

FAITH AROUND THE BARBECUE

(The story)

(Also available as a play)

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INTRODUCTION

I am not a theologian. I am a Christian who tries to make sense of the world in the context of my faith and to make sense of my faith in the context of the world.

Some people make an academic study of Christianity, but in their pursuit of deeper understanding, they sometimes complicate things.

I believe God wants to be understood — and loved — by everyone, across all time and places and cultures. Jesus came to all, spoke to any who would listen, and left his message in the hands of a group of ordinary people. He still speaks to any who will listen.

So let me explain Christianity, simply and with a little humour, especially to those of you who are confused or just a little unsure. I'll try to explain it as we might do with a group of friends around the barbecue.

THE CHARACTERS

James and Mei: A couple who love talking about their faith. James is very articulate, but he likes to put a humorous twist on things. Mei is more serious, but accepts James' quiriness. They run an engineering business together, something to do with cranes. (When we meet people, we always seem to want to know what they do for a living. So there you are.)

Ani and Nathan: Both are cynical about Christians — present company excepted. They've seen the hypocrisy of the church, listened to brow-beating Christians, and are generally unimpressed by the whole notion of faith. Ani runs an online business marketing a range of products. Nathan is a vet.

Jo and Alex: They attend church from time to time. Jo would probably like to be more involved, but Alex is unsure. Jo is a teacher. Alex is a courier driver.

Ellie and Pete (me): Ellie is smart and a great conversationalist. She is not embarrassed about asking questions, and she often seems to cut through to the heart of an issue when the rest of us are trying to rationalise everything. I'm not sure I know who I am. Ellie says I try too hard to be funny, and as a result, I am sometimes flippant when I should be serious. She's probably right. I'm pretty sure I'm a Christian, but there's a lot I don't understand. Ellie is a health and safety consultant and I'm a mechanic.

All of us have kids, of various ages. Later on, you will meet our daughter, Gabby. She has been raised in the church, and has kept her faith through the challenges of university. She has recently acquired a boyfriend, Arun. They are both students.

BECAUSE GOD KNOWS US ... CHRISTMAS IS MORE THAN A PARTY

Christmas is loved by people all over the world. It's a season of excesses: over-spending, over-worrying, over-eating, over-indulging, and eventually over it! Some shops display nativity tableaux among the Christmas bargains. Images of Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, wise men and various farm animals pop up on Christmas cards, competing with snow and reindeer, or the jolly, white-bearded, fat man — Santa, of course, not great-grand-dad! What is the relevance of such things to Christmas?

If the Christmas story has a God connection, then what was God thinking? It's simple really.

The wonderful thing about Christmas is that it celebrates how well God knows us.

Let me show you.

MYSTERY

December 22: Around the barbecue at Ani and Nathan's home. A spectacular West Australian summer evening. Drinks and nibbles.

As a group of friends, we are very comfortable with each other. Even Ani and Nathan's two big black Labradors and Russian Blue cat are relaxed around us, mostly ignoring us, unless there is a tummy rub or cuddle on offer.

As we sat around the big wooden table, we chatted about all sorts of things. Somehow the conversation drifted to magicians. Well, to be fair, it didn't really drift. Ellie had seen a magician in the city and videoed him with her phone. She was keen to show it to others, beginning with Ani and Mei who were seated either side of her.

Nathan was curious about why they were huddled over the small screen. 'What are you looking at?'

Ellie spoke without taking her eyes off her phone. 'I saw an illusionist in the city the other day, and he was amazing, so I filmed him.'

'You have to see this.' Ani leaned in for a better view of the small screen, while Jo moved to stand behind Ellie and look over her shoulder. 'I'm always fascinated by the way they somehow trick us into believing the impossible is possible.'

Mei leaned in from the other side of Ellie. 'I know what you mean. In our logical, explainable world, we have a fascination for things we can't explain.'

'I guess we just like mysteries, don't we?' said Alex.

'True — like science fiction or the paranormal,' Nathan added.

'Or why turning a car's ignition off and on again fixes a computer glitch.' I am experienced mechanic who can diagnose and repair mechanical faults, but the workings of the car's computer are a mystery to me.

‘Or Christmas.’ James off-hand comment surprised everyone.

‘Eh?’ Ellie looked up. ‘Nothing mysterious about Christmas. Same decorations put up in the same way every year. Same bottle of perfume from Pete every year...’

‘Burnt roast dinner,’ I interjected. Then, seeing Ellie’s glare, I quickly added, ‘Just joking. I love the treats you like to cook for Christmas.’

James persisted — fortunately. ‘Christmas is a fantastic mystery.’ He pulled at his ear. I don’t know why. He just does that sort of thing a lot.

‘How so?’ Nathan tilted back his head to drop some peanuts into his mouth.

‘Christmas shows how well God knows us.’

‘You’ve lost me.’

‘Ah,’ said James.

‘Because God knows us, he knows that we love a good mystery, so Christmas begins with two mysteries.’

