

THE 'REAL' CHRISTMAS

Introduction

The Christmas story is probably the most familiar story in the world—certainly in those nations with a Christian tradition. Every year, because of the retail bonanza Christmas has become, it is difficult for anyone to escape the many traditions of Christmas—including the original story as told in the Gospels.

Despite this familiarity and the assumption that we all know the story of the 'baby Jesus', the fact is that the 'real' story is seldom told, and the fundamental story of the *birth narratives* not communicated.

Over the next few weeks we will look closely at the Gospel narrative—what is really written—we will examine the reasons why the stories of the birth of Jesus are told in the way they are—and what relevance they have for us as we enter the beginning of the third millennium of Christian history and tradition....

YOU WILL NEED AN OPEN MIND—YOU WILL NEED TO BE WILLING TO THINK FOR YOURSELF—AND YOU WILL NEED TO BE WILLING TO OFFER YOUR THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS TO THE WIDER GROUP..... *So let's begin!!*

Think time 1

*So you think you know the story of Christmas!
Well—write it out below!
(you may confer!)*

Talk time 1

How did you learn the story of Jesus birth?

What other ways do people learn about the Christmas story?

How close do you think what you believe to be the story is to the 'real' story?

Which Gospels contain the birth narratives?

The Gospel narratives.

You will now receive a copy of the birth narratives. These are from the *New Revised Standard Version* translation of the Bible. This is generally the preferred text used by scholars in most mainline Universities and Theological schools.

Immediately we can see that the birth narratives are contained in two of the Gospels—Matthew and Luke. There is no description of the birth of Jesus in the other two Gospels.

What we will find when we read through the narratives in Matthew and Luke is that they are fundamentally *different* stories!

Our first task is to spend some time going through the stories and identifying those differences.

Talk time 2

Is it surprising to you that only two Gospels tell the story of the birth?

What reasons might there be for this fact?

Since there are two different birth narratives—how come we all think there is one story that we celebrate at Christmas!!

We will begin by looking at Matthew's narrative -

MATTHEW

Matthew's narrative is shorter than Luke's, and without the *genealogy* which begins the first chapter, the whole of Matthew's story is only **31 verses** long. (Luke—132 verses)

Who are the main characters in the 2 chapters of Matthew?

In chapter 1 Joseph is the main character—Mary is only a passive part of the narrative and Jesus is only mentioned in one verse - (25)

Joseph is being prepared for the uniqueness of the birth of this child!

In chapter 2 Herod is the main character with the wise men having a major supporting role - Mary, Joseph and Jesus all *respond* to Herod's actions.

Herod is the main protagonist and drives the plot over 5 scenes.

Think time 2

1. The narrative in the palace

2. adoration of the Magi

3. flight into Egypt

4. slaughter of the infants

5. return from Egypt.

The palace narrative

Central—star, wise men, Herod.

- Herod is alarmed at the prospect of a rival King
- Discussion with the Wise Men (intent is to kill the baby)

Adoration of the Magi!

Central—star, wise men, gifts, warning

- magi find the holy family and give their gifts
- They are warned by God to avoid returning to Herod

Flight into Egypt

Central—Joseph, angel, Herod (by intent)

- this story fulfils O.T prophecy of sojourn in Egypt
- Also reflects the stories of Abraham and Joseph and also infers the reason for the genealogy.
- Holy family stay in Egypt until Herod's death.

Slaughter of the Infants

Central—Herod, children, people in and around Bethlehem, Wise men (in absentia)

- killing again fulfils a prophecy from the Old Testament in Jeremiah

Return from Egypt

Central—Joseph, Egypt, Archelaus, Nazareth.

- death of Herod triggers the call of God to return to Israel
- Joseph fears that Archelaus will continue to hold a 'grudge' and so they go instead to Nazareth rather than their home village of Bethlehem
- This again fulfils OT prophecy.

***This ends the Birth Narratives in Matthew and in Chapter 3
he jumps forward thirty years to pick up the story with John the Baptist
Joseph is being prepared for the uniqueness of the birth of this child!***

talk time 3

How much of the narratives in Matthew are actually concentrated on Jesus?

Matthew misses much of the "Christmassy" stuff—do you agree?

In Matthew there is no wider Jesus stories like the circumcision, no blessing in the temple by Simeon and Anna, and no childhood story of the confrontation with the teachers in the temple when Jesus is twelve years old.

Matthew concentrates on Joseph and his dilemma and on Herod and the unsuccessful attempt to murder Jesus.

Can you think of a reason why Matthew tells the story the way he does?
Does the Genealogy perhaps give us a hint?

LUKE

Luke also has a genealogy, but he places it at the commencement of the *Baptism* narratives at the end of Chapter 3. there are also significant differences in the names in the genealogy.

Luke tells his story over nine scenes rather than Matthew's five and there are clear differences between them.

Think time 3

Take a quick look through the Luke text and see if you can identify these scenes and list the differences with Matthew.

Conception of John the Baptist - 1:5-25

The annunciation - 1:26-38

The Magnificat—1:39-56

Birth of John— 1:57-80

Journey to Bethlehem and birth in stable—2:1-7

Angels annunciation of the birth—2:8-20

Circumcision—2:21

Presentation in the temple (nunc dimittis) 2:22-39

Jesus at 12 in the temple 2:40-52

Luke also contains what are described as a series of pageants or celebrations of people and events—these are important in understanding why he writes his gospel birth narratives as he does.

Zechariah and Elizabeth

- John's parents are celebrated in 43 verses almost half of the first chapter
- They are not mentioned in Matthew
- Elizabeth and Zechariah are both old and childless (*Abraham and Sarah?*)
- John the Baptist will be seen by Luke throughout the gospel as the new *Elijah*
- In the Old Testament Elijah was recognised as the forerunner of the coming of the Kingdom

Women are prominent

- Elizabeth fills a special role
- Mary has a much greater place in this narrative than in Matthew
- She has a more active figure when compared to Joseph the main figure in Matthew
- Anna is a female prophet in 2:38

Music is central

- There are 3 *hymns or canticles*
- *The Benedictus*—Zechariah
- *The Magnificat*—Mary
- *The Nunc Dimittis*—Simeon

The 'familiar' story

- The most familiar parts of the Christmas story are in Luke— "*in those days*"
- Joseph and Mary make the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Jesus is born in a stable, the shepherds and the angels make their appearance

A longer 'pageant'

- much longer story
- Also extends beyond the events surrounding the birth unlike Matthew

Talk time 3

*The differences between Matthew and Luke are clear.
What might be the reasons the two write their stories?
Why might Luke's narrative be the more popular?*

*MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION—
how have we become so caught up in a particular rendering of the birth narrative
That leaves so much out?*