"At last, a retelling of the story of Jesus' birth that peels away 2000 years of added Christmas schmaltz to focus on what was really happening. *Advent* unwraps God's gift of Jesus to reveal the depth and meaning of Jesus' birth for then and for now."

—Dr Bruce Manners

Advent

Hearing the Good News in the Story of Jesus' Birth

NATHAN BROWN

SIGNS PUBLISHING®
Established 1885

For more about this book, as well as the opportunity to purchase additional copies, visit **www.signspublishing.com.au/Advent**

Proudly published and printed in Australia by
Signs Publishing
Warburton, Victoria.

This book was
Edited by Lauren Webb
Proofread by
Cover and illustration design by Shane Winfield
Typeset in Berkeley Book 11.5/15.5

ISBN (print edition) 978 1 922373 22 9
ISBN (ebook edition) 978 1 922373 23 6

"Don't be afraid!" he said.
"I bring you good news that will bring
great joy to all people."
—Luke 2:10

To Angela

Contents

Invitation

It is easy to be cynical about Christmas. It is easy to be distracted by the cultural expectations and excesses of the season. It is easy to be busy with events and to-do lists and to be stressed about the arrangements and dynamics of family gatherings. It is easy to think we have heard the story of Jesus' birth countless times before or to dismiss it as if it were merely another fairy story we tell to children.

I have experienced many of these things and have had more than a few "Bah, humbug" moments in responses to the familial, social, commercial and even religious expectations of a looming Christmas.

But, in my experience, something invariably happens as most of these pressures begin to subside. We arrive at the few days before Christmas and we begin to slow down or, even amid these many other things, we take a few moments to get back to the story itself—and we begin to feel something of the wonder, humility, glory and good news of the story of the birth of Jesus. It might come with re-telling the story in some way, listening to or singing favourite Christmas carols, or whatever your family or faith traditions might be.

This book is an invitation to extend your focus on the story of Jesus' birth in this season. In the traditional Christian calendar, the four weeks leading up to Christmas were known as the season of Advent. It was a time to re-read and re-tell the stories surrounding His coming into the world and to reflect on different aspects and implications of this story.

Adapting that tradition, this book was written with 31 reflections that can be read daily throughout the month of December. Of course, you can choose to read it however you wish, but I invite

you to see if taking regular time to reflect on this story might change your experience of this season. Or you might choose to make some other time to reflect on this remarkable story, which is no less true or important at any other time of the year.

If you have not previously spent much time with the story of Jesus and His birth, I invite you to spend this time considering the deeper significance and claims that surround this seemingly simple story. Despite all the cultural and historical additions and distractions, there must be reasons why so many people throughout history and even today have continued to re-tell and celebrate this story. I invite you to give it a hearing and an opportunity to catch your imagination.

If you know the story well, I invite you to re-hear the story, to think about it in some different ways or even to simply enjoy reflecting on it again. I have had the idea for this book for a number of years, which has prompted me to read and think about the story myself in some new ways. I have also had the privilege of visiting Bethlehem and some of the other places in the stories three times in the past few years and this has enhanced how I read and re-tell these stories. I hope I have brought the best of these reflections, study and experiences to this task of again telling the story of the birth of Jesus.

As a background to these reflections, I invite you to re-read the original stories of Jesus' birth: Matthew Chapters 1 and 2; Luke Chapters 1 and 2; and John Chapter 1. You will find these at the beginning of the New Testament in any edition of the Bible—although a contemporary translation of the Bible is easier reading—or you can find these freely online at various Bible websites.

To go deeper, pick one of the gospel stories of Jesus and read it through completely during this time. Luke's gospel is most referenced in these reflections, so reading through his account will give a fuller picture of Jesus' story and more insight into who He was, what He taught and what He did. I also encourage you to look up and read the verses around any of the Bible verses that are quoted

or referenced if they catch your interest—there is always more to discover.

And once you have spent time with this book, I invite you to share it with someone else, whether in the form of the book itself or simply by sharing what you have learnt or appreciated in a conversation. The best stories are worth re-telling, the best news is worth sharing.

As you read this book, I invite you to hear—or hear again—the good news in the story of Jesus' birth.

1

(Good) News

Something happened.

Something significant happened—but in a way that seems so unlikely.

Yet something happened that was so significant that, every time we write the date, we remind each other that this thing happened a few more than 2000 years ago.

Something happened that was so significant that every year we pause and sing songs about it, share gifts with each other and re-tell the story.

Something happened in a particular place and time: in Bethlehem in the ancient land of Israel around the time of the empire-wide census decreed by Caesar Augustus—"the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2)—and nearing the end of the frenzied reign of Herod the Great, the Rome-supported king of the Jewish nation whose massive building projects were markedly more successful than his family relationships.

