

# Mudiad Addysg Gristnogol Cymru Christian Education Movement Wales

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## *R.E. Ideas*

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# CHRISTMAS AND CREATION

The work of the last two terms has suggested that one of the worthwhile questions to ask about a story is, "What message, or idea, was the writer or speaker trying to convey?" It may be a moral teaching, like the story of the Good Samaritan, a personal challenge, like Jesus' to Simon the Pharisee or Nathan's to David the King, or a message of reassurance, like Cinderella and the other stories which end with ". . . and they lived happily ever after".

This is not to say that questions about the literal truth of a story are worthless or irrelevant, but such questions can, on occasion, divide a class of students into those who believe that "it" happened, and those who do not believe. I have not found this kind of division helpful, for several reasons. Pupils may find themselves pushed into assertions of belief or unbelief when it would be educationally better for the question to be left open. Pupils may feel themselves pushed, by parental or by peer pressure, into "opinions" which they do not really hold, or even perhaps understand, and the current popularity of opinion polls may lead a class to feel that something meaningful can be achieved by counting the numbers of "believers" as against "unbelievers".

Let me illustrate my point by reference to two stories in respect of which even KS1 children are aware that issues of belief and unbelief arise. Space precludes detailed consideration of the second of these.

### THE CHRISTMAS STORY

I choose to consider this in the summer term issue of *RE Ideas* in the hope of avoiding the overload that sometimes oppresses us, as teachers of RE, soon after November 5<sup>th</sup> has passed! An enormous amount of activity, in secondary as well as in primary schools, is devoted to the celebration of Christmas - with proper respect and reference also to Divali and to Hanukkah in many schools - but in my experience much of the Christmas activity cannot be regarded in any strict sense as "religious education".

## Luke



Luke's account includes visits of angels, the decree from Caesar Augustus that causes Joseph and Mary to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the lack of a place in the inn, the birth and the laying of the baby in the manger, the appearance of the angel to the shepherds with the message of the birth of "a Saviour, Christ the Lord" and their visit to the manger telling of that vision. Mary "ponders these things in her heart" and the shepherds return "glorifying and praising God". In this story God speaks to people through angels.

What ideas about Jesus are being stressed by Luke when he records

- the lack of a place in the inn?
- that it is some shepherds who are told by the angel about the birth?
- the title "Christ, the Lord"?
- that Mary "kept all these things"?
- that Joseph was descended from David, Abraham and Adam?

How important were those ideas for the first readers of the Gospel?

Do you think that they are still important to Christians today?

Have they value for people who are not Christians?

The question whether these stories still have value for people today is worth discussion, since it does not lend itself to simplistic yes and no answers "It might have value for people who ...".

The fact that Matthew and Luke are stressing different aspects of Jesus' personality does not imply that the one is right and the other wrong. If we asked three different people for a description of the personality of any pupil in our class might we not acquire three quite different answers - and all three of them true - if they came from the child's mother, next door neighbour, and class teacher?

In that most Christmas presentations combine the two stories, together with a mass of later legendary material, it might be appropriate for a school RE scheme of work to specify that Year 4, say, should be presented with the Matthew story and Year 6 with Luke's. Similarly in the secondary school Year 7 could look again at Matthew and Year 9 at Luke.

If we can encourage students to identify these two principal sources of the story and the aspects of Christian belief about Jesus which they embody they may then be able also to consider what messages are intended by other presentations of the Christmas story - both conventional and unconventional.

I suggest, therefore, that we should find place in our RE syllabuses for a critical look, separately, at the Christmas story as recorded by Matthew and by Luke. The starting point, each time, should be the acknowledgement of the fact that the earliest New Testament writers, Paul and Mark, make no reference at all to the birth of Jesus and neither does the fourth gospel. The only sources are Matthew and Luke - and some later legends from "apocryphal gospels" which form no part of any Agreed Syllabus, and do not merit consideration.

Before looking at the two gospels separately it is valuable to note the few key points common to both -

- i that Jesus' mother was called Mary
- ii that Mary was pregnant with Jesus before she married Joseph and that the pregnancy was brought about by the Holy Spirit
- iii that Joseph was descended from David the King
- iv that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the King, i.e. Herod the Great who ruled in Jerusalem from 37 BC till 4 BC
- v that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

The fact that ii, iii and v above are presented as fulfilment of OT prophecy seldom, if ever, arises when the story is discussed in the secondary school, at least in my experience. If it were to arise I suggest that it would be proper to ask "Why do you think that the writings of prophets hundreds of years earlier were important to the writer and to his readers? Do you think that they are important to Christians today?"

