

# Christchurch Ikley



2015

## **Welcome.**

I come from Leicester. I've always known something of the story of King Richard III, but also known he was lost to history. When his bones were discovered under the tarmac, I saw on the TV news a car park I had known from childhood! Archaeology had a meaning for me, history came alive, and in some way I felt an affinity to King Richard because I *knew* I had often walked within yards of his very body.

The story of the discovery of King Richard III's body has involved scientific research, historical quest, and the faith of some searchers after the truth, who, against much of the odds, were proved right.

There continues to be scientific research, discussion amongst historians, and the personal decisions of each and every visitor to Leicester, about who King Richard was, whether he was good or bad, why he acted the way he did, and what history has made of him.

I have yet to re-visit the town of my birth and go to the visitor centre, re-read the history, the story of the discovery, and stand by his tomb. When I do, I expect an interactive visitor experience.

In this interactive walk *Inside Christmas*, we have tried to take some serious archaeological evidence, link it with some of the most recent and stringent scholarship, and marry them to the faith of the centuries.

This has been a really difficult task, because we are dealing with the 'Nativity Story' - one everyone thinks they know. It's actually two stories, often woven together, that are about Jesus. Christians of course love Jesus, revere him for who he was and what he stood for, and hold him very dear. So opinions differ, and discussion has been strong at times as we have planned this interactive walk *Inside Christmas*. We don't always all agree.

Now we invite you in, to see some of the evidence for yourself, maybe bust a few myths, and yet, before the end, make up your own mind about what archaeology, history, and modern interpretation might suggest this story means.

We hope and pray you might make some new discoveries for yourself, and then be able to celebrate afresh a very Happy and Blessed Christmas!

Rev Rob Hilton  
Christchurch.

## **Inside The Typical Nativity Scene**

- Who and what is in the picture?
- Have you seen a picture like this before anywhere?
- Is there anything that you would have drawn in too?

The 'traditional' nativity scene, as depicted here, is seen on Christmas cards and in school nativity plays across the country every year. How true is this scene to the Bible story?

Did you know there are actually two Bible stories - told by Matthew and Luke about Jesus' birth, and that some of what we think is in the stories isn't there? What truth lies behind the original stories anyway?

We aim to explore each element of the nativity in turn as we journey Inside Christmas . . . . .

### **A note about 'the Bible'**

As you will probably know there are numerous English translations of the Bible; for example we use the 'Good News' translation here at Christchurch. Each one has different purposes, strengths and weaknesses.

Furthermore, there is often the belief that the Bible is infallible, but even in the original languages it was written in, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, there is no single version; there are many ancient ones and they often differ slightly.

The Bible was written, edited, and collected over several centuries, long before the Enlightenment when a scientific view of the world became standard within western culture. So it was not written in a style we would currently use: we are familiar with writing and TV programmes like documentaries, with facts and deductions. In ancient times stories were told that might not be 'true in fact' like a documentary, or even a 'dramatic reconstruction', but that were often legends, myths, or metaphors that conveyed profound 'truths'.

We do a disservice to the Bible if we always read it literally; here at Christchurch when we read the Bible, we try to be aware of its historical context and the type of literature it is. This does not diminish the authority of the Bible, but we try to read it with care if we are to hear God speaking from within it.

## **Walk inside the Darkness**

- How does the darkness make you feel? What can you see?
- Are there times that you have felt afraid/alone?
- When else have you felt like that? Maybe your first day at school? A baby born and Mum being away? A pet dying?
- What difference does it make when we put the light on?
- Who or What is the light in your life?

Many hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the Jewish people had been prisoners in a foreign land and it felt like darkness to them and they were hoping for a light that would one day come. This is the hope Isaiah their prophet put into words, they are remembered every Christmas as a reminder that Jesus was understood to be light in the darkness of human experience.

## **A Birth Announcement - Inside Power**

- What's happened? and how do you know?
- What sort of people have been born?
- Who has authority in your life?
- What sort of authority would you be prepared, or would you like to live under?
- Decorate a coin. On one side depict an authority that you currently feel you live under; on the other side, depict an authority that you feel you would like to live under.
- There are some pictures of well known powerful people on cards. Stand the card depicting the one you would like to live under on the mantelpiece. Write a short sentence inside the card to say why you chose that authority.
- Sit by the fire and read the papers!

When Octavian became the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, the Roman pagan (state) religion, referred to him as a God, and his birth story was written: how his virgin mother had been impregnated by the God Apollo in the form of a snake while she lay sleeping in the temple, and there was a sign of a star in the heavens. So, Augustus (and later rulers called Caesar) claimed to be Lord God, Son of God, Saviour of the World.

