumb for doubting the promise of a son! Both fathers are deliberately sidelined; instead, the events feature Elizabeth and Mary as the main protagonists. Mary's Magnificat is programmatic for Jesus' whole ministry in Luke's gospel: see the thematic connections with the Sermon in Nazareth (4:16-21). Zechariah only speaks eventually to confirm what Mary has already said (1: 67-79).

That Luke is deliberately emphasising the role of the women in order to undo the structures of patriarchy is clear from the rest of his gospel. Luke's Jesus is very particularly Good News for women, who were regarded as second class human beings and male possessions. Jesus fulfils God's Christmas mission of "lifting up the lowly". In the new world of the Kingdom, women are mens' equals - and that is revolutionary!

- *How many Christmas sermons engage with the church's shameful history of the oppression of women, with the opposition to the Suffragette Movement, or with the*

fact that it took us more than 20 centuries of Christmases to recognise that women need to be regarded, treated and rewarded as men's equals?

- *How many Christmas sermons question the fact that issues about inclusive language in worship and Bible translations are disparaged as "political correctness gone mad", rather than a repentant vigilance about the continuing effects of an appalling history of abuse?*
- *Or that Christian churches in the UK claim exemption from Equal Opportunities legislation to discriminate against women in ministry on what they claim to be grounds of Christian faith?*

5. Saying "Yes!" to God

In Luke's story, the birth of Jesus hinges on Mary's response to Gabriel at the Annunciation (1: 26-38). Mary's "Yes!" to God (1:38) is quite properly the subject of many Christmas sermons on responding faithfully to the costly call of God and the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives as would-be disciples. We need to emphasise that her obedience and embrace of the cost of personal disgrace and communal and family misunderstanding is possible only because of the directness of her encounter with God. Faithful discipleship is only possible because of the immediacy of an ongoing relationship with God through the Holy Spirit.

What is far less often included is Mary's "Yes!" to the revolution God intends to accomplish through Jesus' birth. The Magnificat is Mary's hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for personal blessing (1: 48-49) - but also a clear recognition that the content of that personal blessing is being the means by which God will turn the world upside down (1: 51-53). This is the promise of the New World that Mary celebrates - a world that is Good News for the lowly and the hungry.

- *Why do our Christmas sermons tend to emphasise the personal blessing that follows Mary's obedient response at the expense of her celebration of God's revolution?*
- *Ought it to be possible to have the one without the other?*
- *How often does preaching about the Holy Spirit connect the Spirit to the struggle for justice and the welfare of the poorest and most vulnerable?*

Revolutionary themes in Matthew's Christmas story

Matthew's story of Jesus is the most explicitly Jewish gospel. His presentation of Jesus refers back constantly to the great salvation stories of Israel's past - to the stories of the Exodus from Egypt, Israel's monarchy (particularly to King David) and the Exile in Babylon. These are very visible in his Christmas narrative. However, because we are not Jewish readers, steeped in these stories and alert to Matthew's echoes and inferences, we will need to spend longer on them in order to hear his Christmas message more clearly.

1. Salvation, sin and politics

Joseph is told by the angel that Mary will conceive a child by the Holy Spirit, whom he is to name "Jesus", because "he will save his people from their sins" (1:22). This is the fulfilment of the vision in Isaiah 7:14 of a baby whose divine conception means that he is nothing less than "Emmanuel" - "God with us" (1:23).

This emphasis on names is theologically important and politically explosive. The name, "Jesus" means, "God saves/rescues/delivers". When we hear that Jesus "will save his people from their sins", our immediate thought is that Jesus has come to deal with the bad things we do that offend God. That is because we have made sin a "religious word" - something to do with personal piety. We do not connect it with the politics, economics, and military power of Empire.

Jesus did - as would any Jew of his day. Significantly, Matthew opens his Christmas narrative proper with, "Now the birth of Jesus the *Messiah* took place in this way" (1:18). When the Jews talked about God saving, rescuing and delivering them, their prayer and assumption was that God was going to send the Liberator (Messiah), who would lead a successful revolt to throw off the Roman Occupation, doing for them what God had done for the Hebrew slaves through Moses. This would be their own Exodus from slavery - the very best Good News possible!

When the Bible writers talk about God as "saviour" and about "salvation", their fundamental image is Exodus - the liberation from slavery in Egypt. God is the saviour because God alone is able to stand against the Pharaohs of Egypt, Babylon and Rome, and free the slaves. "Salvation" means being liberated to live in the new world created by God - a world ruled by God's Law (Torah) - in covenant obedience. That was how God would deliver on all the divine promises of Life, blessing and flourishing. It was Israel's calling. It made them God's special people.