### Matthew

Matthew's account includes the story of the star seen by the wise men from the East, of their visit to Herod the king, of Herod's request to his priests and scribes "where the Christ was to be born", of the wise men's arrival at the place where the child was and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, of Herod's massacre of the baby boys and of Joseph and Mary's flight to Egypt. In this story God speaks to people in their dreams.

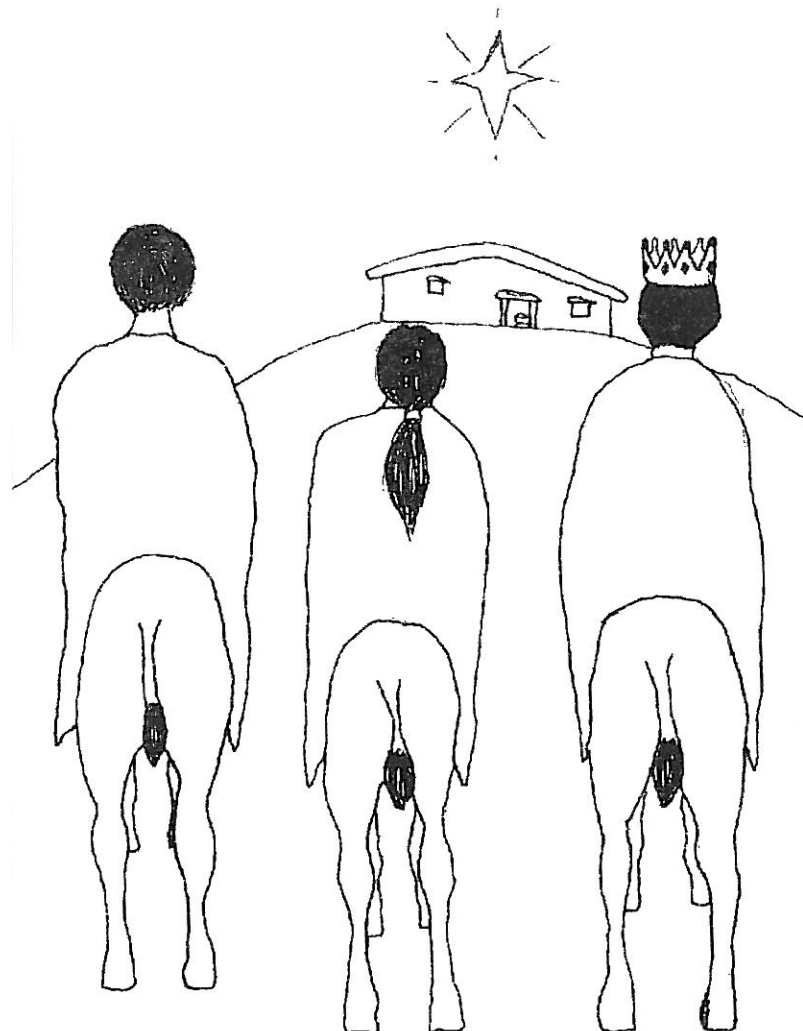
I suggest that a profitable approach could centre upon the question - "What ideas about Jesus is Matthew trying to convey when he writes about

- the star and the wise men from the East?
- King Herod's interest in the new baby?
- the fact that Joseph was descended from David and from Abraham?
- the family having to flee to Egypt?

How important were those ideas for the first readers of the Gospel?

Do you think that they are still important to Christians today?

Have they value for people who are not Christians?



I have found class response to this approach to be very variable, partly perhaps on account of the timetable disruption which in many schools seems an inevitable feature of the weeks before Christmas. Students who grasp the ideas, however, often enjoy discussion of some of the levels of meaning of the Father Christmas story, or the older "Santa Claus", or of the Rudolph or White Christmas or the current pop song version. Nearly all pupils can see the obvious commercial messages and the shallow sentimentality of much that is presented.

### **THE CREATION STORY (Gen I- II.3)**

The most sensible starting point, it seems to me, is to acknowledge at the outset that many Christians believe the seven days of the story to be symbolic of periods of time but that there are other Christians who take the story as being literally true.

What ideas are being put forward by the writer? Do these include

- that the world was **created**, i.e. it did not come into being by chance?
- that the world has pattern and order?
- that the world was inherently good?
- that human beings are the highest form of creation?
- that human beings have "dominion" over every living thing?
- that the seventh day should be a day of rest?

These are ideas that can encourage useful discussions - useful because they will not necessarily split along predictable lines - and because they may engage students' interest in green and environmental issues. Above all, this approach to Biblical material requires students to move beyond the flat response, "I don't believe that", to consideration of issues of principle.

**CEMW** is grateful to Hywel Evans for preparing the 2000-2001 issues of *RE Ideas*. Future editions of *RE Ideas* will seek to provide a balance of suitable material for use in teaching Key Stages 1, 2 and 3.

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