

a christmas miracle

Can a bunch of Aussie teenagers find the true meaning of Christmas

IT IS THE period after lunch. Eight-Green and their Christian Studies teacher have just read Luke 1:26-35.

'So you mean to tell me', says one, 'that if we found one of Jesus's hairs, right -'
'Yes...'

'...and we took it in for analysis, that he'd have the same DNA as his mother exactly?'

'Um, I don't know...' Nervous cough.

'So, did the Holy Spirit have sex with Mary?'

Huge guffaws from the class; blushing from the teacher...

'Well, just back up a bit. We'll get to that, sort of. First thing you've got to realize is that Nazareth is a very small place, not famous for anything much; one of those places that has more sheep than people.'

'What, a bit like New Zealand?'

'Hmm, well not exactly! But it wasn't the big smoke, that's for sure. It was the kind of town an angelic being might reasonably overlook if he wasn't going there on a mission. But angel Gabriel showed up there one day, and paid a visit to a young girl. Does anyone know how old Mary was?'

Blank stares.

'Well, she could have been as young as thirteen or fourteen: your age in other words. Hey, Laura, come and put that mobile phone on my desk, you can have it back at the end.'

Laura rolls her eyes, pouts; and puts the phone on the desk.

'As I was saying, she was not really anybody. There was nothing remarkable about her that we know of, either. All Luke tells us, anyway, is that she was virgin - which seems to us like a



little too much information - and thinking about her wedding to Joseph.'

'How did he know?'

'What?'

'That she was a virgin. That's what she said.'

'Yeah, my mum says that she was probably raped by a Roman soldier.'

'Or she could've had an affair with someone, couldn't she?'

'All I am saying is what Luke tells us here. She was getting married to Joseph, who had some royal blood, being a descendent of David and all that; but the royal family tree was a very long one with a very large number of branches, legitimate and otherwise. This was not going to be a royal wedding, that's for sure.'

'And what does the angel say to her? Can someone read it for me? Luke 1:30-33...'

Someone reads: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and

you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'

'Hang on, sir. Is an angel one of those things with wings?'

'Well we don't have pictures. An angel is a just a messenger - we don't know what they look like. But I don't think this guy was the local postman. Whatever he looked like he clearly made Mary a little afraid. Actually, whenever angels in the Bible appear, this is pretty much what they have to say to everybody!'

'But what's the message here? Mary, you are about to get pregnant with the baby of babies: a royal baby, no less, for people will call him 'son of the Most High', which was a title for a king of Israel. And he is going to sit on the throne of David, his father.'

'Ha, wait a minute sir: David isn't his father, is he? I mean it says something

about Joseph, but Jesus isn't Joseph's son, is he?'

'Oh, good point... hmm. Well, um, perhaps Mary and Joseph were cousins. That wouldn't be unusual, for cousins to get married back then.'

Disgusted looks, as teenagers think about marrying their cousins.

'Now, I love Mary's response here. She has what I call a polite concern for the technicalities when she says:

'Excuse me: aren't we forgetting something here? I am, you know, a virgin'. It's not like Mary doesn't know the facts of life or anything. If a child is going to be born, then, well...'

'...she needs to have sex with a man sir.'

'Well, yes. But Gabriel was getting to that bit. And he says:

Continued on S4

christmas 2001



christmas 2002



christmas 2003



christmas 2004



christmas 2005



christmas 2006



How about ...
a meaningful and lasting relationship!

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

THE BIBLE

MEET THE GOD WHO LOVES YOU

by Dominic Steele

THERE was an elderly lady who used to live across the road from me, and she would spend all day sitting on her porch out the front of her terrace, watching the street. As I used to walk home, most afternoons, I would just walk by, smile and say, "Hi".

But one Christmas morning, I got up early, and saw her sitting on the porch. You know how it is at Christmas time – everyone is a little more friendly. So I went across the road and started to talk to her, and wished her a Happy Christmas.

