



By now most of us will have started to receive the annual steady flow of Christmas cards. Sometimes they come with a recent family picture, capturing in a moment the family looking at its best. The perfect family portrait omits details like the bribery to get everyone together: it tells the ideal story, but it is never the full story of the day or the year.

The Christmas 'Nativity Scene' is the same: the Holy family, the shepherds kneeling; the wise men with their gifts: a perfect picture of wonder and intimacy: a mother soothing a new-born and hope for the world. But it doesn't tell of Mary and Joseph's desperate search for somewhere to stay, or of the flight for their lives to Egypt, or of the hygiene implications of delivering a baby in a barn. An incomplete picture can leave the lonely feeling excluded and the insecure even more vulnerable, because it invites us to compare ourselves with an unattainable ideal. But Christmas is precisely for those without the perfect picture. Consider:

### Mary and Joseph

- As a God-fearing Jew, Joseph's reaction to Mary's pregnancy was to divorce her 'quietly.' The threat of divorce is as alive in the Christmas story as it is in many modern families this Christmas. It doesn't fit with the perfect Christmas picture, but it is so real for so many families and it must be acknowledged.
- By the time they had reached Bethlehem, Joseph had been reassured by his own angelic experience, but his family can't have been convinced. None of Joseph's family members would offer them a room in spite of Mary's condition and none of them came to visit the Mother and new Baby. Imagine Mary's loneliness!
- Family upheaval is an integral part of the first Christmas story, as it is so often in modern families.

### The Shepherds

- The shepherds' lonely job on the hills kept them separate from society. They were barred from temple worship because their work made them 'unclean' and they were regarded as too untrustworthy to testify in court.
- Nevertheless, God came first of all to the shepherds with the message of Jesus' birth, thus stating that the birth of His Son is for the dreadfully lonely, the poor and misunderstood and the socially or religiously isolated.
- Throughout His ministry and on the cross, Jesus is reaching out to those who feel they are on the outside.

### The Magi

- These were the polar opposite of the shepherds: they were both trusted advisors and religious leaders and were probably king makers, performing a role similar to that of the Archbishop of Canterbury at coronations. In asking 'Where is the One born King of the Jews?' they caused geo-political and religious anxiety. The Romans had given Herod that title: the Magi were implying someone else had an authentic claim to the throne
- We too live in uncertain times. Like the Magi, when we find Jesus, we too must worship Him – Emmanuel, God with us. When we think about the very real drama of the Nativity scene, when we engage with its real message, we can see how the Christmas story speaks to us, whoever and however and wherever we are.

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### **Questions and thoughts for discussion:**

1. *Can we pray we all do the loving thing in the midst of the relational dynamics we find ourselves in this Christmas?*
2. *Can we live assured that Jesus' welcome to all transcends social or institutional boundaries? His grace is for all. How do we make this a reality in our church life?*
3. *The shepherds and the Magi came from very different backgrounds and ours might be different again. We can come to Him in our own way and with our particular questions to find out how to shape our lives around the Prince of Peace.*
4. *Remember the difference between the pictures of Maisie the puppy and the reality in the house?! Christmas, too, is never like a static picture. It is dynamic, it is alive: O Come, O Come Emmanuel.*