

The Christmas story is a political story [18 December, 2016](#) by [symonhill](#)

The New Testament opens with a story of conflict. It is a political conflict. By any standard, King Herod was a vicious ruler. Yet in Matthew's Gospel, he is frightened. He feels threatened – not by another ruler, not by an army, not by his masters in Rome. He is frightened of a baby.

Herod tries to fool a group of astrologers (not three kings) into passing on information about Jesus, but they are warned and outwit him. They proclaim Jesus, not Herod, to be king. In his desperation, Herod inflicts the unimaginable horror of a massacre of children. But Jesus survives. Mary, Joseph and Jesus become refugees in Egypt.

The story has been distinctly odd even before Herod appears. We have a Jewish couple who look set to break up when Mary becomes pregnant. But Joseph is told that Mary is pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Instead of feeling shame or outrage, he trusts her and goes through with the marriage. Social and family norms are overturned. No “traditional family values” here. Jesus had two fathers.

We are presented with contrasting images of kingship. We have the worldly kingship of Herod, rooted in wealth, violence, deceit and political manipulation. Against that, we have the child of an almost-single mother who becomes a refugee. As the child grows up, he mixes with the marginalised, sides with the poor and exemplifies active nonviolence.

Since the fourth century, when the Roman Empire domesticated Christianity, many churches have shown more affinity with the sort of power represented by Herod than with the upside-down kingship of Jesus.

Few elements of Christianity have been domesticated more thoroughly than Christmas.

Stories from Matthew and Luke have been welded together, mixed in with Pagan imagery and used as the sentimental background music to a festival of consumerism.

It is sometimes said that we are losing “the real meaning of Christmas”. I'm not sure that people in Victorian times or the Middle Ages were focused on the radical nature of Jesus' message any more than we are – at least not if they were listening at the pulpits of state-aligned churches.

The nativity stories are among the parts of the gospels that scholars tend to regard as least likely to be factually accurate. I accept that judgement. Nonetheless, I suggest that these stories mean a lot because they are a microcosm of the conflict and choice that is at the heart of the gospel. The nativity story is not merely a romantic myth but an invitation to take sides. Will we choose the kingdom of God or the powers of this world? The tyrant or the baby? One side has money and armies. The other has love and nonviolence. It's up to us.

The above article is adapted from a piece I wrote for the December 2016 issue of [Reform](#) magazine, in which I was one of four people asked to respond to the question, “What does Christmas mean to you?”. Many thanks to Steve Tomkins, editor of [Reform](#), for asking me to write this.

My latest book is [The Upside-Down Bible: What Jesus really said about money, sex and violence](#), published by Darton, Longman and Todd. It costs £9.99 in paperback or ebook.

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