

Notes

Please note that this document contains 3 different versions of the "Exploring the Word" worksheet. Each version contains the same Gospel texts, Reflection and questions, but with a different configuration of "alternative views". The suggested activities are applicable to a variety of age ranges. Some activities may not be suitable in all circumstances.

Activities

- Gather a collection of nativity images and identify those elements that appear in the Matthew infancy narrative, those that appear in the Luke narrative and those that do not appear in either.
- Carefully read the two different infancy narratives from Luke and Matthew and compile a list of comparisons and contrasts.
- Locate on a map the towns of Nazareth and Bethlehem. How difficult would that journey have been for Joseph and Mary to undertake?
- Create a modern day infancy narrative. What circumstances might Jesus be born into today? Where would he be born? Who would be the witnesses to his birth? Who might be excited / upset by news of his birth?

Gospel Journal

Why might the Luke gospel go into detail about the Roman officials at the time of the census?

What is significant about Joseph being 'of David's House and line'?

Why do you think the two infancy stories have been commonly combined into one?

How could the two different infancy stories be better highlighted and respected?



Gospel Lk 2:1-14

Caesar Augustus issued a decree for a census of the whole world to be taken. This census – the first – took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to his own town to be registered. So Joseph set out from the town of Nazareth in Galilee and travelled up to Judaea, to the town of David called Bethlehem, since he was of David's House and line, in order to be registered together with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to a son, her first-born. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn. In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night.

The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing:

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Reflection

If you were to give just a cursory glance at a collection of 'religious' Christmas cards, or even the local nativity scene, you would undoubtedly see a varied assortment of shepherds, wise men, livestock and angels gathered around the holy family in a timber structure of some sort. Even the most casual reading of Luke's account of the birth of Christ would reveal that most of the nativity figurines are missing! Our retelling of the birth of Christ tends to be an amalgamation of the Luke and Matthew versions with a bit of creative tradition thrown in for good measure.

The Luke account of the nativity carries a very specific theology that runs throughout the rest of that gospel. It is a theology that places the outcast and downtrodden at the centre of Jesus' mission. In this account, Jesus is born outside the town because there is no room for Joseph and Mary within the safety of the inn. Like those he will minister to later in life, Jesus is born 'on the edge' – even outside the boundaries. Rather than the impressive 'Wise Men' of the Matthew infancy account, the witnesses to Jesus' birth in the Luke account are lowly shepherds. Unlike the somewhat romantic notion we may have of shepherds, in Jesus' time they were regarded as little better than thieves and cut-throats. All they could be trusted to do was tend sheep outside of townships and away from 'civilised' society. They held one of the lowest positions in Jewish society. The gospel writer's choice of these witnesses to the birth of Jesus is a very deliberate one that clearly announces the purpose and direction of Jesus' mission.

Gospel Focus

A Great Census?

The decree of a census for the whole Roman world appears to be an unlikely event. A census of people in local regions was not unusual but a census that required people to return to their place of birth carries no historical validity. The gospel writer correctly places Mary and Joseph in their home town of Nazareth but prophecy indicated the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The author needed an excuse for Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem. We must remember that the gospels are not to be read as historical accounts but rather as faith accounts of the life of Jesus.

Scriptural Context

Matthew v Luke

Ask a child (or even most adults) to describe the scene at the birth of Jesus and you will hear a confused combination of the two scriptural accounts with several non-scriptural additions. It is a shame that the two versions have merged into one as each is deserving of its own integrity. The Matthew account emphasises Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy and has Wise Men as the witnesses to his birth in a house. It is from Luke that we have the much humbler birth in a manger witnessed by the lowly shepherds. Each has something different and distinct to say about Jesus and his mission.

- Q. *Why might the Luke gospel go into detail about the Roman officials at the time of the census?*
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Historical Context

The Nativity scene

St Francis of Assisi is credited with setting up the first nativity scene and thus establishing a tradition that is carried on today in homes, churches and public spaces in Christian communities everywhere. In 1223, in the town of Greccio he created a life size tableau of the nativity scene to heighten the awareness of the celebration of the birth of Christ. It included statues of the holy family and a live ox and donkey. The inclusion of the livestock has no scriptural support and it is to Francis that we owe the array of sheep, oxen and donkeys that have become standard inclusions in our nativity scenes.

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