The Roman Occupation was understood to be God's punishment of Israel for disobeying the covenant - ie for *sin*. It was a punishment that began with the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon in 587 BCE. Although the exiles had returned, the divine promises of a restored, independent Israel under a Davidic king had never materialised; instead, Israel had been occupied by succession of empires, the latest of which was Rome. The rabbis taught that God would send the Messiah to liberate Israel only when covenantal obedience (keeping the Law) was restored.

When the angel announces that Jesus will "save his people from their sins", he means it to say what his hearers would immediately have understood: their punishment for sin is ended. Jesus is God's promised Liberator who has come to rid them of the Romans. Matthew presents Jesus as the New Moses. He evokes the story of Exodus:

- Jesus, like Jacob's sons, finds safety and refuge in Egypt (2:13).
- God leads the family out of Egypt to a home in the Promised Land, as the Hebrew slaves were led out of Egypt (2:15).
- The massacre of the Bethlehem infants echoes the slaughter by Pharaoh of the Hebrew baby boys; Jesus escapes Herod's massacre by finding safety in Egypt, as Moses had escaped by finding safety in Pharaoh's court.
- As Moses goes up Mt Sinai to *receive* the Law from God, Matthew's Jesus will go up a mountain to *teach* the New Law of the Kingdom (5:1-7:27).

"Church language" of sin and salvation is thus actually intensely political because sin's primary reference is to the ways in which we make our world in opposition to God, and salvation's primary reference is to the ways in which God will establish the new world order of the Kingdom. This is the "Big Picture". Individual sin is therefore to be understood in terms of the myriad ways in which we contribute to a world that is opposed to justice, equality and a life lived according to the dual commandment to love God and neighbour, and in so doing choke and crush emerging shoots of the Kingdom.

- *How many Christmas sermons ask what a difference it would make if we examined our political priorities, our economic systems and our social practices and culture to find out how "sinful" they are?*
- *How often is Christmas a time for looking at those most hurt and disadvantaged by them, and ask what they need saving from?*
- *How have we normalised "sin", and made it socially and religiously acceptable?*

- *Does our preaching about sin make it a privatised, individualised question of personal niceness and religious respectability, or does it encourage us to look at the ways in which we contribute to the “world of sin” from which the neediest need so desperately to be saved?*

2. Monarchy and power politics

The Magi (wise men, or astrologers) from the East arrive at Herod’s court in Jerusalem, looking for “the child who has been born King of the Jews” (2:2). This is extraordinarily ironic, as well as dangerously naive: it has horrific consequences as Herod moves to eradicate the threat to his power and dynasty. We will look at this more closely shortly. For the moment, though, we need to note that Matthew engages very explicitly with whole vexed Old Testament question of kingship in Israel, and of the collusion between Israel’s kings and the Roman Occupation in the time of Jesus. We need to look at each of these in turn.

The problem of kingship in the Old Testament

God never intended Israel to have a monarchy, because Yahweh was Israel’s king. Instead, it was to be governed by Judges as a radical political alternative that proclaimed Israel’s distinctiveness as a nation under God’s Law. A dominant biblical image is of Yahweh the king as Israel’s Shepherd, and Israel as Yahweh’s flock. That is why Samuel is so horrified when the people demand, “Give us a king like the other nations!” (1 Samuel 8:5). God’s response to Samuel is telling: “Listen to what the people are asking for; they have not rejected you, but have rejected me as their king!” (1 Samuel 8:7). Their demand is an exercise in the same sort of faithlessness that led the newly-liberated slaves to worship the golden calf in the wilderness, and to adopt the Canaanite fertility gods (1 Samuel 8:8). God grants their request for a king, while making it explicitly clear that this is a significant departure from God’s will.

David is presented as the most ideal of Israel’s kings. The shepherd boy from Bethlehem is anointed by Samuel while Saul, the failed king, is still on the throne. In contrast to Saul, David is described as “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14) - a description echoed in Acts 13:22. For all his many failings, he enjoys a particularly close relationship with God. He becomes a great warrior and, after conquering Jerusalem, establishes it as his capital. It is David who first proposes to build a temple, although this is given to his son, Solomon, to do. Most importantly, God establishes a covenant with David (2 Samuel 7). It is announced by the prophet, Nathan. In it, God promises that Jerusalem will be the site of the temple (God’s dwelling place), and that God will ensure Israel’s defeat over its enemies. David’s kingdom will last forever, and one of his descendants will always sit on the

throne. God will look on the king as a father does a son: the king might need to be punished, but God promises, "Yet I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul" (2 Samuel 7:15). It is on the basis of this covenant that the post-exilic expectation emerged of a Messiah - a Davidic warrior-king, through whom God would re-establish the kingdom of Israel after the Exile in 587 BCE.

