

Matthew 1.18–25

Christmas is not a fairy tale

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Sunday 18 December 2016

Fairy Tales

It's something we all know from listening to stories growing up: princes and princesses live in castles. I expect if I asked you to imagine a castle fit for a princess, you would think of something like the Disney castle, with soaring towers and roaring fires.

When Prince George and Princess Charlotte were born, they received the best medical treatment money can buy, in the Lindo Wing of St Mary's Hospital, London. All the rooms there have private bathrooms, satellite TV, free wi-fi, and chefs who cook your food to order, and optional afternoon tea for you to share with visiting family members.

The visiting wise men thought that Jesus – born to be the King – would be found in the first-century equivalent of that. They went to the palace, the most comfortable, most expensive, most lavish place in all Israel.

But Jesus wasn't there.

When Jesus was born, there was no Disney castle, no privacy, there no chefs cooking Mary whatever she wanted. There was no epidural, no C-section, no bed: Mary had to lay Jesus in an animals' feeding trough. Instead of afternoon tea with the family, a bunch of smelly shepherds arrived from the hills, to crowd into the already crowded room. And as for Joseph? Mary was his wife, but Jesus wasn't his son.

Christmas is not a fairy tale.

2016

For months now, my Facebook News Feed has been full of people slagging off 2016. I can see why: it began with the deaths of some much-loved celebrities: from Alan Rickman to David Bowie, Paul Daniels, Victoria Wood, and more. 2016 continued with political earthquakes, from Brexit to Donald Trump. And through all that the situation in Syria has got worse, and worse.

If 2016 were a fairy tale, it would need an *extremely* 'happily ever after' to make up for the rest of the story. For many people, the fresh start of 2017 can't come soon enough. (Of course, if you're Andy Murray, 2016 has been a *very* good year!)

God with us

When things are difficult, when we face turbulent times, out there in the world, or closer to home, among our family and friends, often people ask the question, ‘Why, God, why? Why did you let this or that awful thing happen?’

The problem with asking that question is that God’s answer is rather unsatisfying: ‘You can’t understand, but one day you will.’ I don’t know about you, but that isn’t the answer I *want* to here.

But that’s because, ‘Why?’ is the wrong question.

If we ask a slightly different question: ‘*Where* were you God? *Where* were you when this or that awful thing happened?’ then we get a much more satisfying answer. And the answer to that question is part of the true meaning of Christmas.

‘Where are you God?’

We heard the answer to that question in the last reading. The angel spoke to Joseph, to reassure him that Mary hadn’t been sleeping around, but the child was from God – she was still a virgin, fulfilling an ancient prophecy: **‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’** (23) – *from Isaiah 7.14.*

That name, **Immanuel**, means ‘**God with us**’. In Jesus, God came to live with us, as one of us.

Christmas is not a fairy tale: Jesus wasn’t born like royalty, in a private hospital with servants waiting on him. He was born, like everyone else at the time, at home with his parents. He was born into an ordinary family: **God with us**.

The answer to the question, ‘Where is God?’ is quite simple. He is with us. Jesus knows what it’s like to be hungry, sad, happy, lonely. Jesus knows what it’s like to be betrayed, let down by his closest friends. Jesus knows the feel of the wind on his face, the beauty of a mountain top, the satisfaction of a hard day’s work. Jesus knows what it’s like to feel pain and face death – his own and that of loved ones – he knows what it’s like to *be* one of us, because he *is* one of us.

Jesus is human, like you and me, with one important difference: he is *also* God. Somehow, in Jesus God became a man. Somehow, in Jesus God made his home with us – not to enjoy the view, but because we needed him to.

God saves

We don't normally use the name **Immanuel**, because we use his other name: Jesus. Immanuel means **God with us**; Jesus means **God saves**, and the angel gave him that name, '**because,**' he said, '**he will save his people from their sins**' (21).

You see, 2016 is a symptom. 2016 is an example of how messed-up the world is. And for that, all people together, everywhere and everywhen, are responsible. We have all of us taken the wonderful gift of life from God, and acted as though we earned it: instead of living it God's way, as we were made to, we all follow our own path. This is what the Bible calls 'sin'. Sin is much more serious than taking an extra chocolate from the tree, or having an extra mince pie. Every human being who has ever lived suffers from the same problem: the human heart, damaged and broken by sin. Every human being, that is, except one – Jesus.

2016 is a symptom of that problem – and so unfortunately 2017 isn't the cure. The world is not going to get any better all by itself, because *we* are the problem; we can't fix it by ourselves.

But thankfully, we don't have to. Christmas is not a fairy tale – instead it is *very* good news.

Jesus wasn't born to enjoy the view: he was born to save us from the mess we've gotten ourselves into. Jesus was born to give *everyone*, no matter when or where *they* were born, the chance of a fresh start, a new life. We can't fix ourselves, but in Jesus we can find the only way to true, abundant and everlasting life.

That life isn't magic or make-believe: Christmas is not a fairy tale. It cost Jesus everything – his very life – to win us that new life.

The cost to us, is what Elton John described as the 'hardest word': sorry. It won't cost you a penny, but it will cost your pride. We say 'sorry' to God for ignoring him, for living as though he doesn't exist, for living as though we know best.

And *when* we say sorry, we find that God isn't sullen or grumpy, but delighted, ready and willing to forgive us completely, and welcome us home. We find God, our true and perfect Father, is longing to run to us, throw his arms around us and say, 'Welcome home, my child.' And that is the best present anyone could receive.

So, Christmas begins with, and is really all about, Christ: as he was born to his **earthly** family 2000 years ago, so may we join our **heavenly** family this Christmas, through God's only Son, who is called **Immanuel** – **God with us** – and **Jesus** – God saves.