While the date of the Roman census is not clear historically, Herod's death is commonly dated to 4 BC and no later than 1 BC. The Bible records some key events as following the birth of Jesus: the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem, their search for Jesus in Bethlehem, the escape of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt, and Herod's massacre of all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two years old (see Matthew 2:1–18). If we factor in time for these events, it seems likely that Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BC. It might even have been a year or so earlier, with the news of Herod's death the all-clear

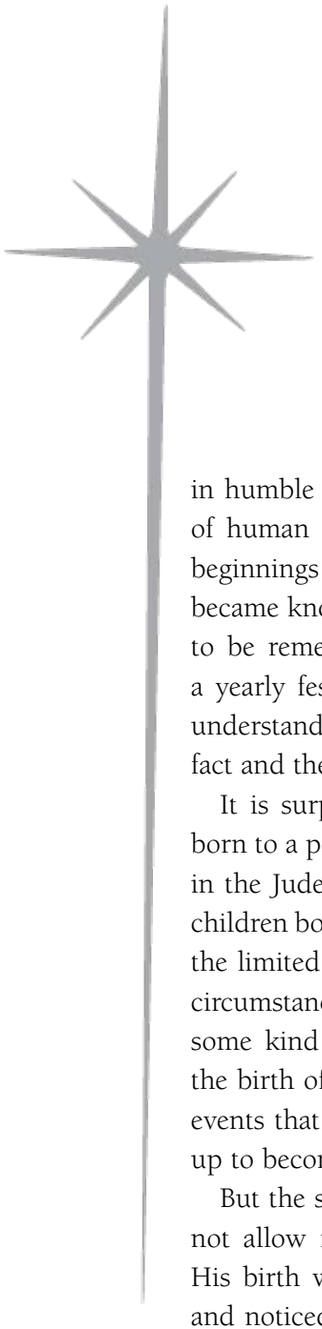
signal allowing Joseph and Mary and their family to return from their refugee period in Egypt (see Matthew 2:19, 20).

So it seems that the monk who set the dates for the BC/AD divide might have been out by a few years. But in a remarkable twist of history, it was Jesus rather than Augustus, Quirinius or Herod—or any of the other powerful men and great leaders of their age—around whom the axis of history revolved. Something happened that truly changed the world.

The story is told in only two of Jesus' "official" biographies—the New Testament gospels. Matthew and Luke told the story of the birth of Jesus in ways that reflect their research interests and intended readerships. Matthew began with the Jewish genealogies and history, while Luke cited the Roman political leadership with its census and political administration. By contrast—in what is believed to be the first gospel to have been written—Mark seemed impatient to jump straight into the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. In the last of the gospels, John began with a poetic, philosophical and even cosmic meditation on light and darkness, Word and flesh, creation and life, but he still emphasised the historical reality of the One who became human and lived among humanity (see John 1:14), who had a particular history that had been experienced and witnessed.

Beyond the Bible, Jesus would become one of the most attested figures of ancient history. More is known of His life, His teachings and His death than is known about any of the powerful figures of that time, including those Luke used as markers: Augustus, Quirinius and Herod. Even if they debate some of the details and argue about their implications, no serious historian dismisses the reality of someone called Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in those places at that time. He was believed by many then and countless since to have been Someone significant—historically and spiritually. Something happened.

That such historical attention would be given to such an apparently inauspicious birth is notable. Of course, some of those who have come to be regarded among the great people of history were born



"I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people."

in humble circumstances. Part of our interest in such stories of human achievement is how these people overcame their beginnings and aspired to the achievements for which they became known. Sometimes the date of their birth might come to be remembered and marked in retrospect, perhaps with a yearly festival in their city of birth. More often and quite understandably, their date of birth remains simply a historical fact and their later achievements receive more attention.

It is surprising that we know of His birth at all. A baby born to a poor, out-of-town couple in a small shepherd village in the Judean hills would not expect the fanfare accorded to children born in the homes of the powerful and wealthy. Given the limited record-keeping of the period, the time, place and circumstances of the birth of many people who would reach some kind of fame or notoriety is unknown. In one sense, the birth of Jesus might be considered one of those historical events that we look back on only after we see what He grew up to become.

But the story of Jesus' birth as told in the two gospels does not allow for that to be all there is to it. They assert that His birth was predicted, anticipated, announced, celebrated and noticed even in the halls of power and the courts of the temple. They urge that something significant happened in the fact of His birth in itself.

In Luke's telling of what happened that night in Bethlehem, there was an announcement of the birth of Jesus—only everything about it seemed unlikely, implausible and misdirected. An angel—a heavenly being sent as a messenger from God!—appeared to a group of shepherds, poor farm labourers employed to guard flocks of sheep overnight, to tell them that something had happened. And not just *something*, something big, something significant, something that would change the world, something that we might still be singing songs about and re-telling the story of more than 2000 years later: "I bring you *good news* that will bring great joy to all people" (Luke 2:10).

Something happened. Something real happened. Something significant happened. That's what makes it *news*.

Something overwhelmingly good happened. That's what makes it *good* news.

2

Anticipated

Many of us remember our anticipation of Christmas when we were children—and we can be reminded of this by observing our children or grandchildren, nephews and nieces today. Excitement builds through the various traditions that different families maintain. The marking of an Advent calendar, whether in a traditional format or a more commercial product, counts down the days to Christmas. At different dates and events, some kind of Christmas decorations or lights might be put up. Carols will begin to be sung—or heard on the instore music playlists and advertising jingles some weeks or even months earlier. Whether from a faith perspective or simply that of preparing for a family gathering with gifts and good food, the Christmas season fosters anticipation.

