

CHRISTMAS MATTERS

By Harry Fielding



It was Christmas day. I believe the year was 2006, although I cannot be certain. It could well have been a year or two either side of that. Whatever year it was, the setting was on our back verandah in Charlotte, North Carolina. Adele and I were sitting in the hot tub, watching snow-flakes gently falling around us. As the warm water soothed my body I found myself reflecting on the meaning of Christmas. In the article that follows, I offer my own personal reflections and understanding of the Christmas story. And just in case you are wondering, the pun in the title is fully intended.

The Bible does not specify the date of Christ's birth. It is widely agreed by historians and theologians that it was almost certainly not in December. Around 37% of Orthodox Christians celebrate January 7 as the birth-date of Christ. This is also extremely unlikely. The short version of all this is that we do not know the exact date or time of the year when Jesus was born. Internal evidence in the Bible does not support a "winter birth" which would have been the case for both December and January.

There is also some ambiguity in the Bible as to the place where Jesus was born. Both Matthew and Luke assert that the birth took place in Bethlehem, but Matthew (2:11) states that Jesus was in a "house" when the Magi ("wise men") came to visit, Luke does not specify where in Bethlehem Jesus was born. The Greek word *phatnēs*, which in Luke's account is translated as "manger", is perhaps better translated into English as "feeding container" or "feeding trough" out of which the animals were fed. This was most usually outside in the fields, but could also have been in a shelter. Nevertheless, the word translated as "manger", apparently did not refer to the entire structure where the manger was placed. However trivial this discussion may appear, it is still worth noting that, according to the author of Luke, Jesus was not born in the manger, but was placed there after his birth.

Another difference between Matthew and Luke is that Matthew has the Magi (no specified number) coming to visit Jesus and makes no mention of the shepherds; the reverse is true in Luke's account. We are clearly not dealing with a factual, historical narrative in the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus. We are instead being faced with an allegorical/mythological narrative that was written many years after Jesus' death and which tries to convey that here was someone extra special with an inherent spirituality of the utmost quality. The stories were not intended to be taken literally, but to try to express an inexpressible truth about the love of God being manifested in human life.

The early Christians faced the central question, "what does the life of Jesus mean to me?" So too, do we as Christians, face that question today. At this

time of the year we are more particularly faced with the question, "what does the Christmas story mean to me?" I cannot answer that question for you who are reading this article. I can only try to share, however inadequately, my conclusions in the fading twilight of my life. These conclusions are very different for me now than they were 50 years ago, or even only 20 years ago. This is my story now and it is still in the process of being refined. It may not be your story: that is for you to work out!

I am sometimes asked, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" My short answer to that question would have to be "No." If pressed further I would say that I believe Jesus was a Son of God and for me, as a Christian, the most complete expression of God that I know. In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) the term "son of God" is used to refer to humans who have a special relationship with God. In ancient Hebrew society many just and pious men were referred to by this term. In a sense, we are all sons and daughters of God. This is distinct from the Christian theological understanding of Jesus as being "God the Son", the second person in the Christian trinity. I confess that I have some trouble with embracing this latter belief.

Jesus was born into this world, as a fragile, imperfect, baby. He did not come, perfect in behavior and wisdom. In Luke 2:52 he is portrayed as "... growing in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men."

So now we come to the crux of the matter: Jesus as our model. We too are born as helpless babies. We too are called to be sons and daughters of God. The birth story – indeed the life story of Jesus is the model we are called to follow. We are called to discover the divinity within us, at the very core of our being, and to release that divinity in all our relationships. We too are called to grow in Grace and Wisdom and to live out our discipleship in service to others. And yes, we too are almost certainly destined, at times, to be crucified, albeit metaphorically, as we follow the example of Jesus.

We live in uncertain and unsettling times. I am reminded of the title of a song by Kris Kristofferson: Please Don't Tell Me How the Story Ends. We are called in the midst of this uncertainty to live out the "Christmas Principle". The greatest gift we can give and receive this Christmas is the gift of unconditional love.

SHALOM!