When Matthew and Luke wanted to introduce their stories of Jesus, they reflected this idea to introduce a very different ideal, not Pax Romana (peace through conquest) but peace and justice through God's Love, revealed, they believed, through Jesus. This was a highly subversive and dangerous thing to do!

There are several stories within the Bible of improbable pregnancies, involving 'barren' women or old couples. These 'miraculous' births are there to demonstrate the power of God. Whatever is meant by 'virgin', and Christians disagree over this quite vociferously, it's a word that means so very much more than biology!

## **The Shepherds and the Women - Inside the Margins**

- Look at the shepherd's things - a real sheep's fleece, cutters, and crook. What do you think the shepherds would use them for?
- We have suggested that cleaners, builders, and road workers are on the edge of society, not at the bottom, we need them, but we don't often see them, they often work overnight.
- Imagine what your school or place of work would be like if no-one cleaned toilets?
- Women were marginalised in Jesus' society, they had a role (to bear children), but not a very high or prominent one; they were always owned by men.
- Dress up in various outfits and imagine what it would be like to live on the edge of society but have your work needed by everyone else.

In Jesus' time, shepherds were considered ritually 'unclean' through handling animals, yet they reared the very lambs offered daily as a religious sacrifice in the Temple. It was a lowly, but very necessary, job, rather like a toilet cleaner today. Shepherds in a rural situation would be uneducated, poorly paid and at the bottom of the social heap.

Luke's story has the birth announcement of Jesus specifically to shepherds to emphasise that he is a Saviour for ordinary people. In fact, throughout his book, Luke includes an emphasis of those who are on the margins in society (lepers, disabled people, foreigners, women, . . .) which isn't as much of an emphasis as is found in the other Gospels.

Luke also has Mary as the key character at the start of Jesus' birth story, with angelic visitations from Gabriel. Matthew on the other hand, writing for a Jewish audience, has Joseph in that central role having the visions - but it's usually Mary that makes it into the nativity stories today!

## **Hospitality - Inside the welcome**

- Make yourself at home!
- Look at the note left for visitors.
- Write a post-it note to say thank you for the welcome, or write a postcard to describe a time that you have been surprised by a welcome
- Have you ever had to share a room with someone you didn't want to, or been turned out of your room because visitors come at Christmas?
- How does that feel?
- What makes them feel most at home?
- How can you make people welcome in your space this Christmas?

A typical peasant dwelling (like those in England at the time and for many hundreds of years) would be a single communal living area for the family with an area at one end for any animals they might have. Sometimes the house would have a 'guest room' on the end, or on the top (known as an 'upper room'). Palestinian culture was and is very hospitable, a guest would never be turned away. If the guest room was full, there would be a welcome to hunker down near the animals in the multipurpose open plan living space. The cleanest, warmest, and safest place for a baby would be in clean hay in the animal feeding manger.

## **A note about Bethlehem**

Matthew's story involves Joseph and Mary living in Bethlehem, and later relocating to Nazareth via Egypt; Luke's story is more convoluted: he tells the story of a census that means they have to travel from Nazareth, way up in the north of the country, to Bethlehem near Jerusalem in the south.

Bethlehem was the home town of the great Jewish King David, and Jerusalem had been, and remained his capital city. Jews believed that God's next 'Messiah' to save their people would be like David.

Although Luke has a lot of detail about the census and the governor, historians struggle to reconcile the dates and details outside of the Bible. Either Luke is right and historians are missing something, or the historians are right and Luke was being very fluid and creative with facts because he wanted to make a point about Jesus because of his faith.

What do you think is plausible?

It is suggested that Luke tells his story the way he does because he wants to emphasise the subversive link between the Caesar way of doing things world-wide and the gospel (God's way) - the good news, peace and justice that Jesus brings. Luke wants the actual historical existence of Jesus, and the context of his birth to portray these virtues of faith, and he wants people to choose Jesus' way of living rather than Caesar's.



## **The Magi room - Inside Honouring**

- Herod (who by this time was the King of the Jews) did not get the gifts of Gold, Frankincense, or Myrrh, Jesus did. He asked to be involved, but the Magi didn't return to him. How do you think he felt?
- Herod said he would pay homage – what sort of a gift do you think he would have brought?
- How do our gifts recognise who the person is that we're giving them to? For example, think about why you give the gifts you give to people.
- Would you give a Wii to your granny for example?
- Who do you think Jesus is?
- Take or make a symbol of who Jesus is to you and hang it on the Chrismon tree.
- Look at the three gifts and the activities associated with them

The astrologers are only found in Matthew's story and are not referred to as 'Kings' from the Orient and no number is given (but there are three gifts).

