

A Very Messy Christmas

Roger Dawson SJ

Are you ready to have the perfect Christmas? No? Don't worry, you are in good company. The first Christmas was hardly perfect, so maybe the mess and muddle of an imperfect Christmas is the best situation in which to welcome Jesus. *Thinking Faith's* Editor, Roger Dawson SJ, wishes you a very messy Christmas.

About ten years ago I volunteered to work over Christmas for the homeless charity Crisis at Christmas and one of my duties was to work in the clothing store. I remember meeting one woman who was very polite – she always said 'Please', and when she was given a jumper she would say, 'Oh, that's lovely, thank you very much'. She was grateful for more or less anything that I offered her. She was followed by a man whom frankly I found difficult. He just stated – demanded, even – what he wanted: 'Trousers.' When asked what size: '32 to 34'. When I came back with a pair of trousers, size 32-34, he said, 'Nah!' and sent me back to find a different pair. Once I had satisfied him with the trousers, next came, 'Shoes, size 9'. Back I came with size 9 shoes and he rolled his eyes. Try again. Sometimes he would even tut, and by the time we got to 'Coat' I was fairly irritated and annoyed. I found this man rude and ungrateful; he was difficult and hard to like. But this man was on the edge. He was an outsider, excluded from many of the things that we take for granted at Christmas and also in daily life.

It was to people like him, not people like me, to whom the Nativity was announced – the excluded and the marginalised, rather than the clerics. It is tempting to have some sentimental, Christmas-card view of the shepherds living in some rural idyll, but the reality is that they were despised. Their work brought them into frequent contact with blood and mess, so they were ritually unclean and unfit to participate in the religious celebrations; they were excluded



Photo by orangejon at flickr.com

from participation in Jewish life. And yet it is to these people that the birth of Jesus is announced.

'The story of the first Christmas is the story of a series of completely unplanned, messy events – a surprise pregnancy, an unexpected journey that's got to be made, a complete muddle over the hotel accommodation when you get there... Not exactly a perfect holiday.'

This was how Dr Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, described the first Christmas in a [Pause for Thought reflection](#) two years ago. He was making the point that each year most of us strive to have the Perfect Christmas: advertisers pile on the pressure, we get carried away with lists and budgets and plans; yet each year seems to bring the same panic and tensions.

But perhaps it does not have to be perfect. God does not say to us, 'Go and get yourself sorted out and then I'll come, then we will talk'. He comes to the world as it is – imperfect, frequently messy, often muddled. He chose disciples who were far from promising – slow on the uptake, unreliable and obtuse. Matthew gives us [Jesus's family tree](#) and it is one that most of us would keep quiet about: among the kings and prophets there are adulterers, prostitutes and murderers. This Jesus is someone who would have frequent contact with the blood and mess of human existence; indeed, his own life would end in blood and mess. This Jesus can handle chaos and confusion, and he seeks out those who are on the margins, excluded and despised.

So for those who feel like one of the outsiders, away from the mainstream and not part of the respectable crowd, there is a special place this Christmas. God shows us, 'Look, I am in the middle of this and if you would just relax I will help you. It does not have to be perfect. I came here to help you'. As soon as we recognise this, then we may enjoy Christmas a little more and we may find the love Jesus brings at work in

our messy, muddled lives; or, even better, we might bring that love into someone else's mess and muddle.

If an imperfect Christmas was good enough for Jesus, surely it is good enough for all of us.

Roger Dawson SJ is Editor of Thinking Faith.