

## “A CHRISTMAS YOU CAN BELIEVE IN”

*Luke 2:1-7*

Well, it's that time of year again – the time when there is a raft of articles in magazines and newspapers, documentaries on television, news stories about the confusion that has been caused, and grumpy old vicars, and all that kind of thing. It's the time of year when Christmas is debunked and we are told that most of what we celebrate and remember during the festive season is a load of old hokum. Those of you who take *Christianity* magazine will have read David Instone-Brewer's article just this month about how there wasn't an actual stable in Bethlehem and the town wasn't full of crowds – you get the drift. And somewhere a well-meaning priest will have told a group of children that there's no such person as Santa Claus.

Year by year, we are told that Jesus wasn't born in December, that he wasn't born in a stable, that we can't really be sure about the Wise Men – apart from that there weren't actually three of them – there weren't animals worshipping the baby Jesus, that he did actually do a bit of crying, despite what the carols say. And so on and so on. Most of that, of course, is true. Pretty well all the traditions we have allowed to encrust the Christmas story like barnacles on a boat's bottom have no real basis in reality.

So my text today is taken from a book that many people in our area will have read more of than the Bible over the past couple of weeks – the Lidl Christmas Offers book, which was probably thrust through your letterbox some time in September. The words I'm referring to were emblazoned across the front page – “*Big on a Christmas you can believe in*”.

I suspect that the marketing department of the Teutonic traders weren't really expecting those words to take us in the direction I'm going to go, but there is a pointer in them towards what it is actually all about – “*a Christmas you can believe in*”. That Christmas isn't about a stable, or snowy scenes, or singing sheep and carolling cows, or three wise men dressed for a party – or even frozen turkey and packs of party food. Those things don't matter and they're not the things to believe in anyway.

We can peel away the layers of tradition and myth that have gathered around the biblical story without too much difficulty. There was a lot of pagan stuff in the background anyway when the newly minted Christian faith took over – or redeemed – all the ancient conventions that went with the mid-winter festival. That's probably the reason we celebrate Christmas in December: it is unlikely, according to most scholars, that it happened in the middle of winter – so out goes all the stuff about snow and all that kind of thing.

And then there were various bits of the story that were added over the centuries, bringing in local superstitions and attempts to embellish the story with tales of worshipping animals and a baby Jesus who never cried, and Joseph picking cherries, and all kinds of other legends. And the Victorians almost drowned

the whole thing with gallons of festive cheer that has no basis in fact or theology – or anything else for that matter – before advertisers and movie makers used their mass market appeal to populate the season with cheery, red-coated Father Christmases, flying reindeer and angels, and enough sugary sentiment to bury the real story for good and all, it seems.

Yes, it makes it all fun and gives us an excuse to let our hair down for a couple of days – and I'm all for that, as long as we see it for what it is. But strip away all those centuries of extra accretions, look at the Bible story – which is, after all, all that we really have to go on – and you discover that what does matter is that Christmas is about God breaking into our world in the person of Jesus and making a difference, bringing hope and transformation to a world that had become spoiled and hopeless due to the presence of evil.

Most of the things I've mentioned can easily be de-bunked and people feel that if you take all that away there's nothing of Christmas left to believe in. The point, though, is that if you strip all that away, what you are left with is actually "*a Christmas you **can** believe in*" – which is what the church is "*Big on*" every year (not just this year, like German supermarkets). There is, indeed, an awful lot of what we celebrate as Christmas that you can't believe in, really, but at the heart is the real story you can – you must – believe in.

When Jesus was born as a baby in Bethlehem around 2000 years ago, it signalled a turning point in history. In the Gospels, Luke particularly goes to a lot of trouble to set this event in a real location and at a verifiable time in history. Jesus was born – no doubt about that. And he was born because God wanted men and women everywhere and through all time to be able to relate to him again, not as some remote deity always spitting thunderbolts and smiting people, visiting earth from time to time to seduce some unwitting young maiden, like the gods of the pagans were always said to be doing, but as a person, as one of us, as a human being who was fragile and vulnerable and knew what suffering was all about. God wanted us to know that he loves us and that he wants us to love him, too. That's what he'd wanted all along, ever since he created us as part of this amazing world. And Jesus came to make all that possible.

That's the bit of Christmas you can believe in. You can believe in it because of the witness of millions of men and women over the centuries who have discovered it's made a difference to them. You can believe in it because it can make a real difference in your life. You can believe in it because it won't all fade away after January 6<sup>th</sup>, because it's not just some advertising ploy, because it's not based on some pagan myth that wasn't true in the first place. You can believe in it because Christians are "*Big on it*" because we know it's made a real difference to us. This Christmas check it out, if you haven't already done so, and dare to believe that God loves you too. And there's something for you to talk about to the check-out operator in Lidl, as well.