

INTRODUCTION

*I love
Christmas*

In our house it is a widely recognised fact that there is one person who gets more excited than anyone else as Christmas approaches – Dad! Indeed, as the build-up to the great day gathers pace, there are a series of family traditions which now have to be followed – to the letter. Always, for over twenty years now, my daughter and I spend one Saturday shopping together. Living in central London, we travel easily up to the West End by bus. We then follow a fixed route, beginning at Fortnum & Mason and finishing at John Lewis – with a compulsory stop for hot chocolate and cake in the middle. Alongside this, there are special tasks allotted to each family member and these are guarded jealously: one ices the Christmas cake, another makes the brandy butter, another always puts the last decoration on the tree – the star at the top, and so on. And, of course, Father

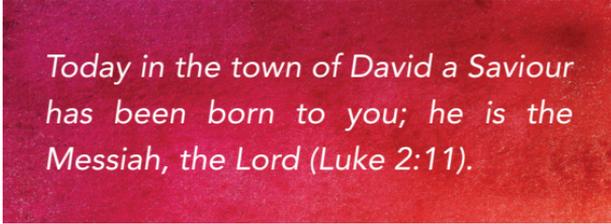
Christmas still visits every year (regardless of behaviour!), even though the kids have long since grown up.

I love Christmas.

But in amongst the fun, the presents, the family visits, and the good food, one thing that makes Christmas genuinely special and of lasting importance to me is the individual right at the heart of it – Jesus. Long after the festivities are over, the tree taken down, and the wrapping paper recycled, Jesus Christ – the man whose birthday Christmas is all about – continues to thrill and enthrall.

There is one sentence from the first Christmas Day that explains why Jesus' birth is of such lasting and universal significance. It was spoken at night, by a messenger sent from God. It was spoken to a group of shepherds keeping watch

over their flocks outside Bethlehem. It reads as follows:



*Today in the town of David a Saviour
has been born to you; he is the
Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:11).*

Three simple things stand out in this sentence. First, Christmas was a real historical event, so we can trust the Christmas message. Second, Christmas is about the coming of God himself – we should not sentimentalise it as just a cute story. Third, Christmas was a rescue plan, from which we can benefit forever.

The Christmas message affects us all.

1. Christmas and history

WE CAN TRUST THE
CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

The sentence I quoted comes from the eyewitness account of Jesus' life and teaching that was drawn up by a doctor called Luke. Dr Luke tells us in his introduction that he worked as an investigative reporter, speaking only to those who were themselves eyewitnesses, or who had spoken personally to the eyewitnesses of the events of Jesus' life. Together with all the other writers of what are known as the 'Gospels', Dr Luke wants us to know that we are dealing with real events that took place in real places amongst real people. The Gospels are first-hand reports of the kind prized by courtroom lawyers. Throughout Luke's account he emphasises the historical

*The Gospels
are first-hand
reports of the
kind prized
by courtroom
lawyers.*

detail that people saw. In recounting the birth of Jesus, he tells us that ‘an angel of the Lord appeared’, that the shepherds ‘hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby’, and that ‘all the things they had heard and seen ... were just as they had been told’.

It would be worth getting hold of one of the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John) and reading it through. All the authors record the big-picture events for us. Later Luke tells us who was Emperor of Rome when Jesus began his ministry – Tiberius Caesar; which year of his reign it was – the fifteenth; who was governor of Judea – Pontius Pilate; who was ruling in Galilee, and Iturea, and Abilene – Herod and Philip, and Lysanius; and who the high priests were – Annas and Caiaphas. Not only does this show that Luke considered

himself to be writing a serious historical account, but it also allows us to check up on his record and verify it against what we know of the period from other sources. Furthermore, we can see just how carefully Luke treats the material he includes by comparing it with Mark's gospel account, part of which Luke uses. He doesn't make any big or significant changes – he is a serious and trustworthy reporter.

Not long ago I began reading through the gospel accounts with a man who is a barrister in Fleet Street. In fact, after starting to explore the gospel with him, I discovered that he is one of the top QCs in his field in the country. He grew up not believing in the eye-witness accounts of Jesus. I asked him recently why he now believes. His response was: 'I am compelled to. The evidence demands it.'

As you read the gospel accounts, though, you will also see that the authors don't simply record the big-picture events such as current world rulers, dates, plus senior religious and political figures. They also mention minute details such as where a person was standing when something happened, what kind of tree a person had climbed, the precise numbers of people witnessed, and people's names and family details. All of these details indicate that the material is neither myth nor legend, but on a par with the eye-witness evidence we encounter in court rooms, delivered by reliable people who were actually there.

However, it isn't only the trustworthy and personal eyewitness nature of the material that compels belief. It is also the backstory. For literally thousands of years before Jesus was born, God had promised that he

would come to visit his creation in person. These promises can be found in the first part of the Bible, the Old Testament. Here we are told details of where Jesus was to be born and into which family, and that at his birth he would be visited by kings from the east who would bring gifts of gold and frankincense. Alongside these details of his birth, the Old Testament also tells us about what Jesus would do when he grew up, how he would die and how he would then rise from the dead.

*God had
promised
that he would
come to visit
his creation
in person.*

Another friend of mine has been reading the whole Bible for many, many years. In fact, he travels all over the country

speaking to people who haven't heard much about Jesus. He often points out that the first part of the Bible, which was written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, records numerous specific details of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

'Jesus is the only man in history whose biography was written before he was born!'

He then makes this point: 'Jesus is the only man in history whose biography was written before he was born!'

The Christmas story, then, is history and we can trust it. There was a real woman, Mary. There was a real birth and a real baby, Jesus. It took place in a real place in real time and was witnessed by real people – the wise men and the shepherds.

I mentioned at the start that Father Christmas still visits our home and that I get more excited about Christmas than anyone else in our family. There is no doubt that there can be something 'magical' about Christmas. But there is nothing 'fictional' about the birth of Jesus. We can trust it.

