

Christmas
UNCUT

What really happened
and why it really matters...

Christmas Uncut

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Introduction

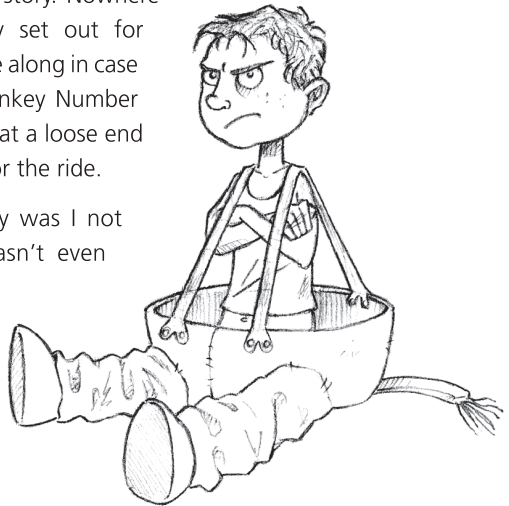
What did you most want the December you were six? I wanted to be one of the three kings in my school nativity play. And I particularly wanted to be the king who got to wear the gold cloak. (It was actually an old curtain, but it looked good.)

Unfortunately, Mrs Ablett made the controversial decision to give out the roles based on acting ability. Since my approach to speaking on stage was “say it as loud as possible, as fast as possible”, this meant the end of my kingly dream.

Instead, I got the not-so-glamorous role of the rear end of Donkey Number Two. (Luckily, it was a non-speaking part.)

And, as every six-year-old knows, there’s only one donkey in the nativity story. Nowhere does it say that as Mary set out for Bethlehem, she took a spare along in case of breakdown. Or that Donkey Number One had a friend who was at a loose end that day and came along for the ride.

I was devastated. Not only was I not a main, kingly part—I wasn’t even a bit-part. I was a no-part. Or, to be more accurate, the rear-end of a no-part.



No donkeys at all

But in fact, I needn't have been so disappointed. Yes, there wasn't a Donkey Number Two at the first Christmas. But here's the thing I discovered years later: *there wasn't even a Donkey Number One*. The original, real-life Mary didn't ride a donkey. And there weren't any kings, either.

The donkey and the kings are a famous part of the nativity story. But they're nowhere to be seen in the real Christmas history.

When children act out the nativity, it doesn't have much in common with the historical Christmas. Over time, we've cut huge, crucial bits out. We've added nice but completely made-up details. We've made it into a tale for children, and forgotten the real events. (Did you know that there were no kings or donkey?!) We've turned Christmas history into a nativity play.

I don't want to be a spoilsport. Nativity plays are part of the whole Christmas experience, along with desperate last-minute shopping and writing cards to people you didn't make the effort to see last year, and won't make the effort to see next year. If my son is ever chosen to be a king (or the back-end of a donkey, like his father before him) I will be on the front row, smiling proudly.

It's just that the real Christmas is much more interesting than what we've turned it into. It's worth rescuing and re-telling.

So let's begin. At the first Christmas, Mary wasn't waving to her mum in the front row. The angels weren't wearing last year's tinsel stuck onto old white sheets. Joseph's dad wasn't annoying a shepherd's grandma by standing up in front of her to record his son's big moment.

What there was at the first Christmas was scandal. Controversy. Massacres. Mystery.

More than history

The real Christmas is a great story. But it's more than that. This isn't simply a 2,000-year-old history; it's a story that speaks to us today—

about our life, our world, our future. What happened way back then is still changing and shaping millions of people's lives in the 21st century. What really happened at Christmas still really matters today, to all of us.

That's the Christmas story this book is about. Each chapter, or scene, is in two parts. First, **What really happened** to real people. In each of these sections, you'll see some words in **this kind of text**. These are words taken straight out of the Bible*, and are the really important ones. Those in normal text are written by me, just to help you grasp what was going on.

And second, in **Why it really matters** we'll see why what happened way back then still has significance for how we live today. In each scene, this part will focus on one character from the Christmas history.

This is not a cute nativity play (though we'll mention them as we go). It's not fluffy, childish, or dull. There are some parts you probably wouldn't want a young child even to know about.

It's the real Christmas—uncut.

* I use sentences from the Bible to show what really happened in human history. If you want to know why, you might like to flick to "Yes, but... isn't this all made up?" at the end of the book on page 53. And if you'd like to read about the historical Christmas in the Bible, you can find it in Matthew chapter 1, verse 18 – chapter 2, verse 18; and in Luke chapter 1, verse 26 – chapter 2, verse 40.

SCENE ONE: MARY

“You will be with child... the Son of God”

It's the height of ambition for most 5-year-old girls—and often their mothers, too. But in every school, church or kindergarten, only one girl each year can reach the dizzying height of being Mary in the nativity play.

Last year, my god-daughter was selected. She only had one line, which she forgot, and one job, holding the baby Jesus, which she did. Around the neck.

But those were minor details. She was Mary. Proud girl. Proud parents. Proud god-father!

Yet in a way it's strange that parents want their daughters to be Mary. We're essentially dreaming that our child will play a teenage mum who got herself pregnant in a very suspicious way, and whose life nearly fell apart because of it.