‘What mysteries? How fat Santa fits down a narrow chimney?’ Alex used his hands to help him ask the question. He tends to do that. Fortunately, he doesn’t say much, but when he does, it’s risky to be too near his waving arms.

‘Or how he breaks into homes that don’t have chimneys.’ Ellie handed the phone to Alex to watch. ‘That’s a bit spooky.’

James laughed, but continued unfazed. ‘Mystery one is that God became human and lived on earth as Jesus.’

Ani screwed up her face. ‘I struggle to comprehend the notion of God living on earth as a man, like an undercover cop. Even setting aside the practicalities, why would God want to be one of us?’

‘I agree,’ said Nathan. ‘If you believe in God, then, by definition, God is above humanity. He reigns, he rules, he oversees, he monitors. He sets the expectations and watches while people struggle to achieve them. He doesn’t get intimately involved.’

‘Just zaps them when they get it wrong and lets them win Lotto when they get it right.’ Alex grinned. Although he doesn’t say much, he’s proud of himself when he does. He handed the phone back to Ellie.

‘Or so we tend to think.’ Ellie wriggled as she pushed her phone into the pocket of her jeans.

‘Am I wrong?’ asked Nathan.

James took a sip from his can. ‘Well, God shows himself throughout history as a God who is involved with his creation. There are stories from the Bible and stories from people today that tell how God spoke directly to them. Sensible, sceptical, mentally healthy, normal people saw God, heard him, felt him, experienced him so strongly that they had no doubt whatsoever that it was God, and no doubt whatsoever that they must reshape their lives and their futures to do what he told them.’

‘If you believe the Bible,’ said Ani. ‘And that’s not the same as coming to earth.’

Jo had returned to her seat. ‘Why are we surprised that God should decide to drop in? Nanna enjoys receiving texts, emails, phone calls, even video calls, but they are no substitute for a personal visit. Being with us lets her share our experience of life in a way that no other communication can. Perhaps God felt the same.’

I liked that image.

Alex was apparently less appreciative. ‘But Jesus was a fictional character.’

Although I was finding all this to be moving a bit fast for my brain, I thought it was time I showed that I was still in touch and was confident to rebuff this. ‘No,’ I said, perhaps a little too pompously. ‘The historical existence of Jesus has been proven by contemporary documents other than the Bible.’

‘So he was a good man. That doesn’t make him God.’ Nathan took some pretzels from the bowl which Ani offered him, and passed it along. ‘You’re a good bloke, but God? I don’t think so.’

‘We could debate that further,’ I grinned, pleased to be included.

‘Or you could just zap him and prove him wrong, Pete,’ suggested Alex.

‘If I’m God, I don’t need to prove my power.’ I lifted my chin to look down my nose at people, but that made me cough, which rather spoilt the impact.

James scratched his head before continuing. ‘To Christians, what matters is that Jesus was not just a good man; not just an insightful teacher; not just a clever illusionist: he was God on earth.’

Later on, the one who is the true Light arrived to shine on everyone coming into the world.

But although he made the world, the world didn’t recognise him when he came. Even in his own land and among his own people, the Jews, he was not accepted. Only a few would welcome and receive him. But to all who received him, he gave the right to become children of God. All they needed to do was to trust him to save them. All those who believe this are reborn! — not a physical rebirth resulting from human passion or plan — but from the will of God.

And Christ became a human being and lived here on earth among us and was full of loving forgiveness and truth. And some of us have seen his glory — the glory of the only Son of the heavenly Father! (John 1: 9–14, TLB)

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A quick word about the Bible passages. You may find them helpful or distracting. You’re the reader. Feel free to read them as you go along or come back to them later.

‘Hmmm.’ Nathan was sceptical. Frankly, Nathan is always sceptical — not just about God, but about anything that isn’t consistent with his thinking. ‘We skipped over something here. All this may be very well, *if* you believe in God.’ There was silence, which surprised me. I thought someone would leap in. ‘What? You’re not going to answer that?’ I thought someone should, but it was a bit beyond me.

James clearly wasn’t troubled by Nathan’s challenge. ‘Well, we could debate the existence of God for a week, and still not convince the other. I can’t prove to you that God exists any more than you can prove to me that God doesn’t exist.’ He took another unhurried sip from his can. ‘What is interesting, though, is that there seems to be a God-created need in the hearts of people throughout history and in most cultures. It seems significant that people on every continent have been trying to connect with God, or some power beyond this earth, since the beginning of time. So it comes down to faith. I choose to believe in God.’

‘Why?’

James was thoughtful as he caressed his bearded chin. ‘Because it makes more sense to me than believing there is no God. Because believing it makes me a better man and my world a better place. Because Jesus describes a God I want to connect with. And because of my experience of God, influencing my life and my relationship with the world every day. We each believe in something. We each allow our lives to be influenced, even controlled, by something. I choose God.’

‘I can relate to that,’ said Ellie, ‘although I wouldn’t have articulated it so well. Thanks James.’ James smiled.

Ani frowned. ‘That may be very good, but only if you believe the Bible.’