In presenting Jesus as "the one who is born King of the Jews", Matthew addresses directly the ambiguity that has permeated the monarchy from Day One - particularly as it is embodied in David as the ideal king within a system that is premised on the rejection of God as Israel's King. Note how he constructs his genealogy of "Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1: 1-18) with David as the pivot: there are 14 generations from Abraham to David; 14 from David to the deportation to Babylon (Exile); and 14 from Exile to Jesus, the Messiah (1:17).

His point is unmistakable: Abraham and David were the people with whom God had made a covenant that promised their descendants an identity and a kingdom - promises that the Exile had appeared to negate. Jesus is indeed the long-expected Messiah - the Davidic king of the Jews who will fulfil those promises by liberating them from the Roman Occupation and establishing Israel as God's Kingdom.

Crucially, however, Jesus is *not* the expected Davidic warrior-king who will lead a successful uprising. This is the significance of the prophecy from Micah 5:2 with which the chief priests and scribes answer Herod's question about the birthplace of the Messiah (2: 4-6). Bethlehem had long been forgotten as the "City of David"; that title had passed to Jerusalem as the capital of the warrior-king David's kingdom. In citing the prophecy from Micah, Matthew is calling attention to David the shepherd. *This is what makes David the "ideal king", according to Matthew: David began as a shepherd-king, like Yahweh. Jesus, like David of Bethlehem (not Jerusalem) will be "the ruler who is to shepherd God's people, Israel" (2:6). That is why it is not enough to describe Jesus, like David, as "a man after God's own heart"; Jesus is Emmanuel - "God with us". God's victory through Jesus will be accomplished by the cross, not the sword, however inconceivable and unpalatable that might be to Matthew's readers, just as it was to Jesus' first disciples.*

The Kingdom of God, moreover, is not narrowly defined by Israel. God had made the covenant with Abraham in order that "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" through him (Genesis 12:1-3b). The Kingdom of God that Jesus brings establishes God as King of the universe. Jesus the Davidic shepherd-king, the son of Abraham, is the means by which God's promises to Abraham of being a blessing

to the whole world will be fulfilled. This is *true* kingship, because it establishes Yahweh as King, rather than dethroning God.

King Herod and the Roman Occupation

Matthew contrasts this true kingship of Jesus with that of the Jewish monarch at the time of his birth, Herod the Great. There are four key points of comparison:

Herod	Jesus
Descended from Esau: not a Jewish king	Descended from Abraham/David: Jewish king
Appointed by Rome as a client-king	Appointed by God as Shepherd/Messiah-king
Built Temple Mount and Herod's Temple	Prophesied the Temple's destruction
Massacre of the Innocents	Intended victim of the massacre; saved by God

Herod was deeply loathed by his Jewish subjects as anything but a Shepherd/Messiah-king; rather, he was an integral part of the oppression that the people experienced under Roman Occupation, from which they longed for messianic deliverance. He personified everything that was wrong with kingship:

- (i) *An illegitimate king*: Herod was not Jewish by birth, nor was he a descendant of David. That contrast with Jesus is one of the main reasons that Matthew begins his gospel with Jesus' genealogy. Herod was descended from Esau, Jacob's brother, and was therefore an Edomite who had converted to Judaism - principally to gain credibility among his Jewish subjects. He was a skilled politician who was careful at times not to offend Jewish religious sensibilities unnecessarily, but who, in most of his personal and public life, scandalised and offended observant Jews. This was significant: the dominant Jewish religious teaching of the time taught that God would only send the Messiah when Israel observed the Law scrupulously. Herod was therefore one of the principal causes of the Messiah's delay, and one about which they were powerless to do anything.
- (ii) *A Roman client-king*: Until Herod's accession to the throne, the Jews had been ruled by the Hasmonean dynasty. The last Hasmonean king, Antigonus II, had led a fierce struggle for independence against Rome. His Jewish support base had included the Pharisees. Herod - an opponent of Antigonus - had fled to Rome and appeared before the Roman Senate to plead that they remove Antigonus from power. Rather to his surprise, the Senate appointed Herod King of the Jews. Herod returned to Judea with Roman military support to capture his throne from Antigonus. Jerusalem fell to Herod and the Romans after a

bitter struggle that lasted three years. Herod sent Antigonus to Mark Anthony for execution, who, according to the Roman historian Josephus, had him scourged and crucified.