I asked her what her plans were for the day. She told me that she was spending the day on the porch. Her husband had died years ago, and she had only one child, a daughter. Fifteen years ago, she had a big argument with her daughter, and her daughter's parting words were: "Drop dead, Mum." Her daughter has never come back, yet the mum said she only lives two suburbs down the road, not more than five kilometres away. She told me she even has grandchildren she has never met. In fact, for that whole 15 years, the daughter has not spoken one word to her mother. And so, my elderly neighbour was spending another Christmas Day alone. It was such a tragic situation.

Most of us would think that the situation was unsatisfactory. Certainly the mother thought it was. But I think, if you spoke to the daughter, she might also say that it was unsatisfactory. We are meant for relationship with our parents.

As I continued the conversation with my neighbour, it sounded like a silly, stubborn fight that had got out of hand.

And that is what sometimes happens with God: we start a silly, stubborn fight, and then we think back, and wonder, "What was I on about?" But soon enough, we have become entrenched against him.

A book of the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles, in chapter 17, records Paul's speech to a bunch of sophisticated philosophers in Athens. The God Paul describes is creator, who is greater than all that he has made. God did not merely make the world, then collapse in retirement. God is intimately involved in caring for and running the world. He gives us everything – life and breath and everything else.

What about us? Well, Paul says we are God's children, and the loving God who made us, wants us to relate to him:

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men [people] would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

God wants to be involved in our lives and wants relationship with us. The God who made us, who loves us, is not



like Bette Midler's impression of God. Remember she sang: "God is watching us ... from a distance". God "is not far from each one of us". He is intimately involved in our lives. God wants and expects us to reach out for him and find him. It is what you and I were made for: to relate to our father, God.

Unfortunately, we have a problem. God is not like the grandmother on the porch. God loves us, but just the same, he will hold us accountable for the wrong way we have treated him:

In a nutshell, the most extraordinary thing is that through the death of Jesus, God was able to bring about justice. Wrong was punished. And, at the same

time, God was able to be merciful and welcome us home. How? Because Jesus was the perfect son of God, who always was in perfect relationship with his Father. He was the one who never deserved to be punished. He was the one who should never have died. And yet, Jesus died to take on himself the punishment that should have been directed at you, me, Hitler, the Queen, the American President, Sadaam Hussein, my neighbour, her daughter, and at everyone since the beginning of time.

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NUDGE FOR JESUS THIS CHRISTMAS

LUKE BEARDMORE, with shaved head and built as solid as a refrigerator, is aptly known as 'Nudge' by his mates. Luke says he is a 'Bra Boy', a close-knit group of young men in Maroubra. And this may already have readers of Sydney's tabloid newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, jumping to some false conclusions.

Luke says people have the wrong idea about the Bra Boys. They are just a group of friends who have a few things in common. Most grew up in the large public housing commission flats in Maroubra. They are fearless and athletic. And what binds them is a love of high adrenaline activities like surfing and Rugby League.

"We are just working class fellas who like surfing together," says Luke.

And Luke is a gun at both. He surfs open A grade in the local board riding competition and played 1st grade Rugby League for the Coogee club.

Like many other young blokes his age, Luke has had his problems with alcohol. But what really made him think more about God lately is that he has been 'pretty down'. One of his best mates has been diagnosed with brain cancer.

"I was really destroying myself," says Luke.

Luke has known fellow surfer Dannie Boyd, who is now a leader with Maroubra's Surfers' Church, since Luke was a kid. So one day last year when they ran into each other in the surf, they got talking about what



Luke was feeling. It's been a gradual process, but at the beginning of the year Luke came to a Surfers' Church meeting. Now he can't get enough God-talk.

"I wish we had a meeting every day," says Luke. "It gets you amped for life."

Luke explains that since he 'came to the Lord', God has been working in him, helping him to put his 'faith into action'.

This Christmas, Nudge will be actively celebrating Jesus' birthday for the first time as one of his followers.

"I've always believed in God but it wasn't showing in my actions," he says. "Reading the Word makes me want to be a doer."

