

BUSTING CHRISTMAS WIDE OPEN

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While the primary focus of Christmas is the birth of Christ, or at least, it is the reason behind this festive season. The advent story really has very little mention of the actual birth of Jesus. You would think there would be better records for the birth of someone that change the world as it was known, someone that was Emmanuel. God in flesh and blood, living amongst humankind. The truth is there is very little information recorded on the birth of Christ. The little recorded in the gospel stories focuses more on the disclosure to Mary, or Elizabeth, and the responses of their partners to the news of their impending parenthood. There is the heavenly announcement to some shepherd, and the journey of three wise men and the fear and thus persecution of King Herod.

However, there is a lot of information about the Christmas story that I have learnt, or rather acquired, over the years which doesn't actually appear in the Bible at all. This information has been generated through artistic creativity and Christmas card images, carols and cultural assumptions which would almost have us swearing that it was written right there in Matthew or Luke.

Now I don't want to destroy Christmas for anyone but we will call this section 'busting Christmas wide open' and look at what we 'know' about the birth of Christ that isn't actually recorded in the Christmas story.

Let's start where every preschool play version has been misleading us. There was no innkeeper and for that matter, no petting zoo. I think the two factors have always been tied together. Here is the thought process. If there was no room in the inn, and Jesus was placed in the manger. This must mean they were sent outside to the barn and thus if they were in the barn they must be surrounded by all sorts of animals. However if we take a quick moment to look at some ancient near eastern architecture. A typical house consisted of two main rooms. An upper room, that was commonly for guests and downstairs. Downstairs was split into two sections, while all still open, there was a sunken section as you entered the dwelling where the animals would remain. Walking up some stairs you would enter the

main living/everything room. Along the edge of this upper section would be a depression in the floor, a manger for the animal to eat from. This is important. The manger is inside the home, indented in the floor above where the animals slept, but next to the main dwelling space.

The innkeeper, barn and whole scene of animals comes from one line in Luke 2:7 "and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in the manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

This confusion stems from the translation of the word inn. The only other time this Greek word 'kataluma' is used in the bible is to describe the meeting place of the last supper. However, this time it is referred to as the upper room or guest room. If we look back to our floor plan, it is much more likely that there was no room in the top guest room and thus Jesus was born in the kitchen or where the family slept. Christmas illusion shattered, no stable, no straw covering every surface of our scene, and no farm animal surrounding our newborn baby Jesus.

Second thing we 'know'. On the front of many a Christmas card I have received are three wise men. They are beautifully dressed, wearing crowns, dismounting from camels, to present presents to the baby in the manger. It is important to note these wise men were Magi, not kings. Therefore, there would be no crowns or fine dressings. They were scruffy men who studied astrology and magic and had travelled following a star for years.

Now, I know how unpleasant I smell after sitting on an airplane for 30 hours. They were traveling by camel. They would have been dusty and dirty and smelt much like those camels. Their journey was long, and thus they would not have met a new born baby but a small toddler running around. "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother." (Matthew 2:11). Hence why Herod had all children under two killed. The nativity story is not the tale of one night, but numerous years.

There is a lot we don't know about Jesus' birth, other information creatively embellished from those originally created gospel stories. So let's return from 'busting Christmas wide open' to examine what is before us.

Matthew is written with a post Easter perspective, and thus the infancy story is part of the whole Christ event. The end was known at the beginning.

This child would grow to be an incredible man, for the way he challenge the societal standards of oppression and persecution, replacing them with acceptance and compassion for those that were marginalized. He would grow to teach the love and heart of God over the letter of the law. A theme which is reflected in this very first introduction.

Joseph is described as being righteous. In first century culture, being righteous translates to 'upheld the law.' Especially the religious laws. Yet even before Joseph found out the baby was from the Holy Spirit he was only planning on quietly dismissing Mary.

This was not the righteous (religiously lawful) thing to do. Right here, at the very beginning of Jesus life, starts the tension between the prevailing understanding of God's commandments and the new things God was doing through Jesus.

Capital punishment was the appropriate response to Mary's situation. Mitigating this response, the penalty should have been severe and humiliating. Yet Joseph was only going to dismiss her quietly. He was choosing to live out the heart of the law not the letter. As Jesus would do and teach time and time again. The very action that would eventually lead to his persecution and execution.

So often at this time of year society speaks about the spirit of Christmas and Christmas cheer with magical wonder. When you truly look at these activities that are done with Christmas intent, they are the actions of Christ's whole life. It is people take time out of their busy lives to visit with others, it is people choosing to spend money on a needy stranger by taking a tag of a Rotary Christmas Tree, it is buying a couple extra groceries to contribute to a hamper that feeds the hungry. It is actually and actively putting others first. It is sharing the very heart of the love of God, rather than sticking to the social laws which have been established to look after oneself, often at the detriment of others. Oddly enough this 'Christmas cheer' behaviour is only encouraged at Christmas, or rather, it is specifically encouraged at Christmas. But this, these actions, is what it mean to be a Christian. This is the very foundations of what Christ did. Us engaging in these activities is the very essence of what Emmanuel means. Emmanuel is God with us. It is Jesus showing us how to live with the same heart as God. It is a call to follow in Christ footsteps, to do as Christ did, not just at Christmas but all year round.

Even before Christ was born, his influence was challenging what it meant to be righteous, as opposed to just. Christ's mission is still our mission. We are called to go beyond that tension of what is righteous, to seek out what is just. It doesn't matter if there were donkeys, or chickens, a room filled with straw or not. It doesn't matter if there were crowns on the heads of the wise men, or if they smelt like camels, it doesn't matter if they visited with a squishy newborn or a wriggly toddler. What matters, and what we celebrate at this time is that a baby was born, that grew into a man. That, that man refused to stand silent to oppression and injustice. He taught those around him a new way to love. He continued to teach this way to love even when his own life hung in the balance. To love as God loves. Indiscriminately, whole heartedly and unselfishly.

My prayer for you this Christmas season is that you might be full of Christmas cheer, which causes you to live and love as Jesus taught, and that it might live in you and be expressed by you not just at Christmas but all year round.