As a client-king, Herod was expected to support the interests of his Roman patrons. In order to impress both the Romans and his Jewish subjects, Herod embarked on an extraordinary series of lavish building projects that included the Temple Mount, the fortresses of Massada and Herodium, and the sea port of Caesarea Maritima, which used the latest technology in hydraulic cement and underwater construction and was named in honour of the Emperor. It was for these that he was justifiably known as Herod the Great: they were some of the greatest buildings in the ancient world.

Herod was utterly dependent on Rome for the security of his dynasty, however. His buildings were funded by a tax system that caused immense suffering to his Jewish subjects. Furthermore, he made frequent, expensive gifts to Rome to maintain his reputation with his patrons, emptying the kingdom's coffers to fund these and replenishing them with further punitive taxes. The hatred of his subjects that threatened constantly to break out into revolt was met with brutal military repression. His death in 4 BCE was followed by heavy outbreaks of violence and rioting in many cities, including Jerusalem. The scale of these popular uprisings soon after Jesus' birth sparked hope that a messianic-led insurrection could be successful in overthrowing the Romans, and contributed directly to the climate of unrest and messianic expectation within which Jesus ministered.

Matthew foregrounds Herod to emphasise his collusion with Rome. The king was meant to be the visible sign of God's opposition to and deliverance from Rome (as Antigonus II had been); instead, Herod was an active agent of the Occupation. He was driven by personal ambition at the expense of the people. He was a "king like that of other nations", rather than a Shepherd/Messiah-king like Yahweh. In so doing, he betrayed the role of kingship and the longing of the people for liberation - a new Exodus.

(iii) *Herod's Temple*: The construction of Temple Mount (of which the Wailing Wall is part survivor) and the expansion of the Second Temple is one of Herod's greatest building achievements. Solomon's First Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Second Temple had been built by the returning exiles and was completed by Zerubbabel in 516 BCE. It had been a much more modest affair. Herod had expanded and totally refurbished it. In an

extraordinary feat of engineering, he had levelled the top of Mount Moriah to turn the entire mountain into a level platform, on which the refurbished temple sat. To do so, he had huge stone bricks laid, the largest measuring 44' x 17' and weighing up to 628 tonnes. The awe its magnificence provoked is echoed by the disciples' comment to Jesus: "Look, Teacher! What enormous stones! And what massive buildings!" (Mark 13:1).

The Temple was, however, like Herod's monarchy, in hock to Rome. Observant Jews considered it polluted by the large Roman golden eagle that Herod had installed over the Temple entrance in honour of the Emperor. The High Priest was appointed by Herod or, at the time of Jesus' ministry, by the Roman governor. At the time of Jesus, the Temple was a flourishing international economy, as Jews came from all over the Empire to sacrifice at the great festivals. Jews were also taxed by the temple authorities to maintain the Temple, adding to the tax burden that hit the poorest hardest, and tipping the most vulnerable over the edge of "almost coping" into indentured slavery.

It is because the Temple has become an instrument by which the poor are further oppressed and exploited in the name of God - part of that from which they need liberation - that Matthew presents Jesus' cleansing of the Temple as an exorcism (21:12). In Jesus' view, it has become terminally corrupt; it cannot be reformed, but will be utterly destroyed (24:2). Far from crediting Herod for his refurbishment of the Temple, Matthew emphasises that his motives as king for building the Temple are not pure (as David's had been); rather, both the monarchy and the Temple under Herod and his successors had been pressed into the service and personal ambition of a king who used them to amass and consolidate power and wealth at the expense of the people. Jesus, the true King of the Jews, will pronounce God's sentence upon them.

(iv) *The Massacre of the Innocents*: Herod orders the massacre of the Bethlehem boys aged two years or under in order to eradicate the threat to his dynasty. This was not the first time his paranoia had led him to such ruthless brutality: he was infamous for having murdered his brother-in-law, one of his wives and three of his sons to neutralise perceived threats to his power.

Matthew wants to highlight Herod's rule as kingship-gone-wrong - the opposite of Yahweh's own rule. He also wants to emphasise the collusion with Rome: Herod's brutality mirrors that of Rome's legendary ruthlessness in suppressing rebellion, for which Rome reserved the very public and horrific method of crucifixion (which Jesus will suffer). There are two theological

contrasts with Jesus'/God's own rule that he further wishes to emphasise.