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CHURCH MAKES SENSE, SAYS PAULA



PAULA DALLEY was surprised at first when she heard that her local Anglican church was running a body and spirituality day – with free massages and make-up workshops – in the lead up to Christmas. "I didn't think that church people would be into that sort of thing," she said. Although the day included a talk about Jesus, Paula found it 'quite different' from the churches she'd been to before. "I grew up going to a Catholic school – had very much the old structured way of doing things."

Christmas time had sparked Paula's return to church. But what did that child-born-in-a-manger story have to do with life in Australia today? Well, everything, Paula found out. The life, death and resurrection of that baby was the climax of the story of

God's love for the world. A God who really wants to have a relationship with us.

Paula encountered a community overflowing with God's love. "I really felt welcomed from the start," she says. "I walked in and didn't even expect to be noticed, but some of the women came up to speak to me directly afterwards. I even got invited to a barbecue the next day. That completely blew me away!"

She's been growing spiritually ever since. "I've definitely been changing," she says. "I have a much better understanding of what the Bible is talking about."

And Christmas has a new significance. "I've always loved Christmas, and always associated it with the birth of Christ, but it just means much more to me now. More than just the baby in the nativity scene."

Craig Schafer, Paula's pastor, can't think of a better time than Christmas to reconnect with church – or to try it out for the first time.

"It's a time of celebration," he said. "You're guaranteed to hear the basic message of why Jesus was born into the world in the first place, why it's important that you follow him wholeheartedly, and you're going to do it in the church's most welcoming environment all year."

Paula agrees. "Come along and have a look, because you don't know what you're missing out on. It's not what you might think – it's definitely not what I thought!"

FIND A CHURCH > www.sydneyanglicans.net

a christmas miracle

Continued from S1

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

Uproar.

When it finally dies down:

‘You have gotta be kidding, sir, haven’t you? I mean she just told this story later because she was ashamed of having sex before she should have.’

‘It sounds like she and the Holy Spirit got together.’

‘Yeah, and like I said before, was Jesus supposed to have the genes of one person only? Was he some kinda clone? We’ve only done biology for a term and even I know that.’

‘Yeah, where’s the proof, sir, for all this?’

‘Hang on a minute. One at a time! The first thing is, no, Luke is not telling us that Jesus is kinda the child of a god having sex with a human – the Greek gods used to do this, they’d come down and rape some poor maiden and produce Hercules, a half god-half man. Jesus wasn’t some kind of blend. That’s actually what the story is trying to say: here was a man who was completely a man, but also God himself.’

‘Second: well, I guess there isn’t any proof, really. And no, you can’t explain what the story is trying to tell us, not scientifically. It is impossible. Look at vs 37 – can someone read it for me?’

Someone reads: ‘For nothing will be

impossible with God’.

‘Actually, this is the punchline of the whole story. Virgins don’t have babies – it is completely impossible. I can’t explain how it happened, and if I could, that would take away from what the story is trying to tell us.’

‘And what’s that then?’

‘That God did it! That when Jesus came, this was something that God did! Not us! It’s a supernatural thing, not a natural one. No human decided that it was time for God’s son to come into the world and fix us up.’

‘So, you could say, sir, that the virgin birth is inconceivable?’

‘Woah, sir: before you start preaching at us again – why should we believe it then? Sounds like it is made up to me.’

‘Well, I can tell you that Luke is trustworthy in other places when we can check up on him, especially when he says that Jesus’s tomb was empty. And this makes sense of who Jesus was – it fits in with the story of his life. And Matthew tells the same story in his own way, too.’

‘But I have to admit it: that’s all I got. But you know, I am actually not worried about this. If I could explain it how it was possible, then it wouldn’t be a case of God doing the impossible would it?’

‘But sir – was sex such a bad thing that Jesus couldn’t have been made by having it? Isn’t this just more proof that the Bible doesn’t like sex?’