Apart from simply re-telling the story of Jesus' birth in the various ways that we do that, practicing this sense of anticipation is perhaps one of the most authentic ways in which we mark the Christmas season. We can get a small sense of this in the stories of Jesus' birth told by the gospel writers.

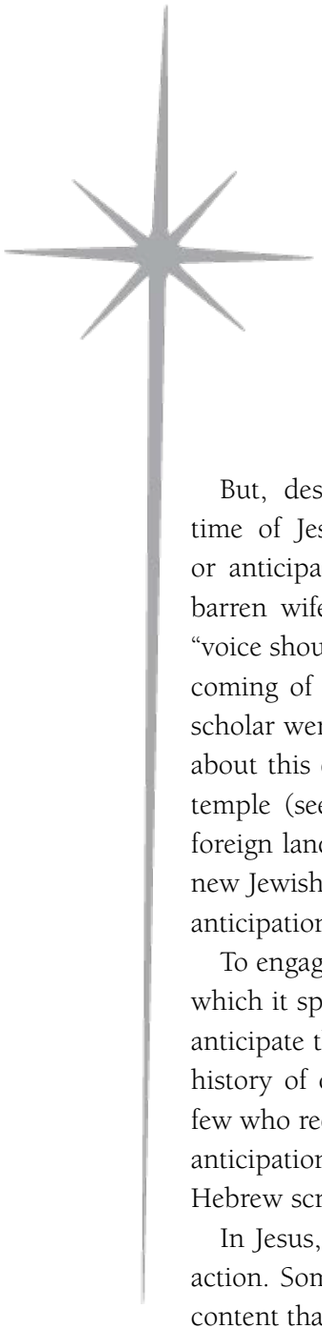
Matthew recited a brief history of the Jewish people, urging that these generations were all leading to this point in history. He also punctuated his storytelling with references and quotations from historical Hebrew prophecies about the birth of a coming Saviour. Luke told stories of startling angel appearances and unexpected pregnancies, with the sense that something was afoot that would have greater significance than the usual small-town birth. Of course, both gospels were written from a later vantage point, but even at the

time of writing their stories retained a sense of expectation—as they do for us today.

But expectation was also in the spirit of the times that surrounded the birth of Jesus. For centuries after their return from exile in Babylon, the Jewish nation had been subjected to a series of conquerors and oppressors, with the Roman empire the most recent and the most brutal. It had been about 400 years since the nation had received the prophecies of Malachi that close out the Bible's Old Testament. From this lapse in the Hebrew scriptures, it seems that most of those years had passed without authentic prophetic voices. But there were many pretenders who preyed on the people's hopes and fears. Historians report a succession of self-styled Messiahs who had come and gone, often sparking violent uprising and even more violent repression. The people were looking for a leader who would set them free—but barely knew what this might mean.

Amid this cultural and political climate, there were those who continued to study their scriptures, to pray and to anticipate. They could answer the questions about a Messiah to come, a new king to be born. When the magi—or wise men—arrived in Jerusalem, Herod asked the religious leaders to direct their search. It seems they soon had the correct answer about where the Messiah was to be born from the Hebrew prophet Micah: "'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they said, 'for this is what the prophet wrote'" (Matthew 2:5).

When Jesus' cousin John began preaching, the questions from the religious leaders about who he was carried this same weight (see John 1:19–23). There was something in the air, an anticipation that could not help but hope, even after generations of silence, oppression and disappointment. And while there were more misunderstandings and disappointments to come, those who followed Jesus came to recognise that He was who and what they had been anticipating. Writing a few decades later, Paul, one of the students of those same religious leaders, would reflect on this anticipation: "But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). In hindsight, it seemed to make sense to people like Paul.



"But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman."

But, despite the pervading sense of anticipation at the time of Jesus' birth, few were looking in the right places or anticipating in the right ways. An ageing priest and his barren wife were unlikely parents of one who would be a "voice shouting in the wilderness" (John 1:23) to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. A widow prophetess and an elderly scholar were the only ones who recognised something special about this eight-day-old baby when He was presented at the temple (see Luke 2:25–38). And coming from strange and foreign lands, the magi were curious heralds of the birth of a new Jewish king. But they each shared a holy sense of faithful anticipation.

To engage with the story of God and the central moment in which it specifically entered into human history in Jesus is to anticipate that God will act in our personal history and in the history of our world. That was the experience of those first few who recognised Jesus for who He was. They had a vibrant anticipation, a living hope based on the prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures of God's imminent intervention.

In Jesus, they recognised the reality of God's presence and action. Something was happening. The old man Simeon was content that his greatest hope in life had been fulfilled. "I have seen your salvation," he said, addressing his praise to God, "which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal

God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" (Luke 2:31, 32).

So when we return our attention each year to the story of the birth of Jesus, we practise anticipation. Even when crowded by Christmas events and the advertising and the shopping and the gifts and the cooking and all those other things on our holiday lists, we are reminded that this story has a momentum and a direction. A Baby was born—and in a sense it will be as if He is born again this year as we re-tell the story. When we see, even feel, the anticipation of our youngest and least jaded, we can see a small reflection of the anticipation expressed in the songs of Mary and Zechariah and the angels and the shepherds. We might also consider the patient faithfulness of Elizabeth and Anna, Simeon and the magi—and rediscover that the life of faith is seasoned with anticipation and hope.