The first point is the connection Matthew evokes with the slaughter of the Jewish boys by Pharaoh in the time of Moses (Exodus 1: 15-22). Like Herod, Pharaoh is concerned to neutralise a potential threat to his power. Jesus, like Moses, escapes the massacre. Jesus, like Moses, is the Liberator who will effect the new Exodus for which the people long; Herod is the contemporary Pharaoh, whose own slave system is doomed to destruction.

The second point - and one that doesn't strike us as unusual, but would have done his readers - is that *God cares about the infants*. Matthew deems the slaughter of peasant infants in an obscure Jewish village worth recording with horror - as something worthy of our concern. This would not be the case among contemporary Greco-Roman society, which had little or no concern for infant deaths. The Greeks, for example, regularly practised infanticide as a means of birth control, especially in Sparta, while Roman fathers had the choice whether or not to lift their newborn baby from the floor, thereby deciding whether it lived or died.

Yahweh, by contrast, has a very special concern for the plight of the unimportant and helpless. The "wailing and loud lamentation" of the Jewish mothers is "*heard in Ramah*" (2:18), echoing the opening of the Exodus narrative in which the cries and groans of the Hebrew slaves in Pharaoh's brickyards are *heard* by Yahweh. This is the trigger for Yahweh to enact the Exodus (Exodus 2: 23-25). God, the Shepherd of Israel, *hears* the cries of the Little People and *takes notice*. This is the signal for God to *liberate* the people. Israel's true King is not a slaver, but a Saviour.

Matthew's Christmas story is saturated in Israel's stories of kingship. We have had to do some hard work to hear and grasp his concerns, which would have been instantly obvious to his own Jewish readers. Yet where do we see these concerns reflected in our own Christmas services?

- *Where do we ask questions about the nature of government - what forms best promote the welfare of all (especially the neediest), and curb personal ambition, the corruptive influence of power, and ensure the accountability of those who govern?*
- *Where is there collusion between politically powerful people and institutions, on the one hand, and business interests that can bolster their power, but which are dangerous or exploitative, on the other?*

- *How do we require of our leaders and ensure that they are genuinely servants of the people, rather than of their own ambitions or those of their political parties?*
- *How do we meaningfully make the interests of the poorest, most vulnerable and apparently most expedient a political priority?*
- *Should a monarch be the head of an established church?*
- *Has history made monarchy so problematic a concept that speaking of God/Jesus as "King" is no longer meaningful or helpful?*
- *For those who think it is, what ought we to do with kingship in the stories and theology of the gospels?*

3. Living in a multi-faith society

The Magi are not kings, and the only reason we assume that there were three is because three gifts were offered. That their names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar is wonderfully convenient for casting a nativity play, but pure legend!

The Magi are wise men/astrologers from the East. They are foreigners, who observe a new star that appears at Jesus' birth, and embark upon a two year journey, eventually to reach the home of Joseph, Mary and there two year old Jesus in Bethlehem. Matthew shares the belief that significant events on earth were mirrored by God-given signs in the heavens to reveal the meaning and significance of these events.

The point is that the star is recognised and understood by foreigners of a different faith - Gentiles. What would have shocked many of Matthew's readers is the notion that (a) God would reveal the birth to people of other faiths (ie it was for them, too), and (b) that they would have recognised and understood the sign. This is a salutary lesson to Christians who struggle to live in a multi-faith society: the truth of God in Jesus Christ is *for* people of all faiths and *can be recognised and celebrated* by them. This is the basis for relating to people of other faiths, rather than seeing them as a threat. It is particularly important in the current climate of islamophobia.

- How many churches use Christmas as an opportunity to discover what Muslims and other faiths believe about Jesus?
- How many churches use Christmas to get to know Muslims and the threats they face from Islamophobia?

4. The plight and experiences of refugees

Matthew's Christmas story emphasises the threat and exposure that the birth of Jesus entailed. Unlike Luke's story, Jesus is born at home in Bethlehem, rather than

in a borrowed stable. While he doesn't share in the risk and uncertainty of the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Jesus shares absolutely in the fate of a people whose lives are made precarious by a murderous regime.

Jesus and his family are forced to flee to Egypt - either to become refugees seeking safe passage and asylum, or to face slaughter at the hands of the regime if they remain at home. It is a terrifyingly contemporary story, and one that is high on our own political, social and ethical agendas. Immigration was a decisive consideration in voting for Brexit. Donald Trump argues that immigrants - particularly Muslims - are potential terrorists, and is working to prevent refugees from entering the United States, regardless of the circumstances from which they are fleeing and the personal cost to themselves and their children.

