

Q&A: Does it matter that we tamper with the nativity story, the account of God with us?

Off-Line asks:



I've been pondering... the extra-scriptural nature of our (i.e. Christian) nativity.

...I know that JC was in all likelihood not born in 1AD or Year 0. That for shepherds to be in the field at night it would have been Sept/Oct not mid-winter and snow on the ground. A little like "Queens birthday" it doesn't fuss me that we don't celebrate on the right date. However it nags at me that so much of what we have in our heads, and on shelves as Nativity scenes at this time of year is just nonsense.

- *Inn/Guestroom – Luke uses each (Samaritan, and Passover prep) so why do we translate it as Inn in the Christmas account. No "room" at the "inn" instead of no space in the guest room.*
- *There is NO stable! There is a manager.*
- *There are shepherds*
- *There are no magi on the night – when they do arrive there are 3 gifts not 3 people – the seem to come some weeks/months perhaps year later.*

Does it matter that we pollute/corrupt/tamper/supplement the

account of God with us? What other piece of scripture would we be so careless with?

However, even having decided that you want a biblical nativity, how do you get from where we are to somewhere scriptural?

It's an awesome question and a fraught topic. It reminded me of an overheard conversation at this year's Christmas pageant in Hobart – "What! The churches are even sticking their nose in for this!" Groan.

In the popular mind the nativity story is becoming not only increasingly inaccurate but increasingly irrelevant. I have made more than one conversation in which, having explained a theological point about God revealing himself to us, the light suddenly dawns as lines are drawn from this gospel reality to Mary and Joseph to Christmas etc.

Nevertheless the nativity story is there along with Prancer and Bitzen and Rudolph and tinsellitis and the North Pole and the whole Claus family. Although emphasising it runs the risk of being accused of being Grinch-like. Bah humbug.

While it's easy to accuse the Santa cultus on Coca Cola, the point you make about diminishing meaningfulness of contemporary nativity I think derives more from Victorian & Georgian England, the conceptual inculcations of the KJV (yes, "inn"), and the tradition of holding a "nativity play" in which pleasing the children (and finding parts for them) pre-empt accuracy.

And yes, the whole traditional nativity is completely inaccurate. Google is your friend in getting the details, but here are a couple of semi-decent links:

- <http://web.cloudbow.com/blog/?p=5>
- <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/how-historically-accurate-is-the-traditional-nativity-437743>

But the substantive question is: should we resist this “tampering” with the story?

And my answer is “yes.” In fact, it is “of course.” Chief among the tasks of proclaiming God’s word is the so-called “joining of the two horizons” – the original word spoken to its original context is applied sensibly as a word within our context. The only way to do this well is to get our head around the historical facts.

Indeed, the historical reality of the nativity is a much more powerful story: the witnessing shepherds *are* socio-economic rejects, the “no place in the inn” is not about a petulant innkeeper but about the limits of familial (covenant family!) hospitality. I have a friend who does midwifery work in third world countries providing sanitary equipment for expecting mothers who would otherwise give birth within the mud and mildew of their tents. Take away the Victorian romance you have a screaming teenager giving birth in full-to-the-brim home amidst the smell, noise, and refuse of animals and peasants. God with us indeed, God with us at our most utterly utterly deprived.

So what to do? Some random suggestions.

1. Tell the real story, as best we can. In conversation, in preaching, etc.
2. Engage with, but don’t lambast, the Christian romantics. This is a “just because I don’t have a Christmas tree doesn’t mean you shouldn’t” type consideration.
3. Steer our nativity presentations away from the false and towards the correct. Again, this can be done offensively, or subversively and gently. I’ve seen nativity scenes constructed and beautifully carved that are abstract and symbolic and take you past the fluff to dwell on the reality. I’ve seen traditional scenes rearranged – the wise men placed further away as if on a journey for instance, proclamations from the angels done

in *full* "Peace on earth and good will to those upon whom his favour rests."

4. Emphasise the important stuff. This isn't about cute babies, it's about God's humbling of himself to lead an estranged people. This doesn't mean being theologically nerdy. The Big Picture Bible is one that does a great job of telling a children's story about the coming of God's "Forever King"
5. Encourage people to read Matthew and Luke.

So nothing particularly revolutionary. Just steady as she goes solid homiletics for the whole of life really.

Blessings for the New Year.