Because that's what happened to the real Mary.



What really happened

To begin with, it was just a normal day: by the end, her life would have changed for ever.

But this story doesn't start with a teenage girl in northern Israel. It starts with God. It starts in heaven.

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph.*

The virgin's name was Mary.

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

Unsurprisingly, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. She knew from the history of her people, the Jews, how rare it was for one of God's messengers to visit them; and that when an angel did appear, it usually meant things were about to get shaken up. And here she was in the middle of it all.

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son.

"And you are to give him the name Jesus.

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David"—the David who had ruled over Israel a thousand years earlier, and was still known and loved as the Jews' greatest ever king.

"His kingdom will never end."

Mary was in shock: but she was still able to think clearly. She was about to be pregnant—and yet she knew that was impossible.

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit —God himself—will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow

* Words straight from the Bible are in this kind of text.

you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. For nothing is impossible with God.”

Mary didn't fully grasp what was happening; but she knew that, for some reason, she'd just been brought into one of God's plans.

“I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.”

Then the angel left her.

Explaining to Joseph what had happened wasn't easy. They hadn't slept together (they were saving it for marriage); now she was pregnant.

Joseph wasn't convinced by Mary's “God's the father” explanation; but **he was a righteous, kind man, and did not want to expose her to public disgrace**, to everyone knowing what she'd done with some mystery man. So **he had in mind to quietly** break up with her.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.”

Joseph knew the promises God had made to his people through the centuries. He knew God had promised that a child would be born who would in some amazing way be God himself. He knew God had said this child would be born to a virgin. And that virgin turned out to be his girlfriend! Mary didn't deserve him leaving her; and she desperately needed him to love her.

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he didn't sleep with her until she gave birth.

➤ **READ THE FULL STORY** Luke 1 v 26-38; Matthew 1 v 18-25

Why it really matters

A nativity play begins with smiles and carols. The real Christmas began with scandal, shame and shock.

Scandal

Here's the scandal. Mary was a normal girl living in a nothing town called Nazareth, in the north of Israel. She was probably 14 or 15—and (as was normal in that society) engaged to be married. But, before Joseph had touched her, she fell pregnant.

Today, that might prompt a bit of gossip, nothing more. Then, it was hugely scandalous. They took marriage seriously in Israel—so seriously that adultery could get you stoned to death.

And that's what Mary faced. Not just dirty looks and cutting comments from other women, but a lifetime of struggle and loneliness, and the real possibility of death. But they don't mention those things in nativity plays.

Shame

Here's the shame. Imagine being Joseph. Everyone would know that your girl so hated the thought of being with you that she'd decided to go elsewhere. There aren't many things more humiliating than your girl sleeping around; and that's what the neighbours would assume Mary had done. It's amazing that Joseph was prepared to split up quietly, rather than letting everyone know what Mary did. It's even more amazing that he ended up sticking by her.

They don't mention those things in nativity plays, either.

Shock

And here's the shock. *All this was God's doing.*

I don't know how you imagine God, if you do at all. Maybe some old guy sitting up in the sky? Maybe some amazingly powerful force who quite frankly has more interesting things to do than care about our

little lives? Maybe some distant being who really has no idea what life is actually like here on planet earth?

But here's the God of the Bible. He's a God who gets involved. Who turns lives upside down. Who doesn't act as we might expect.

He's a God who came and lived on earth, as a human.

That's the big shock. Not that a teenage girl got pregnant, and the father wasn't her boyfriend. Not that a young guy decided to stick by his girl, even though he wasn't the father.

No—the shock is that the baby “will be called the Son of God”.

Who is God?

This baby was God coming to live in human history. This baby would be human (Mary was his mother); but he would also be God. He was God's Son, who had existed with God the Father (who we normally just call God) and God the Holy Spirit since before the creation of the world, since eternity.

And so here's a glimpse of who God is. He's Father, Son and Spirit. He's existed as this three-in-one God, in perfect love and relationship within himself, for eternity.

That sounds quite strange. And it is! But it's also exciting. Because if this God is all about love and relationships, then the universe he's made will be about love and relationships too. It's not about power, or possessions, or just pointlessness. The God of love and relationship has made us to enjoy a life of love which lasts and relationships that work.

That's a God worth knowing. And that's the God who was going to be born to Mary; God the Son come to live on earth.

Mindblowing

I don't know about you, but I struggle to get my head around that. The God of eternity, who knows and controls everything, becoming

a baby who needs changing, feeding, burping. My mind can't work that out!

But then, there are lots of things that overload my brain—like the fact that light can travel from here to the sun in 8.3 minutes. That's a speed, according to google, of 186,000 miles or 300,000 km per second. My mind can't really understand how something can travel so fast (science was never my strongest subject at school). But despite that, I know it does travel at that speed.

We'll never understand how God could travel so far—from his throne in heaven to the womb of a woman in Israel. But he did. The angel said that this baby "will be called the Son of God". God came to earth, as one of us, to live in the world he created.

So what will God as a human be like? What does he want to tell us? What has he come to do?

At this point, Mary had only a vague idea. But the night he was born, things would start to become clearer.