

Equipped to unwrap Christmas

One morning, at the beginning of November, I went to the front door to pick up the mail. Among the usual mix of bills and bank statements was a brightly coloured flyer inviting me to “get Christmas all wrapped up” by taking out magazine subscriptions for friends and relatives. This, I read, was the gift that would last all year. I must confess that the idea of getting Christmas all wrapped up in November was rather attractive. Imagine no last-minute panic buying, no lengthy queues to endure at the tills, no dodging other shoppers. Undoubtedly, there was a certain feel-good factor to getting Christmas all wrapped up...

The following day, I received another invitation - this time, in my email inbox. A Christian organization was asking me to submit a short blog post on the theme of “Christmas unwrapped”. Just when I was all set to get Christmas wrapped up, I’m being invited to comment on unwrapping it! But unwrapping Christmas has its merits. So many layers of tradition, myth, and sentimentality have enveloped our understanding and celebration of this important Christian festival that it would be no bad thing to peel back the packaging to see what’s really there. How about we take a brief look at unwrapping Jesus, the central figure in the Christmas story?

Luke 2:7 tells us that when Mary’s baby was born, she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. And, each Christmas, that’s how many people still see Jesus - as a helpless baby all wrapped up. But if we were to unwrap the baby in the manger, what would we find? The angel’s announcement of the Saviour’s birth to a group of shepherds gives us a few clues. “*This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger*”.¹

Firstly, he was **human**: “*You will find a baby...*” I wonder if our familiarity with the Christmas story causes us to lose the significance of these few words. God became a human being! One of my favourite Christmas readings is the first part of John chapter 1, where we read that the Word was God² and the Word became flesh.³ Although Christ became human, he never stopped being God. Awesome!

Secondly, he was **helpless**: “*...wrapped in cloths...*” At the time of Jesus’ birth, newborns would have had their body and limbs wrapped in long strips of cloth to strengthen and protect them. Fast-forward thirty-three years and we read of Jesus’ body being wrapped in cloth following his crucifixion.⁴ I don’t believe this link from crib to cross is a coincidence. Jesus was born so he could die and, in so doing, would save his people from their sins.⁵

Thirdly, he was **humble**: “*...lying in a manger.*” A reliable historical source⁶ suggests that middle-Eastern homes in the first century had one room where the family lived plus an optional guest-room which, on this occasion, appears to have been occupied - hence, no room at the “inn”. The main family room included a section that animals occupied during the night and they would feed from mangers filled with straw. It seems highly likely that it was in this room of a humble home that Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid him in a manger.

As we set about getting Christmas all wrapped up, let’s not do the same with Jesus. He’s no longer wrapped up as a newly-born baby or a newly-dead corpse. These cloth wrappings, while serving their purpose at the time, don’t bind Jesus any more. The Baby of Bethlehem was the Christ of Calvary and he is alive for evermore! Praise God that Jesus is unwrapped!

¹ Luke 2:12 (NIV)

² John 1:1

³ John 1:14

⁴ Luke 23:53

⁵ Matthew 1:21

⁶ Bailey, K.E., *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, SPCK, 2008