

LUKE 1.1-4 & 2.1-2: THE TRUTH OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY

[Chelmsford: Christmas Day 2011]

Years ago, when I was a teenager, I had a buddy called Nick Page. Nick and I once went up to the Savoy Theatre with a full set of Austrian cowbells, when instead of shouting encore after a Gilbert & Sullivan performance, we rang our bells. I don't think we made ourselves popular that night

Nick had done all sorts of things since.

He has been a radio DJ. He has also produced *The Scroll*, a tabloid Bible written in the style of the Sun newspaper.

In an exclusive scoop *The Scroll* claims to have obtained a copy of the census form which subjects of the Roman empire had to fill in.

Along with the usual questions like age & occupation, it contains such questions as:

What do you think of the Roman Empire?

Excellent? Poor? OK for a dictatorship? Up the revolution!

Any idea who the present emperor is?

Tiberius? Nero? Claudius? That Bald Bloke? Another nutter?

Where would you like us to invade next?

Britannia? Hispania? Hibernia? Diptheria? Hypothermia? or Ruislip?

The question arises: was Luke almost as imaginative as the editor of *The Scroll* when he wrote in his Gospel: "**At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria**" (2.1-2)?

Can we trust Luke to have told the truth?

Is the Christmas story rooted in historical reality - or is it just a fairy-tale?

At this point let me refer you to my blog. Yep – I am at last getting ‘with it’!

With the help of Dominic Rodger I now produce a weekly blog

This week I ask the question: *Is Christmas a fantasy?*

I begin: The dictionary defines fancy as "*Delusion, unfounded belief; faculty of calling up things not present, of inventing imagery*"; fantastic is defined as "*extravagantly fanciful*"; while fantasy is a "*fantastical design; whimsical speculation*".

Is the Christmas story in the same category – is the Christmas story a fantasy?

Honesty compels me to admit that there is much fantasy involved in our Christmas celebrations. Children's nativity plays are often exercises in imagination.

Likewise many carols that we sing give considerable room for poetic license.

Take the wise men, for instance. Down through the centuries there has been much speculation about their identity: we talk of the three kings, and even give them names, but there is no foundation for this.

Even the very date of Christmas is probably an exercise in fantasy

Not surprisingly some conclude that the Christmas story as a whole is a fantasy - an invention of the imagination, which has nothing to do with truth. In this respect it is unhelpful that Christmas time is also the season of pantomimes; for the story of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus runs the risk of becoming the ultimate pantomime.

Yet when we look at the Gospel accounts, we discover that the evangelists themselves were writing serious stuff. They were not in the business of creating fairy stories: rather they were telling it how it was.

Significantly Luke who tells us most about the Christmas story, is the Gospel writer who makes it most clear that he has been engaged in proper historical research.

He begins his account of the life of Jesus with these words: "**Many people have done their best to write a report of the things that have taken place among us. They wrote what we have been told by those who saw these things from the beginning and who proclaimed the message. And so, your Excellency, because I have carefully studied all these matters from their beginning, I thought it would be good to write an orderly account for you. I do this so that you will know the full truth about everything you have been taught**" (Luke 1.1-4).

Luke's introduction to his Gospel is typical of the introductions used by ancient historians: e.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a famous Greek historian who died in 7BC, wrote a 20 volume history of Rome up until the First Punic War, began his magnum opus by stating: "*Before beginning to write I gathered information, partly from the lips of the most learned men with whom I came into contact, and partly from histories written by the Romans of whom they spoke with praise*"

Luke in turn consciously set out to be a historian. Yes, he was also concerned to share the good news of Jesus. In one sense his Gospel was propaganda – but not in the style of Josef Goebbels. Luke may not have been impartial – but then, is there ever such a thing as an impartial historian. Every historian writes within a personal context. But this does not mean that they set out to pervert the truth. Certainly Luke was not in the business of compromising truth

He was, as he said in his introduction, concerned with "**the full truth**" (1.4). He wanted to tell the story of Jesus as it was. And what was true of his story of Jesus, was true not least of the nativity story.

He makes it clear that his Gospel is based on trustworthy traditions and states that the material he uses was based on the evidence of 'eyewitnesses' – "**those who saw these things**" (1.2).

Given the personal nature of some of the accounts surrounding the birth of Jesus, the traditions enshrined in Luke's birth narrative must ultimately be attributable to Mary herself.

Luke's account of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus is different in many respects from Matthew's account – Luke, for instance, tells of the shepherds and the angels, whereas Matthew tells of the wise men and the star. Indeed, Luke's account of the story of Jesus is different from Matthew's – as indeed it is different from that of Mark and John.

Some have found the differences between the Gospels disturbing and as a result have sought to 'harmonise' the four accounts into one. However, the differences between the Gospels are for the most part easily accountable – in part these differences are present because of the different situations which the Gospel writers are addressing; and in part, as is the case of the birth narratives in particular, because of their differing sources.

In fact the differences are an indication of the underlying truthfulness of the story. In this respect we can draw a parallel to modern newspapers, where the same story can receive very different coverage – in part because of the readership being addressed, but also in part because of the different sources available to the reporters.

The fact is that the Christmas story is not a fantasy – it is not a fairy tale.. This doesn't mean that the Christmas story is an ordinary straightforward historical event.

There is nothing ordinary or straightforward about God entering the world in human form.

The most staggering words ever penned are those found in the prologue to John's Gospel. There John begins: "**In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God and the Word was God.... The word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us.... God's Son has made the Father known**" (John 1.1,14, 18).

I freely confess: it does seem fantastic. And yet, it is not fantasy.

Read the Gospels and see if there is any other explanation for the life Jesus lived, other than the fact that he was and is the Son of God.

At Christmas we celebrate not a fantasy, but a reality: the reality of God's love for us in Jesus; the reality of love which took human form; the reality of a love which is for you and for me today.

Listen again to John: "**He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him. Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God's children**" (John 1.11).

Let me encourage you to read the Gospels and discover the truth of the Jesus story.