- *How many Christmas sermons advocate "Would Jesus be denied entry and aid under our policies?" as a touchstone for decisions on refugees and migrants?*
- *How many include stories of the circumstances from which refugees are fleeing, the agonising decisions they have to make, the huge cost and the terrifying risks that fleeing their country incurs?*
- *How many sermons explore the government and social rhetoric that makes contemporary refugees different and undeserving of our care and compassion when compared to the situation faced by Jesus and his family?*

5. Soldiers: war crimes and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

This is an issue provoked by Matthew's account of the Massacre of the Infants, rather than raised directly by him. It arises, too, from the recent Remembrance Day service, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the ending of the first world war.

What would the effect have been on the soldiers ordered to carry out the massacre? How would they live with the memories and guilt of what they were required to do? War normalises killing, brutality and horror. Soldiers end up doing things that they would never otherwise dream of doing, as I know to my own cost.

When we send people to be trained to be soldiers, we need to recognise that we are deliberately intending to train out the part of us - our humanity - that instinctively recoils from taking another life. One of the sacrifices soldiers make is of part of their humanity. This is what makes it possible for ordinary young men to rape, torture and commit other war crimes during a war. We began to learn about the crippling realities of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a commonplace among soldiers after the First World War. Korea, Vietnam, the Balkans and countless other

wars have taught us that many soldiers who survive never truly come home; part of them is lost forever in the no-man's land of whatever battles they fought.

- *How many Christmas sermons address the live issues of war crimes, brutalisation and PTSD?*
- *How many question what it is we actually ask our soldiers to do in our name, and what effect it might have on them?*
How many ask whether we glorify war instead of protecting our young people's humanity?
- *How many ask serious questions about our defence policies and budgets, or explore seriously whether churches should take a pacifist stance?*

Taming the Christmas stories

These are the questions that arise from what would be a typical Bible study of each of the Christmas narratives separately. Were you surprised at how gritty and contemporary they were - how non-churchy and “unspiritual”? Did they strike you as strange or uncomfortable “Christmas questions”? Did you notice how the stories each raised a very different set of questions from the other?

If you answered “yes” to any of those questions, it’s because we’re unfamiliar with the Christmas stories of the Bible! Oh, we know all the elements of both stories very well indeed; what we’re unfamiliar with is the way in which they fit together into two very different narratives. It may seem devastatingly obvious to note that Matthew and Luke did not sit down together to collaborate on writing a “the Christmas story”, dividing up the different elements between them, and leaving us to put “the real story” together like a jigsaw. Yet that is precisely what we do with them every Christmas! It is only when we look at each narrative as a story in its own right - as we obviously should! - that they become hard edged, gritty and world-changing, rather than the church festival with which we’re so comfortably familiar.

Look at how very different the stories are - even at the three points where when both gospel writers are obviously working with similar traditions (virgin birth via the Holy Spirit, birth in Bethlehem, childhood in Nazareth):

	LUKE	MATTHEW
Main characters	Gabriel, Mary, Elizabeth, shepherds, angels	Angel of the Lord, Joseph, Magi
Non-speaking parts	Joseph	Mary
Villain	Emperor Augustus (tax census)	Herod (Massacre of the Innocents)
Family home	Nazareth	Bethlehem
Pregnancy	Virgin birth (announced to Mary)	Virgin birth (announced to Joseph)
Marital status	Engaged	Married
Interpretation	Magnificat, Zechariah, Simeon (Nunc Dimittis)	Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2, Jeremiah 31:15
Place of birth	Stable in Bethlehem	Family home in Bethlehem
Visitors to birth	Shepherds	None

First years	Nazareth: first visit to Temple (Simeon and Anna)	Bethlehem: visit of Magi; flight to Egypt; return to settle in Nazareth for safety
Other childhood events	Second visit to Temple aged 12	None

These are clearly not stories that can be put together - a sort of “two witnesses to the same accident, noticing different things” that, when amalgamated, give us a fuller picture of what actually happened. That is exactly what we do with them nonetheless! We create a single “Christmas story” out of the events of the two separate stories, adding in some of John’s gospel for good measure. And in robbing of them of their distinctiveness and difference, we rob them of their cutting edge and power to transform us. Let’s look at what we do each year with our typical Nine Lessons and Carols and our Nativity (obviously, the precise details will vary, depending on the choices exercised by the Producer!).