3

Unexpected

Best known for his stories of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, J R R Tolkien was an Oxford scholar in linguistics, who made up languages for fun. He then wrote the histories of the people who spoke those invented languages. It just so happened that these became some of the best-loved stories in modern literature.

Reflecting on stories in an essay written in 1939,[1] Tolkien invented the term eucatastrophe. It describes the unexpected and seemingly unlikely turn of events in a story that produces a joyful ending and causes everyone to "live happily ever after" despite the threat, sorrow and evil that have gone before. A eucatastrophe is a "good catastrophe," something unexpected that happens to dramatically change the trajectory of the story.

As he considered the story at the heart of the Christian faith, Tolkien concluded that "the gospels contain a fairy story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy stories." What is remarkable is that the gospels—with elements and themes similar to the most compelling fairy story—are not fiction but history. The story of Jesus is "the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe," Tolkien wrote, before going on to emphasise, "But this story has entered History. . . . The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of [human] history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. The story begins and ends in joy."[2]

While an intervention from God was anticipated and hoped for by many people in the faith, culture and times in which Jesus was

born, people were expecting the Messiah to be announced as a fully grown new king or national hero, preferably with military credentials and ambitions—not as a helpless baby. History does not usually pay attention to the newborn cries of a child of poor parents visiting a small village on the fringes of the empire.

Belying some traditions, we have little specific information about the magi—who they were, where they came from and why. But it seems they made the logical assumption in their search for "the newborn king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) and headed to Jerusalem and eventually to Herod's palace. Except for their inquiries, probably some months after Jesus' birth, this event would have gone unnoticed by the political and religious leaders in Jerusalem. Even then, it seems the disruption caused by these strange visitors was soon forgotten. To outside observers, there was nothing out of the ordinary in the birth of another boy in Bethlehem around the time of the census. And even if there was, Herod's murderous paranoia seemed to bring a quick and tragic end to that (see Matthew 2:16–18).

Of course, people do rise from obscure beginnings at different times in history. But their stories are told because they have overcome the anonymity of their birth and the tide of history that washed over them, threatening to sweep their memory away. The circumstances of Jesus' birth are not those that human understanding would choose or seek out if planning or expecting a shift in the power dynamics and structures of world history.

Jesus would be confronted by presumption and prejudice about his birth throughout the course of His life, which seemed to undermine any claims He might make about His mission and who He was. Not only was He seemingly conceived out of wedlock and born in an obscure town, but He grew up in the even smaller village of Nazareth in the hills of Galilee. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" asked one of His earliest disciples (John 1:46). Even the hometown crowd in Nazareth rejected Him (see Luke 4:28–30). He had no formal education in the religious schools (see John 7:15), and He insisted on saying difficult and discomforting things, so "many

"For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendour with our own eyes."

of his disciples turned away and deserted him" (John 6:66). His rejection by the Jewish leaders and His grisly execution seemed the ultimate evidence of His failure and inevitable historical obscurity.

But the assertions contained in the stories of the birth of Jesus and the evidence of subsequent history are that something happened that night in Bethlehem that was profoundly significant in itself. This was a moment that marked a change in the course of history. To all but the most faithful—and even to them—this was a surprise: "Part of the meaning of the kingdom, in the four gospels, is precisely the fact that it bursts upon Jesus' first followers as something so shocking as to be incomprehensible."[3] It was counter-intuitive and unlikely. It was a good catastrophe but even then it was one that could easily be missed, at least in these early stages. But something had happened. The story of the birth of Jesus is a story of eucatastrophe.

So is it problematic to talk about the story of the birth of Jesus using the language of fairy stories? The temptation for those who choose to reject the stories and claims of Christianity as presented in the Bible would be to argue that the correlation with fairy stories is evidence of an element of fantasy or wishful thinking in Christian storytelling and belief. According to such an argument, the similarities between

Christianity and fairy stories might well be evidence of the fictional nature of the Christian story.

But such an allegation was anticipated—or at least responded to—by Jesus' first disciples: "For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendour with our own eyes" (2 Peter 1:16). While there are elements of the greatest human stories in the stories of Jesus' birth and His life, there is one significant difference: in Jesus, the fairy story became history—and that was the real and personal experience of the earliest followers of Jesus. Though they would not have used the term, they wrote a story of eucatastrophe because it was the story of what they had experienced. This was their story—and it was "too good not to be true."[4]

1. J R R Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" in *Tree and Leaf*, HarperCollins, 2001, page 72.

2. ibid.

3. N T Wright, *How God Became King*, HarperOne, 2012, page 197.

4. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, HarperCollins, 1977, page 98.

4

Pre-existing

In the old town centre of Ulm, Germany, you might be walking along a seemingly ordinary cobblestoned commercial street and encounter a geometric brown-granite stone sculpture. It identifies the location of the house in which Albert Einstein was born on March 14, 1879. A few years ago, I was visiting friends in that historic town and we were enjoying a sunny autumnal afternoon exploring the city. Returning along the Bahnhoffstrasse after visiting Ulm Minster—currently the tallest church building in the world—we came across this marker.

