

Keeping Christmas real

In the school office, the radio is often on. We noticed that from 1st December the programming changed and we were subjected to a constant stream of 'Christmas songs'. The novelty of this soon wears thin, and like lots of aspects of modern life we become jaded. The other thing that we noticed is that the lyrics rarely made reference to the true meaning of Christmas. A stealthy 'secularisation' of Christmas has occurred over the past thirty years; and many songs, cards and films make reference to reindeers, The North Pole, snowmen, robins and roast turkey. Only one from this list has the vaguest reference to Christianity. Do you know which one? Answer is at the end of this blog.*

It is important that we are able to talk with knowledge to our children about the real Christmas story, The Nativity of the Lord. Modern media, and in particular the internet, is extremely good at generalising and diluting the message.

Over Christmas it might be useful for you to try these quiz questions with your children. The answers – drawn from our Gospels – are surprising, even to adults.

1 How many Nativity stories are there?

TWO. St Mark's Gospel starts with the story of John the Baptist so does not mention Christ's birth. St John's Gospel starts with the poetic reference to The Word and the arrival of John, sent by God.

St Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus and describes the visit of the Magi and the flight into Egypt. St Luke describes the census and the wonder of the shepherds. There is very little detail common to both of these Gospels, and our Nativity Story is a blend of the two.

2 How many Kings visited Jesus?

We do not know. The misconception that there were 'Three Kings' comes from St Matthew, who described 'some wise men' but details three gifts. As there were three gifts, people assume there were three men. The Eastern Churches maintain that there were twelve visitors, although this is not confirmed in Western Scripture.

3 Where was Jesus born?

Probably in a house – not a stable. St Matthew describes the Magi 'going into the house.' St Luke is where the assumption comes that Christ was born in a stable as it describes Mary and how she 'laid him in a manger because there was no room at the inn.' There is no direct reference to a stable. A manger is a cattle trough. Many homes in the First Century had a 'downstairs' area for cattle, and people lived in a raised area above.

4 When was Jesus born?

Not Zero AD – and not 25th December. Nobody knows the day. It is not recorded in Scripture. The early Church placed Christmas in December because that is when non-Christians (pagans) celebrated a winter festival called Yule.

St Matthew says 'in the reign of King Herod' (5 or 4 BC)

St Luke says 'in the reign of Caesar Augustus' (30 BC to 14 AD) and 'while Quirinius was Governor of Syria' (about 8 – 6 BC).

There is a whole school of Christian debate about the numbering of our years, and no

consensus. The way we count our years (AD) was invented by Dionysius Exiguus in the year 525AD.

It is important that our children are aware of the truths of the Nativity, and can also embrace the mythology that has grown up around it over the past twenty centuries. I hope that this Christmas you have the opportunity to talk your children about it and share the joy of the Good News.

*The Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) is the only one from the list with a vaguely Christian reference. It suggests that the 'red breast' (red feathers) came from the Robin burning himself near the fire that was lit to keep the baby Jesus warm. 'The Legend Of Robin Redbreast' is from A Christmas Stocking by Louise Betts Egan and tells the story. Another legend says that the robin's breast is red because of his association with Christ's death and crucifixion. When Jesus was on the road to Calvary it is said that a robin plucked a thorn from Christ's temple and a drop of Jesus' blood fell on the robin's chest, turning it red.