



NATIVITY REFLECTIONS

*These questions for reflection and discussion invite adult groups to consider the characters in *The Nativity* and their own journey of faith with Christ.*

Have you ever struggled to trust the people you love? Or believe that God is for you? The characters in *The Nativity* all face struggles that will be familiar to most of us. The wonderful thing about the Bible is that its stories are also *our stories* and we can see ourselves in them. When we read the Bible or watch a great television dramatisation, we tend to identify with the characters. Thinking about where we are in the story can have a transformative effect, allowing us to engage more deeply with it.

The most important character in *The Nativity* is of course, Jesus – but he doesn't appear until the very final moments. The other characters are all on a journey of discovery about this long-awaited Messiah. This is particularly true of three characters who only appear briefly in the biblical text, but have full stories in the drama; Joseph [Matthew 1.18–25; Luke 2.1–6], one of the shepherds (his story imaginatively fleshed out in the character of Thomas) [Luke 2.8–19] and the Magi [Matthew 2.1–12]. Mary, who is at the centre of the story, is full of faith from the moment Gabriel appears to her [Luke 1.26–38], and seems to understand the significance of what is happening. These other three characters don't have it so easy – they all begin with different expectations about the Messiah, all struggle with doubt and confusion, but all end in the same place – clustered around the manger in worship.

The sceptic

Joseph is an endearing character in *The Nativity* – he's nervous, witty and clearly deeply in love with Mary. He also, like many of us, is naturally sceptical. He doesn't believe Mary's story, and is visibly wounded by her perceived betrayal. Even when an angel appears to him in a dream he says 'I want to believe', but isn't able to. Throughout the drama we see him struggling with something too extraordinary to process. He naturally reaches for the most plausible explanation – that Mary has cheated on him. Joseph's journey from doubt to faith is deeply personal and emotional – it is tied up with whether he can trust the woman he loves, and by extension whether he can trust God. It is only in the final moments that he makes the choice – to trust Mary and therefore to trust God. Many of us were first told about Jesus by someone who is close to us, and part of the process of coming to faith is choosing to trust their testimony.

Reflect and discuss: It might be helpful to read and consider Luke 1.46–55 as a backdrop to these questions. Do you find people who seem to have an easy faith in God inspiring or off-putting? How do you respond to the nativity story? Do you find it outlandish or trustworthy? A challenge or cause for wonder? Can you bring yourself to really trust God, as mind-stretching as the gospel seems?

Truth hunters

The Magi's journey to belief is a more intellectual one – particularly for Balthasar, played by Peter Capaldi. As they set out at the beginning of the drama on a quest for meaning and truth they have little idea what they will find. They puzzle together over the prophecies, reading and thinking their way towards faith. They use non-biblical phrases like 'a bridge between heaven and earth' to try and understand the mysterious concepts they are wrestling with. Melchior and Balthasar discuss their conception of God as a father who leaves his children to 'stand on their own two feet' but returns to help when they get into trouble. They eventually move to using the more explicit term 'Messiah' once they have had the Jewish prophecies explained to them, and in the final scene declare 'the arrival of God himself amongst us'.



These characters are easy to identify with for those who want to make sure that faith is reasonable and credible. They are motivated by a search for truth – they are astronomers and naturally curious about how the world works. Perhaps you sometimes find church too concerned with emotions, and are most scared of blind belief.

Reflect and discuss: Read Matthew 2.1–12. The Magi made every effort to understand what the Scriptures were saying. How important do you consider studying the Bible and using your intellect in our search for spiritual truth? Where are today's spiritual seekers and, if they are not necessarily in the places you might expect, how can we reach them?

Man on the margins

Thomas is a man living through hard times. He is wrestling with money worries- desperate to provide for his dependent family and frustrated by the high taxes demanded by the Romans. In these straightened times his suffering and disappointment is something many audience members will recognise.

Thomas's conception of the Messiah is someone who will come and sort out the unfair political and social structures he is living within. His belief in God is challenged by the injustice all around and God's seeming lack of care for his people. In one scene in the synagogue he cries out 'Where are you?' He comes to believe that God cares only for the elites and therefore he must take justice into his own hands. The assurance from Gabriel, later repeated by Mary, that Jesus has come for 'just such as you' is exactly what he needs to hear. Thomas's moving awe at the presence of the baby Jesus is caused by his growing belief that God is interested in the poor and disenfranchised and that the Messiah comes to subvert, not sustain the established order of the world.

Reflect and discuss: Do you ever worry about your circumstances and find it difficult to believe God really cares for you? How, if at all, do you see God interacting with human history? In what ways did Jesus overturn the established order? Is his behaviour a model we should follow as we engage with political and religious authorities? (You might like to consider passages such as Matthew 5.27–48, John 2.13–20, Matthew 12.1–13 or Luke 20.9–26 in answering these questions)

Where are you?

In this story we are offered the chance to identify with these three characters and through the story explore our own assumptions about who Jesus claims to be. Do you find it hard to trust God, to really believe that He is a good and faithful? Or perhaps you struggle to make it all add up intellectually? Or do you find yourself drawn to troubled Thomas, carrying the weight of the world until he realises God is really for him?

In this story we see how all three come to a peaceful belief in the Christ child who they encounter in a manger. Through their doubting, seeking, choosing and grieving, they move onwards towards the only one who can satisfy their questions.

Pray: Thank God that he meets us wherever we are on our own journey of faith. Ask him to draw you deeper into wonder, faith and then response, as your relationship with Christ is refreshed and strengthened. (You might find it helpful to draw on a passage like Ephesians 1.15–23 in your time of prayer)

Elizabeth Hunter is Director of Theos