Such sites are curious places to visit—or stumble across, as in this instance. There were likely other children born in that house across the generations, but only young Albert is celebrated. There was nothing to see at the actual site besides the sculpture, since the actual house was destroyed by firebombing during World War II. And the location would have had little influence on Einstein's life as his family moved to Munich about a year after his birth. Yet we paused for a few minutes, read the inscriptions and felt the significance of this place for the story that had literally been birthed there.

Just as this spot in Ulm only gained significance after Einstein achieved fame, the place and story of a child's birth are usually only given significance retrospectively because of some future achievement. But in re-telling and memorialising the birth of Jesus, we are encountering something different. This is not an occasion to reflect on who this Baby would grow up to be, but who He already was: "The solemnity and awe do not lie in the fact that the baby

becomes the eternal Judge. What strikes us to the heart is this: the eternal Judge, very God of very God, Creator of the worlds, the Alpha and the Omega, has become that little baby."[1]

The summary of the Bible's New Testament is that something significant happened in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This story was told from four different perspectives, and these gospels, as well as the history and letters that make up the bulk of the New Testament, represent the first and second generations of Jesus' followers working out what had just happened and what it meant for them, for their faith and for the world. Their conclusions and claims were startling.

The gospel of John is generally believed to be the last written in this collection of books, dated near the end of the first century. Rather than adding to the stories of the birth of Jesus and the unique circumstances in which that occurred, already told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the fourth gospel begins with some remarkable poetry. Echoing the Genesis-language of creation, we are introduced to an eternal and pre-existing Word:

> In the beginning the Word already existed.
> The Word was with God,
> and the Word was God.
> He existed in the beginning with God.
> God created everything through him,
> and nothing was created except through him.
> The Word gave life to everything that was created,
> and his life brought light to everyone (John 1:1–4).

A later convert and another of the New Testament writers, Paul, also employed similar cosmic imagery in trying to express the divine reality that the followers of Jesus realised in Him—something that was somehow a pre-existing and present reality in the birth of the baby in Bethlehem:

> Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
> He existed before anything was created and is supreme
> over all creation,

"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation."

> for through him God created everything
> in the heavenly realms and on earth.
> He made the things we can see
> and the things we can't see—
> such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities
> in the unseen world.
> Everything was created through him and for him.
> He existed before anything else,
> and he holds all creation together (Colossians 1:15–17).

Of course, this was not immediately obvious to most of those who were in Bethlehem that night or even to many who encountered Jesus during the rest of His life. But among those who met Him—and particularly those who looked more carefully and listened longer—there were those who saw glimpses of the divine and who were undeniably transformed by such encounters. And as the community of believers continued to study and wrestle with who and what they had experienced, their understanding grew: "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son" (John 1:14).

To whatever degree we consider this to be true, it is unsurprising that the place where Jesus was born in

Bethlehem—or which at least has been celebrated as His birthplace since the fourth century—is today a popular destination for pilgrimage. Naturally, the motivations for visits to the small grotto beneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem are as varied as the countless people who have come from different faith traditions, cultures and nations around the world where His story has been told. But in the experience and understanding of those who were closest to the story, the birth of this Baby was the event in which human history intersected with God in a new and profound way. Something happened that changed God, that changed humanity and that changed history.

If we are tempted to think that the Christmas story is one of a poor but cute baby who grew up to be a great and good teacher—or some similarly reductionist re-telling of the story—we are soon confronted by a much larger set of questions and challenges. The claim that Jesus, the newborn baby of Bethlehem, was somehow God and the Creator of the world stretches us beyond science, history and all human knowledge. The claim is that something happened that is bigger than any story we might tell of it. As Lucy explained to the last king of Narnia in one of C S Lewis' much-loved stories, "In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."[2]

Today, we might only have an approximate location of Jesus' birthplace, but this story should cause us to pause nonetheless and reflect on the baby born there. If we allow ourselves, we might begin to feel the wonder that left the shepherds "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20) and the writers of the rest of the New Testament grappling for words for the rest of the century.

1. Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once & Future Coming of Jesus*, Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018, page 60.

2. C S Lewis, *The Last Battle*, Fontana Lions, 1980, page 134.

5

Sent

How God works is one of the great mysteries of faith. But that He does work—in the history of our world and in each of our lives—is the primary reason we have faith at all. As much as we can know God, we know Him by what He has done.

One of our challenges in knowing and talking about God is language. Many of the ways in which we try to speak about or describe God are imprecise and inadequate. Even if we ask what God is *like*, we are suggesting that the best we might be able to offer by way of explanation are metaphors and approximations. This is why the stories of God matter. In the story of the birth of Jesus, we can see God at work and learn something more of how God acts.