It's the gifts they bring that have strong symbolism:

Gold is a gift fit for a King.

Frankincense is an aromatic spice burned in the Temple alongside the sacrificial offerings - it was sometimes said that the 'prayers of the saints rise like incense to the Lord'

Myrrh is another smelly spice used in purification rites and for burial.

Perhaps all three gifts are looking toward the end of Matthew's story when Jesus will be crucified as 'King of the Jews', buried, and then take on the role of God's High Priest, allowing access to God through trust in him.

Matthew has an underlying theme throughout his Gospel that Jesus is the new Moses, coming to bring the new Law (the 'Sermon on the Mount') to his people. The birth story of Moses in Exodus 1 and 2 is recreated by Matthew (with parallel dreams and visions), the flight into Egypt enabling Jesus to also 'come out of Egypt' to 'save his people'. The story of Herod ordering the slaughter of all the boys under two years of age (not found in any other historic record) is directly similar to Pharaoh's command when Moses is born, although this doesn't make it into the modern nativities either.

## Mary and Joseph - Outside Christmas

- Look at the poem on the wall, it's a modern (slightly tongue in cheek Christmas) version of another part of the Bible sometimes read at weddings. What do you think of it?
- Peace – What difference does this make in our lives? Jesus brings peace through non-violence and love, which is in contrast to the Pax Romana (the way the Romans achieved peace through force)
- place a marker on the map of the world somewhere that you would like to see peace come
- Justice - Was Mary meek and mild – NO! She sang this song where she demonstrates what effect the radical tough love of God has in the world.
- Listen to the musical version of Mary's song, called The Magnificat.
- Take a piece of fairly traded chocolate and enjoy the taste of justice - remember that Jesus came to create a just, fair, equalised world.
- Take time to look through the leaflets – Buy justice this Christmas!

Mary is usually depicted as wearing blue (it would have been something very different as the wife of a day labourer living in the poverty of most of the population then), but this is a medieval invention: within the art world, blue was the most expensive pigment to create, so was used sparingly and for special significance.

Luke has a genealogy linking Jesus as a descendent of Adam, the first man, for Luke wants us to believe Jesus came to save all the human race.

Matthew's family tree starts with Abraham and David, but interestingly includes four women, all of whom were non-Jews. They occur in the Old Testament in situations where there is scandal or irregular family situations! Matthew wants to show that the very nationalistic pride that Jews took in 'their' God needed to be re-evaluated. Rooted in Jewish history, but with a radical re-reading of that history, Matthew wants us to believe in Jesus bringing a radical message of hope and love for all the whole world to hear, perhaps we might say - a light to lighten the darkness?!

## **Resources - Goodbye, maybe see you again!**

So, what do you think?

What do you think about the donkey, the Inn, and the stuff you expected but didn't find inside Christmas?

More importantly, what did you think of the original context, politics, subtle messages by Matthew and Luke as to what they believed about Jesus?

And what do you make of Jesus as you've walked inside Christmas?

Thank You!...

...to Noah, Mags, Steve, Pam, Rob, Brian,  
the Wizards and Mike for making this  
happen.

Two opportunities for follow up:

**Thursday 10th December** here at Christchurch 7.30 in the evening, (room to be confirmed). A chance to tell us what you thought, explore further, and ask more questions in an open and welcoming atmosphere.

**Mondays in January** - 4th, 11th, 18th, and 25th here at Christchurch 7.30 in the evening, (room to be confirmed). Looking in more depth at Jesus as the gospels have introduced him. Using some of the information and techniques of 'Inside Christmas' we look afresh at the 4 Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and discover Jesus as they present him. All welcome, if you have faith, want faith, or have no faith. Led by our Minister Rev Rob Hilton.

**You may wish to visit one of our Special Christmas Worship Services:**

We lead the Carol Singing at Ilkley Rugby Club 12.15pm, Sunday 13th Dec

Candlelit Carol Service 6pm Sunday 20th Dec

Christingles for all the family 4pm Christmas Eve

Midnight Christmas Communion 11.30 pm Christmas Eve

Christmas Morning Worship for all the Family 10am Christmas Day

For all the rest of Christchurch's Worship, Cafe, and Children's Soft Play facilities, see [www.christchurchilkley.org.uk](http://www.christchurchilkley.org.uk)