

# What's On The Top of Your Tree?

Have you put your tree up yet? Many of you will no doubt respond, 'No, and there will be no Christmas tree here this year.' Just suppose for a moment that you have the dilemma of deciding what should go on top. Which way would you jump? Star or Christmas Angel (or do I mean fairy?). My assumption is that, unlike my elder grandson, you will not have opted for a penguin. For myself, I find the crinoline of the 'fairy' sits more easily and is more stable than my pathetic attempts at securing a star to the treetop, and it has never occurred to me to add to the options. I am aware that some people can get very agitated about what is and is not 'proper' to adorn the top of the Christmas tree, but does it really matter that much?

Similarly, there are those of you who can sit more loosely with the Christmas tableau so that if a child is desperate to be the lion in the stable, Peppa Pig or Spiderman (which you had obviously overlooked in the biblical record), your stress levels will not become overly inflated. Does it really matter that much?



In recent years I have given a gift to both my sons and their family each Advent; a decoration for the Christmas tree. So it was that I found myself scanning the garden centre for a suitable decoration for Christmas 2022. (To be stowed with next year's Christmas cards for prompt dispatch next year.) I was surprised to find a tree ornament fashioned as a baby with *broderie anglaise* body and woolly hat, amongst the decorations on sale. It was only then that it occurred to me how fitting that was as a decoration, and how strange it was that that the very centre of our celebration of Christmas, the reason for the season – the baby Jesus - was such a rare sight on a tree. But does it really matter that much what we decorate our trees and our homes with?

It's around this time in Advent that we think about John the Baptist. We read in Mark 1 that John appeared in the wilderness wearing clothing made of camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist, and that he ate locusts and wild honey. One can't help wondering if he wasn't a bit 'whiffy' as well as being slightly eccentric. Probably someone who we might be tempted to dismiss as a 'weirdo' or a fool. How many others have we dismissed in similar fashion who may also have been pointing us to God but didn't have the right clothes, go to the right school or were different from us in some way which we thought important. On my noticeboard I have a postcard which simply says, '*Suffer fools gladly: they might be right.*' So, wearing the right clothes, attending the right gatherings in appropriate places...does it really matter that much?

We are told that God sees beyond whatever image we choose to present to the world to what

is in our heart, *Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart* (Proverbs 21:2), and the psalmist speaks of the in depth knowledge that God has of each one of us (Psalm 139).

By now, I hope you are beginning to ask yourself what is it that really matters about Advent and Christmas. I am sure we could fill an hour or two debating the question but I offer just one hope: that the story is told so that the reason for the season is clear. Surely that is at the heart of what matters.

How important is the detail? Well, some of what we celebrate in our nativity plays is legend and tradition rather than biblically accurate. Search for detail of the innkeeper- you will not find any. Are we going to get upset because the nativity play features Mary and Joseph knocking on the door of the Inn and being told there was no room when the Bible does not? – of course not. Are we going to worry that it was most likely that the baby Jesus was not new born when the Magi turned up- no of course not, it would upset the balanced tableau with shepherds on one side and Magi on the other if they were removed from the scene.

So, if the detail is of lesser importance what is it that matters? Well, for me two things: That God's hand and the fulfilment of his promise from long ago is manifest in the birth of Jesus; and that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who saves us from our sins. Sadly, too often these truths get lost in the detail. So have your penguin on the Christmas tree, and spiderman in the stable but hear the message of good news for all; Christ is born that we may live life in all its fulness and to eternity, knowing our sins are forgiven.

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