This specific story began with an angel appearing to Mary in the village of Nazareth. It is commonly believed that she was a teenager at the time, engaged to be married to an older craftsman in the village. When told she was going to have a baby, Mary asked how this would be possible. The angel's response gives an insight into the nature of God and how God works. The angel replied to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

In this apparently simple statement, we hear the announcement of something remarkable that was about to happen—and we are introduced to a God who is a loving community of three Persons who act together as One in intent, intellect and integrity. In turn, we are introduced to the Holy Spirit, the Most High—or God the

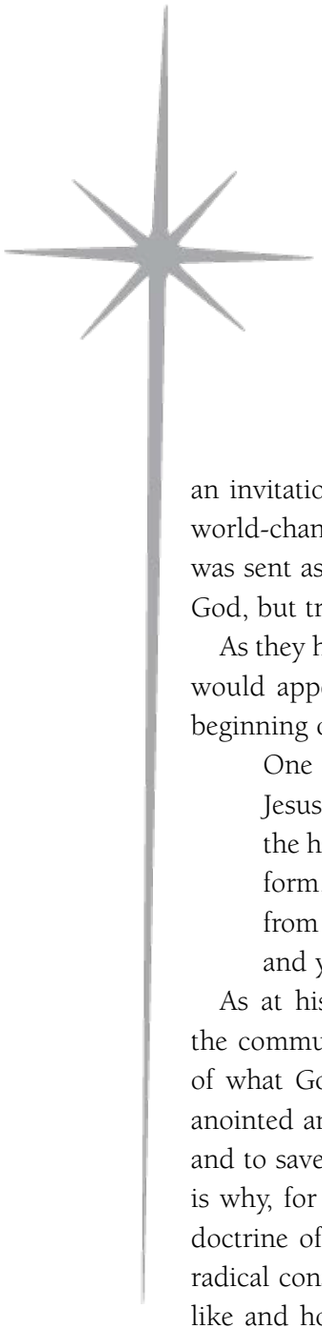
Father—and God the Son, who would become human as Jesus while remaining essentially God.

The theological term for this community of three Persons is *Trinity* and it is one of the most complex concepts of Christian faith, knotted up with the intricacies and inadequacies of language, metaphor and our limited human capacity for understanding the transcendent and Divine. Yet it makes most sense in a story like this, as well as other glimpses we see throughout the life and teachings of Jesus: "If the story of what happens with Jesus could be told without a threefold reference to God there would be no church doctrine of the Trinity."[1]

In the Bible's larger story, the three-in-one God worked together to create the world as a shared project of love, inviting the first human beings into their loving and equitable community. When that God–human relationship was broken, God made a plan for overcoming the sin and death that had been brought into the world, with each of the Persons of God playing distinct but equally engaged roles in the project of reclaiming and restoring humanity, our broken relationships and all of creation.

This is the context of the Bible's best-known verse—and the lesser-known but equally important verse that follows it: "For God loved the world so much that he *gave* his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God *sent* his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16, 17).[2] We will come back to talking more about the love of this God who would reach out to a broken world. But, for the moment, we simply observe the action of God as He *gave* and *sent* a unique part of His triune Self into our world as a baby born in Bethlehem at the specific time in history when Augustus and Herod ruled the world.

While exactly how God works remains a mystery, this story shows us God in action. Because Luke was explicit in recognising the presence and actions of the trinity of God in his telling of the story, we can begin to understand this oft-heard story with new depth and step further into the mystery of the nature of God. This is also



"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God."

an invitation to appreciate more of God's world-creating and world-changing love. We not only see a baby, but a Baby who was sent as a divine emissary; He was not merely an agent of God, but truly the Son of God.

As they had at the conception of His life, these three Persons would appear together at Jesus' baptism, which marked the beginning of His public ministry about 30 years later:

> One day when the crowds were being baptised, Jesus himself was baptised. As he was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy" (Luke 3:21, 22).

As at his conception, at Jesus' baptism we again observe the community, love and joy that are the reality and essence of what God is. The Trinity was seen together as Jesus was anointed and sent to serve the world in His life and ministry and to save and restore it by His death and resurrection. This is why, for all its complexity, metaphor and abstraction, "the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for Christian life."[3] We see what God is like and how God works by what God does. Not only that, but we are invited to join with God in what He is doing in our world.

And when we retell the story of the birth of Jesus, we are drawn into the wonderful mystery of God and His work in our world. We are awed by how something so significant and grand could be made so specific and small. And we are overwhelmed by the depth of love within this intimate creative community that compelled it to send One of their Three-in-One into a broken and dangerous world, risking rejection and defeat, to offer the invitation to reconciliation, restoration and re-creation.

1. Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (2nd edition), Continuum, 2009, page 128.

2. New Living Translation footnote, alternative translation, my emphasis.

3. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, HarperOne, 1991, page 1.

6

Incarnation

There are so many reasons Christmas should have lost its significance:

> The lovely old carols played and replayed till their effect is like a dentist's drill or a jack hammer, the bathetic banalities of the pulpit and the chilling commercialism of almost everything else, people spending money they can't afford on presents you neither need nor want. "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," the plastic tree, the cornball crèche, the Hallmark Virgin. Yet for all our efforts, we've never quite managed to ruin it. That in itself is part of the miracle.[1]

Despite its many distractions and diversions—and we could each add to this list from our own experiences and holiday aggravations—that Christmas continues to have some meaning is testimony to the grand miracle at its core. That miracle can be summed up in a single word: incarnation. God became human—more than that, God became a fragile and helpless baby. The Creator came to His creation, the One who made it all dependent on others for His most basic needs. It is a miracle and mystery always beyond our understanding.