LUKE	MATTHEW	NATIVITY
Zechariah’s vision	Pregnancy: Joseph’s dream	Zechariah’s vision
Annunciation	Isaiah 7:14	Annunciation
Mary visits Elizabeth	Joseph marries Mary; no sex*	Pregnancy: Joseph’s dream
Magnificat	Two years pass*	Mary visits Elizabeth
Birth of John the Baptist*	Magi arrive in Jerusalem	Magnificat
Zechariah’s prophecy*	Micah 5:2	Emperor’s Census
Emperor’s Census	Herod: “Bring me word ...”	Journey to Bethlehem
Journey to Bethlehem	Magi travel to Bethlehem	No room in the inn
No room at the inn	Gold, frankincense and myrrh	Birth in a stable: “Away in a manger”, cattle, star, no crying
Laid in a manger	Warning to Magi in a dream	Shepherds in the fields
Shepherds in the fields	Joseph warned in a dream*	“Tidings of great joy”
“Tidings of great joy”	Flight to Egypt*	Angelic choir
Angelic choir	Massacre of the Innocents*	Shepherds debate what gifts they can offer
Shepherds go to Bethlehem	Jeremiah 31:15*	Shepherds go to Bethlehem
Circumcision and naming*	Death of Herod*	Shepherds present sheep
First visit to Temple*	Joseph told to return*	Journey of the 3 Kings

Nunc Dimittis*	Move to Nazareth*	"We Three Kings of Orient"
Twelve years pass*		Magi arrive in Jerusalem
Second visit to the Temple*		Micah 5:2
"My Father's House"*		Herod: "Bring me word ..."
		Kings follow star to stable
		Gold, frankincense and myrrh
		Warning to Magi in a dream
		Tableau at the stable
		John 1: 1-14

*Incidents typically omitted in the Nativity

Our church Christmas Story is *neither* Luke's nor Matthew's, but a new creation - a jigsaw made of pieces from both, glued together with later Christmas traditions, designed to bring us to the tableau of the stable with shepherds and kings kneeling at the manger!

Taming Matthew's Christmas

This is only possible by collapsing the 2+ year time scale of Matthew's story, and transforming the Magi into kings. But note, too, how placing the kings alongside the shepherds at the manger (which is not part of Matthew's story) and omitting the aftermath of their visit *includes* them in the "Good News of great joy" announced by the angels to the shepherds in Luke's account. They are no longer a key element in the darkness and horror of Matthew's story - the machinations of Herod that culminate in the infant Jesus becoming a refugee and the massacre of the Bethlehem babies. The key elements of Matthew's Christmas message - that Jesus is the New Moses, come to effect a New Exodus enslaved people - have been eradicated entirely.

Taming Luke's Christmas

While most of Luke's story makes it into our Nativity, it is at the cost of the elements of confrontation and radical transformation sung about by Mary in the Magnificat - "putting down the mighty from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty" (1:52-53). In the tableau, kings and desperate peasants kneel at the manger - only to go away without having been changed by that encounter. The so-called kings remain kings

(as our monarchs and rulers do), exercising power as before; the shepherds remain trapped in the structures of poverty (as our poor do), suffering as they always have.

Leaving out the infant Jesus's two visits to the Temple ("my Father's house"), which Luke deliberately emphasises, is also enormously significant. The Temple will prove to be the centre of resistance to Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Jesus will exorcise the Temple at the start of his final week, proclaiming that the chief priests and scribes have turned it into "a den of robbers" (Luke 20:46). This is the beginning of a series of confrontations in the Temple that will end with Jesus prophesying its destruction (21:6) and the Temple authorities' determination to kill him (22:2). By leaving out the visits at the start of his life, we remove the elements of confrontation and the shadow of Jesus' death that, in Luke's story, are present from the outset of Jesus' life.

Creating Christian doctrine vs God's Revolution

Christmas appears in the second articles of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds as, "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary" (Apostles' Creed) and, "he ... was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human" (Nicene Creed). For the past 200 years, the creeds have been read as providing historical information about Jesus - as "historical facts" that Christians are required to believe. The assumption is that they are "true" to the extent that they "actually happened". One of the key "Christmas questions" for contemporary disciples is therefore, "Did the Virgin Birth actually happen?"

This is to miss the point that Luke and Matthew make. We have seen how each gospel writer constructs a story whose primary aim is not to give us "historical facts" about Jesus, but to tell us the significance and meaning of his birth. This is the "truth" of Christmas. We have seen just how significantly their stories diverge. Not only is it impossible to read these as essentially the same story, told differently; it is also impossible to use them to establish "what actually happened" at the first Christmas. When we try and do so, we end up with a story that is an entirely new creation of the church and misses the truth that both writers try to tell us in very different ways.