‘I think it’s the same issue.’ James scratched the back of his neck. ‘There is abundant evidence that the Bible records events which actually happened, but the Bible interprets those events in a particular way. It assumes that a creator God wants a relationship with his creation, and that humanity wants a relationship with God, and it assumes that God has

the keys to how humans can get on with each other. I choose to believe the Bible's interpretation, to believe that it tells how to relate to God and to other people.'

'Hmmm. Maybe we'll come back to that.' Clearly Ani wasn't convinced.

'I have a feeling we will.' Mei smiled as she nodded slowly.

The conversation moved on to other topics as Nathan fired up the barbecue and Ani began to set out salads. Alex sat quietly, until he suddenly said, 'James, you said there were two mysteries. We heard about God coming to earth. So what's the second?'

As always, James was ready with an answer. 'Mystery two is the pregnant virgin.'

Nathan turned from placing meat on the barbecue. 'Ah yes. The pregnant virgin. Fantasy time. It can't happen.'

'I'm surprised that God would risk having people snigger behind their hands by seriously suggesting such a thing?' Ani is almost as sceptical as Nathan. They make a good pair.

God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

'Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out! God be with you.'

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, 'Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.'

'He will be great, be called 'Son of the Highest.' The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He

will rule Jacob's house forever — no end, ever, to his kingdom.'

Mary said to the angel, 'But how? I've never slept with a man.'

The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. (Luke 1: 26–35, MSG)

Jo had been quiet until now. 'Well, actually, we now know that a virgin can become pregnant! Reproductive technologies enable women to carry a child without ever having had sexual relations with a man.'

'You're not suggesting that Mary had this technology 2000 years ago.' There was the trace of scorn in Nathan's voice.

'No, but maybe God knew that it was possible.'

'The thing about a mystery is that it can't always be explained — like Ellie's illusionist,' said Mei.

'Isn't that a cop-out?'

I thought Mei was onto something, so I decided to add my bit. 'We humans have convinced ourselves that we're such a clever species that there is nothing we can't know and understand. But there is a simple explanation to the virgin birth.' Everyone looked at me.

'What's that?'

'That God is God!'

'Eh?'

I wasn't sure if they were waiting for me to share a brilliant insight or whether they were waiting for the men in white coats to come. I'd got myself into this. Now I had to get out of it.

'Well, why should we think that God couldn't make a virgin pregnant? If he created the universe and operates it day by day; if he created humankind and all other living things; if he can intervene to

change events and to change individuals; then why couldn't he do this simple thing?' There was silence as that thought sank in. They were clearly impressed by my vast intellect. Actually I impressed myself.

'Fair point,' conceded Nathan. 'If you're going to believe in God — if! — there's not much point in putting limits on him.'

'Or her.' Mei smiled broadly.

'Yay Mother God.' Ani laughed and applauded.

Jo looked pensive. 'I'm a Christian, but I'm uncomfortable with the idea of a virgin birth. I think the blokes who wrote the gospels didn't want to suggest that Joseph and Mary could have been up to something.'

That evoked a response, as people agreed or disagreed. I stood and pointed to the barbecue. 'We'll call for a division. Virgin-birthers to the left of the barbecue; non-virgin-birthers to the right.' Surprisingly, nobody moved.

'You're getting caught up in an intellectual debate,' said Ellie. 'Does it really matter? Accept the mystery of it all. James is right. We can't explain everything.'

I thought that was pretty profound. 'That's true. Some people who live healthy lives get cancers; others recover from cancer against all medical explanation.'

'Sometimes the strangest of incompatible couples form long-term relationships.' Ani looked at Ellie and me.

'There are plenty of situations for which there are no explanations, and may never be,' said Ellie.

Nathan looked at James. 'So, James, you're saying that God chose to drop in on planet Earth. He chose to arrive by some miracle.'

'Well, he's God. What else would you expect?'

Mei spoke almost in a whisper. 'Perhaps he still does!'

SOAP OPERA

Sun has set. Barbecued meat and salad. (Sorry vegetarians and vegans. Our group caters for all tastes.)

Ani went into the house to get more food. Nathan checked the progress of the meat and moved some of it around. Some of us clustered at the barbecue. Watching meat sizzle and the fire spit and flare puts me in a contemplative mood.

‘Hmmm.’ I tried to make my hmmm sound wise and not confused. ‘I wonder about Joseph and Mary. Everyone would have assumed they had been ... you know. Why would God put them in such an awkward position?’

‘Ah,’ said James.

‘Because God knows us, he knows that we love a soap opera, so the story involves a pregnant teenager and a man prepared to stand by her.’

‘It’s a familiar enough story,’ said Nathan. ‘It has happened millions of times, before and since, throughout the world.’

Ellie looked at Nathan. ‘Yes, but people’s response varies between cultures and over time. What would you have done if you had been in Joseph’s situation? His fiancée announces to him that she’s pregnant, and he knows the baby is not his. In my understanding of the Jewish community at the time, Joseph would have been within his rights — even within the community’s expectations — if he had quietly broken off the engagement.’

‘So why didn’t he?’ Nathan removed meat from the hotplate and placed it on plates.