If we get to it among the busyness of the season, each year we are invited again to imagine what the "first Christmas" must have been like. Growing up in a church context, I have many memories of watching—and sometimes participating in—re-creations of nativity stories. These often featured a group of children dressed in an

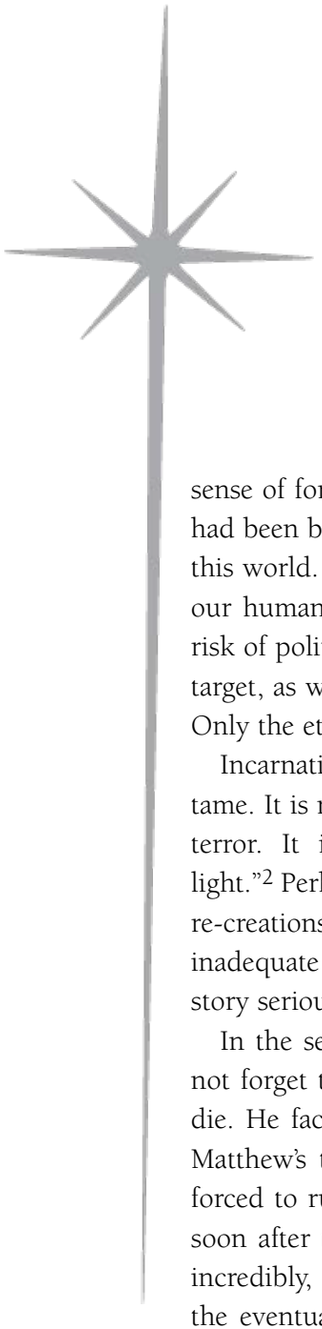
assortment of towels, bed sheets, bath robes and dressing gowns in a cardboard stable with bales of hay strewn across the front of the church or school hall. While the production values of some church nativity plays seem to have improved, many nativity stories and scenes retain their comic amateur earnestness. Even some grandparents will admit that these can sometimes be difficult to sit through and often hardly seem appropriate re-creations of a story which has such profound claims made about it.

Yet somehow—perhaps almost incidentally—they can begin to work, if we allow ourselves to be drawn into the story. In the frailty of the expression, with all its human sincerity and frantic indifference, we might experience and gain an insight into something of the feebleness of this eternal and central moment.

Only in our retellings does the world stop for this event. As a starting point, the shepherds were simply going about their work. We have hints that the village of Bethlehem was crowded: "there was no lodging available for them" (Luke 2:7). Many of the local residents and businesses were probably busy housing and feeding the influx of visitors, while the out-of-towners were intent on either rest or revelry, perhaps excitedly catching up with distant relatives or letting off steam after a journey they had been forced to make by their Roman occupiers. It was probably not a silent night and any attending holiness would have been largely unappreciated. Only a small number of people in town that night even knew of Jesus' birth; fewer still had any clue as to its significance.

Only in retrospect could John say, "we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). But in that long-ago animal shelter, the largely ignored birth was already a new and glorious reality: "So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness" (John 1:14).

But there is a darker reality to the story of the birth of Jesus. While the angels sang glory to God for this marvellous thing that had happened (see Luke 2:13, 14), it seems they might have been just as likely to hold their collective breath in fearful wonder and with a



"So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness."

sense of foreboding at the vulnerability into which this Child had been birthed. In Jesus, God was entering into the risks of this world. The life and experience of Jesus would include all our human and physical dangers, with more than the usual risk of political, physical and spiritual attacks. He would be a target, as would those who cared for Him and followed Him. Only the eternal reward is greater than this incalculable risk.

Incarnation, as Frederick Buechner has described it, "is not tame. It is not touching. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable terror. It is unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light."[2] Perhaps one of the reasons that our various depictions, re-creations and re-enactments of the nativity story seem inadequate is that, for all their earnestness, we don't take the story seriously enough. Incarnation is dangerous.

In the sentimentality of Christmas stories retold, we must not forget that His human birth made it possible for God to die. He faced life-threatening danger almost immediately. In Matthew's telling of the story, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were forced to run from the paranoid and murderous King Herod soon after the visit of the magi (see Matthew 2:13–15). But incredibly, in the Bible's narration of Jesus, it seems that the eventual death of this miracle Baby was one of the key purposes of His birth.

We can marvel at the sacrifice of God stooping so low as to

become human. Yet He would go lower still. The darkness of His crucifixion 30-something years later and the light of the resurrection morning a couple of days after that are the source of our true hope. This light flickered weakly in the first cries of the baby-God but would come to shine far brighter than the lantern light in a stable or even the angel glow depicted on Christmas cards: "The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone" (John 1:4).

From that night, a powerful light has been shining in the darkness of ourselves, our world, our despair and hopelessness. But it is sad to say that "the darkness has not understood it" (John 1:5, footnote). The tackiness, artificiality and stylised goodwill of our contemporary Christmases so clearly show that we have not understood it still. Yet that Light continues to shine its piercing beam into our darkness. God became light in the hope of being understood by the darkness. It is the central miracle of incarnation.

1. Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary,* HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, page 29.

2. ibid, page 30.

7

Fear

Despite the risks inherent in incarnation, there is a significant and repeated pattern in the succession of announcements that preceded and accompanied the birth of Jesus.

While the elderly priest Zechariah was fulfilling his duties in the temple, burning incense as part of the ritual of afternoon prayers, an angel appeared to him, introducing himself as Gabriel, a messenger who had come directly from the presence of God. "Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. But the angel said, 'Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer'" (Luke 1:12, 13).