One of the few things on which the stories appear to agree is that Mary was a virgin and became pregnant through the Holy Spirit, rather than through infidelity to Joseph. Whether this actually happened, or is only a device to tell us the meaning of Jesus' birth, is ultimately immaterial. In narrative terms, they both want to tell us the same truth: Jesus is not simply a man of God, but God in human form. God's purpose in coming among us in Jesus is salvation - transforming the

world into the Kingdom by turning it upside down. This is the miracle of Christmas - not that God can make virgins pregnant, but that God has entered into our world and human experience in order to save us.

We ought therefore to read the creeds as “signposts to the stories”, rather than “historical facts that have to be believed”. They flag the key moves in the story of God’s Revolution. They signal the elements of the stories that ought to shape our own lives as disciples - individuals and churches. They remind us that Christian faith is not about believing “facts”, but living out stories that are recognisably like the first stories of Jesus.

By divorcing the creeds from the stories, we have reduced discipleship of the Jesus born at Christmas into a debate about whether or not the Virgin Birth actually happened, rather than about how faithfully we respond to his call to follow and share in his mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. Our questions about Mary ask only, “Was she actually a virgin?”, rather than “How prepared are we to put ourselves utterly at God’s disposal, and celebrate and share in God’s turning the world upside down?”

Christmas: Good News for the poor and oppressed

Why has the church been content to turn Christmas into a church festival, rather than a time to explore and celebrate God's revolution? It is only when we look closely at both Luke and Matthew individually that we realise that Jesus' birth is not universally Good News. In different ways, both writers make the point that Christmas is Good News to the poor, the oppressed and the outcasts. This is because God's intention is to transform the world into the Kingdom of God.

But it is Bad News to the rich, the powerful and the respectable - anyone, in fact, who has a vested interest in things staying the way they are. That puts the church in a very tricky position: most of us are not poor or oppressed. We would generally be far better off if the world stayed the way it was - not because we're very wealthy when compared to the rich and powerful, but because we're incredibly wealthy when compared to the poorest people.

The church on the wrong side of power and wealth

The church changed sides in 313 CE. That is when the Emperor, Constantine, made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. At that point, the Empire, which had been the single biggest obstacle standing between the world as it was and the Kingdom of God - the reign of God over the world - became the Holy Roman Empire. The church, which had been defined as the opponent of the Empire in God's name, became the church of Empire, instead of the church of the poor and marginalised. It became rich and powerful.

Ever since then, the church has been caught on the wrong side of power and wealth. Personally and institutionally, it has been compatible with Christian faith to behave like Empire rather than Kingdom - to pursue power and wealth as a means of survival and flourishing. That is so deep-seated that we no longer question living at the expense of others lower down the scale. Whether we are Vladimir Putin or simply climbing the corporate ladder of whatever profession we have chosen, we do not question the accumulation of money and influence. And in the UK, we mourn the "golden years" when the church was a significant social and political powerhouse.

It is no coincidence that unbiblical "Christmas story" was created by a church that needed desperately to baptise its wealth, power and privilege - to make it "okay" to be an institution that has abandoned the priorities that Jesus said were indispensable for faithful discipleship. We couldn't look too closely at the gospel stories at Christmas, because the questions they raised were too uncomfortable.

Most importantly, they make it all too clear that the Good News of the baby born at Christmas is not for us.

Christmas and the Way of the Cross

For Jesus, discipleship/the church is defined by our attitudes to wealth and power. The Kingdom of God entails the "Great Reversal" that Mary spoke about in the Magnificat (Luke); when God through Jesus brings about the New Exodus that forever destroys the ability of Empire to define the way in which the world works for the benefit of the rich and powerful and at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable (Matthew).

Discovering and learning to live by those radically different alternatives is the goal of discipleship. It is learning to walk the Way of the Cross. In Matthew's Christmas story, in particular, the shadow of the cross is very present. Christmas is the beginning of the road that Jesus has come to walk - not some happy alternative that leaves the structures of poverty, oppression, despair and death intact.

Christmas for a wealthy church and wealthy Christians is a time of challenge. It is a time to hear again Jesus' call to follow him on the road of vulnerability, renunciation, self-sacrifice and service of the very least. That is when we will begin to be Jesus-shaped - recognisably like the Jesus we proclaim and profess to follow. That is when we will *be* Good News at Christmas.