‘Some Christians have read it this way in

the past, but I think they are missing the point. It’s not about sex. Why Jesus came into the world this way is because humans couldn’t produce him for themselves. We weren’t going to make our own saviour: we weren’t going to evolve into Jesus, or somehow civilize ourselves into becoming like him by sending everybody to good schools. He isn’t just a superman if by that we think of one exactly like us but just better. He is actually a new kind of human. That’s not a perfect way of putting it, but it’ll do for today.’

‘We need a saviour, who is someone like one of us for sure; but he had to be a new start as well, someone not infected with sin like the rest of us. That’s why God chooses Mary who is such a nobody. Jesus couldn’t just be an alien, or one of the angels.’

‘You reckon every human being is sinful, right sir? I remember that from last term, you wouldn’t stop going on about it. So how does Jesus, if he is really a human, not get to be a sinner like the rest of us?’

‘Great question: well you’ll notice that Gabriel says to Mary ‘therefore the child to be born will be holy’; he is really keen to tell us that Jesus was going to be holy which was a bit different to us. The way he was born shows that he didn’t do being human the way we have done being human ever since the first people.’

‘So: is that like because Mary didn’t have any sin either? That’s what my Oma reckons, and she goes to church all the time, too.’

‘Well, Kosta, with all respect to your Oma, who I am sure is lovely – no, Mary was not sinless and the Bible doesn’t tell us that at all. And, like I say, it isn’t as if sex is the problem. What Luke is telling us is that Jesus coming wasn’t the doing of humans but something God did – but it was something that happened to humans. It was one of us that he became: he didn’t become a dolphin, or a pig, or a fly, or an angel, or even an alien. He came and lived with us, as one of us.’

‘So, sir, are you saying that Christmas was a miracle, and so you just have to believe it?’

‘Actually... yes. Well kinda; there’s more to it than that. But, you are right when you say it’s a miracle: because that means basically God did it, because only he could’ve done it.’

‘And that goes for the whole Christmas message. All that trumpeting about peace on earth that we sing – humans can’t ever deliver that. It is impossible for us – it shouldn’t take us long to figure that one out.’

‘But that’s not to say it’s hopeless. Not at all in fact. That’s the punchline of the story, remember? That for God nothing is impossible. Nothing.’

The bell suddenly rings, and, in a trice, the class packs its bags and disappears.

Note: The author admits that this class of largely civilized and articulate 14 year olds is completely fictional, and bears little or no resemblance to any class, certainly none that he has ever taught.

GOD MAKES SENSE

IT’S common sense to believe in God. This statement is not intended to annoy those who aren’t believers. It is simply a historical reality: throughout the history of the world people everywhere have worshipped some deity. Like our interest in art and music or our longing for good relationships, honouring the Creator, or creators, is one of the few shared hallmarks of the human race. It is common to most people who have ever lived. Whether ancient Babylonians, nomadic Goths, Australian aborigines or post-Christian Westerners: all cultures have expressed a belief in the divine. Even today, over 80% of Australians still acknowledge the existence of some kind of god. (i)

Of course, some people (around 5%) are still atheists. They argue that the beautiful complexities of the universe are just accidents. But most people follow the logic of the ancient poem found in the Bible:

The heavens declare the glory of God;

the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

The first thing to say is that God is much ‘bigger’ than us in every sense. So we can never completely describe him or understand him. It would be like a slug trying to understand Einstein’s theories to expect us to understand God.

We do know something about God, but

we are dependent on him revealing himself to us. He has done that through the Bible and through his Son, Jesus.

The Bible tells us that God is a living personal Spirit. He is not an impersonal force, but a living being who acts. God is personal with his own characteristics. He is Spirit who exists apart from this world and is above and beyond it.

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THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS



THE UNIQUE and enduring claim of Christianity in all its forms is that the God of universal conviction—of our common sense—has broken into history for all to see. The ‘kingdom of God’ has touched the world of humanity in a tangible way.

While churches have disagreed about many things through the centuries, the acknowledged core of Christianity is Jesus

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On all these counts Christianity fares much better than most of us realize. The Christian Faith gladly places its neck on the chopping block of public scrutiny and invites anyone who wishes to take a swing.

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