We don't know the specific circumstances in which this same angel also appeared to Mary, but the tradition marked by the Basilica of the Annunciation—a relatively contemporary and beautiful church in Nazareth today, built over the archaeological site of a small ancient house—suggests that Mary would have been going about the daily domestic duties of a young woman of her time. Gabriel addressed Mary with a strange greeting from God, leaving her "confused and disturbed." But he was quick to add, "Don't be afraid, Mary" (Luke 1:29, 30).

When Joseph learned of his betrothed Mary's sudden and inexplicable pregnancy, he was understandably and righteously troubled and decided that he could not go ahead with their marriage. But an angel appeared to him in a dream to reassure him. "'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife'" (Matthew 1:20).

On the night Jesus was born, a group of shepherds were guarding their sheep in the fields outside the village of Bethlehem. We might imagine a small group of men sitting and talking quietly together, perhaps complaining about the influx of census-compelled visitors. The night would be dark, lit only by moon and stars, perhaps a small fire for some light and warmth.

> Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people" (Luke 2:9, 10).

One of the repeated refrains of the story of the birth of Jesus is "Don't be afraid." It is hardly surprising. "Don't be afraid" is most often an acknowledgment that there is a likelihood of fear. In each of these instances, the immediate circumstances are the most obvious reason for fear. The heavenly messenger, the unexpected pregnancy, the sudden interruption were alarming. "Don't be afraid" was an important and necessary introduction.

But there seems to be a larger meaning in these comforting commands. As we have considered, the incarnation was not a project for the faint-hearted:

> Terror surrounded the life of Jesus like great parentheses. At His birth, Herod pursued Him with slaughter, and in His crucifixion, He shared the fate of the condemned slaves and others of low esteem. But Jesus was not contained by the terror, for at His birth and at His resurrection, messengers from God proclaimed for all who would hear: "Do not be afraid."[1]

But there is a still larger understanding of the angels' words. "Do not be afraid" is one of the Bible's most common commands. Of course, it is a common greeting when an angel appears or God shows up in some kind of dramatic or unexpected way. But, much more than this, it is one of the key messages of the Bible.

"Do not be afraid" acknowledges the real human experience of

"But the angel said, 'Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer.'"

fear, the tangible and sometimes intangible nature of the threats that surround us in the world as we know it, and our frailty as human creatures. It recognises the existential crisis of death and how it works to undermine all that is good, worthwhile and true about our lives. It also reflects the broken relationships with which we live, which can threaten our peace, security and even our lives.

"Do not be afraid" also reflects our broken relationship with God. In the Bible's story of the human fall away from God, Adam's first confession is that fear had replaced the community they had previously experienced with God: "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked" (Genesis 3:10). This fear was the first barrier God would need to overcome in restoring our relationship with Him. But at the same time, the evil at work in our world would continually work to entrench and grow the human fear of God.

With this background, it is hardly surprising that "Do not be afraid" would become one of the recurring themes in the life and teaching of Jesus. It was a necessary reassurance when the disciples were exposed to glimpses of Jesus' divinity (see Matthew 17:1–8) and a catalyst for their choice to follow Him (see Luke 5:8–11). In Jesus teaching, it was also a practical and spiritual ingredient for living life with God: "So don't be afraid,

little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

So the "Do not be afraids" in the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus were laden with meaning, both practical and deeply spiritual. They introduced the people in the stories to the divine and recognised their humanity. They announced that God was about to do something new in the history of our world, which would be troubling, transformative and redemptive.

It was almost a year after his startling conversation with the angel in the temple that Zechariah, old priest and delighted new father, could speak again. No longer fearful but "filled with the Holy Spirit," he used his first words well in a bold song of prophecy and praise for what God was doing in the world:

> Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. . . . We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. . . . Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace (Luke 1:68–79).

And "awe fell upon the whole neighbourhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills" (Luke 1:65).

1. Lee Griffith, *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, Eerdmans Publishing, 2002, page 278.

8

Human

In Luke's gospel, Jesus was introduced to His mother Mary by the angel Gabriel in this way: "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:31, 32). A few verses later, Gabriel re-affirmed, "he will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Later, God Himself confirmed this remarkable, specific and unique claim about Jesus. At his baptism a "voice from heaven said, 'You are my dearly loved Son'" (Luke 3:22) and at His transfiguration the voice again announced, "This is my Son"(Luke 9:35).

Curiously, elsewhere in the gospels this "Son of God" title is used almost exclusively by Jesus' enemies. Evil spirits recognised Him by this title, the devil in his temptations of Jesus tried to make Him doubt that the title was His, and religious and political leaders used it as the basis for accusing Jesus of blasphemy or mocking Him during His trial and crucifixion. In the mouths of His enemies, tempters, critics and persecutors, "Son of God" became a term of derision and irony, a joke commenting on His seemingly ordinary and ultimately tragic circumstances.

By contrast, Jesus' favourite description of Himself was the less obvious and seemingly contradictory expression "Son of Man." It is used about 80 times through the four gospels but only ever by Jesus—and only ever about Himself. Those who first heard these statements would have understood the title as a reference to the expression used in the book of Daniel (see Daniel 7:13). But it also suggests that while Jesus understood that He was God, He was