
But...

Luke 2.1-20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 25 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

The story is told of a British preacher who came to visit the United States. He had prepared a careful three point sermon on the subject of the word 'But'. No one had told him that in America 'butt' means 'backside'. And so he embarked on the first point of his sermon, 'Everyone has a but'. He was a little bit confused by the congregation's response. Undeterred, he carried on to his second point, 'You can see other people's butts'. Now the congregation didn't seem to be getting his argument, but there was nothing to be done but to carry on to his third and most significant point, 'But you can't see your own but'.

The story of Christmas is one in which almost every character has a 'but'. It starts with Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest of the Temple in Jerusalem. There were so many priests that each group only got to serve for two weeks a year, and when a group was performing the morning and evening sacrifices they would draw lots for which of their number would also make the incense offerings. Zechariah's name was drawn, and in he went to the sanctuary. There he met Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, who announced that he, Zechariah, would have a son named John, who would make ready a people prepared for the Lord. The way Luke tells the story, it reminds us of Abraham and Elkanah, two old men in the Old Testament who had sons according to God's promise, Isaac and Samuel. But it turns out Zechariah has a very big 'But': 'But I'm too old'. Zechariah's 'but' is that he can't believe God still has a use for an old man like him.

The next character is Joseph. Just as in Luke's account an angel appeared to Zechariah, so in Matthew's account an angel appears to Joseph. Joseph knew that he was of the lineage of David, the family from whom the messiah was expected to come. He also knew his fiancée was pregnant. What he found it a little difficult to believe was that the father of the child was the Holy Spirit. Like a lot of people, Joseph was more than a little concerned with the gossip in the village, at the shops, in the offices, on the workshop floor. It's not a nice situation to be in, to be planning to marry a young woman and suddenly to discover that she is expecting a baby, and knowing the baby isn't yours. Joseph is a kind and good man, and doesn't get angry or humiliate Mary. Which of us would have been as generous as he? But Joseph was nonetheless a man with a very big 'but'. 'But what will people say?' He could square it in his own imagination, but he struggled to see how others would do so.

Then we move to a third character, who doesn't appear in the scriptural story but who has become the stuff of every nativity play performed ever since. I refer to the innkeeper. Luke gives us a simple line 'she laid him in a manger, because there was no room at the inn.' Out of this line we have created endless sequences of grumpy innkeepers, menageries of farm animals, beds of straw, and little donkeys. But the innkeeper, fictional or not, is a man we can all relate to. He is forever remembered as a man who was so preoccupied with the cares of his world that he had no room for Jesus. He is a man with a big but: 'But I'm too busy'.

And then there are the wise men. They are sages, magi, astrologers. They have been consulting the skies for a long time. They have a deep understanding of the mysteries of the universe. They have discovered a special star, a star that heralds the birth of a new king, a king whose influence matters not just on earth but also in heaven. They travel afar, bearing gifts. But then they face a crisis of faith and wisdom. They assume that the king of the Jews must be born in Jerusalem. These are very clever, very courageous and very patient men. But they have a big but: 'But the Son of God can't be born in a stable in a small insignificant town'.

So here are four characters from the Christmas story: four characters who each have a big but: but I'm too old, but what will people say, but I'm too busy, but this isn't the God I'd expected.

There are other characters who see things differently. One is Elizabeth. Elizabeth was Zechariah's wife. She was past her best before date. Her hopes of having a child seemed to be over. She could have said 'But I'm too old'. But it seems she didn't. Instead she said 'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me'.

Another character is Mary. This must have been a terrifying time for her. Having a child is a daunting prospect at the best of times, but just imagine being a young girl swept up into God's destiny and facing the misunderstanding of your whole community. Mary could have had lots of big buts: "But I'm too young", "But I'm too scared", "But why me?" We can hardly blame her for saying "But I'm a virgin". But Mary left all the buts to one side, and when Gabriel told what God had in store she simply responded, "Here am I., the servant of the Lord".

Finally there are the shepherds. Of all the characters in the story, these might have had the biggest reason to find a big but. The life of a shepherd was a hard one. Not only did they spend most of their life far from the comforts and company of home; even worse, the fact that they were incapable of keeping the ritual and dietary standards of the Jewish law meant that they were regarded as unclean and therefore outside God's favour. Alone of all the characters in the Christmas story, they have not the slightest hint of a but. They don't say "But we are only shepherds". All they say is "Let us go now and see this thing that has taken place". They put their livelihoods in danger by leaving their sheep in the field, and they put what little reputations they had in jeopardy by telling the whole community what they had heard and seen. For the shepherds, there is no but: simply celebration and thanksgiving.

As we look at our lives on Christmas Day, and take away the wrapping paper of nostalgia and sentimentality, the question for us is, where do we fit into this story? Do we have a big but – but I'm too old, but what will people say, but I'm too busy, but this isn't the God I expected, but how can this be? Or are we like the shepherds, a little scared, but eager to respond to whatever new thing God has in store?

The heart of Christmas is the word Emmanuel, God with us. The good news of the Christmas story is that God found a way to be with us, despite our buts. He found a way to be with Zechariah by giving him a hopeful wife. He found a way to be with Joseph by speaking to him in a dream. He found a way to be with the innkeeper by coming in the back door. He found a way to be with the wise men by sending them scurrying back to their books of prophecy. God finds a way to be with us whether we say "But...but...but" or not. That is the good news of Christmas. And the good news of Christmas is good news for today. For God shall be with us until all buts have ceased and we see him face to face.