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ENTERING THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS

There is no doubt that Jesus was born, lived and died as a Jew some two thousand years ago. As Christians, we believe that he continues to live in a transformed way and that he wishes to share his transforming Spirit with us.

The Christmas stories are well-known, nevertheless none of them are completely accurate in geographical, time and circumstances detail. All of them can be used to prompt our imagination and lead us into the mystery of the Son of God coming to live on earth, amongst us, here and now, inviting us, enabling us, with his Spirit, to move into the Kingdom of God.

Advent – Entering into the Mystery of Christmas.

These Advent reflections can be used as a basis for group discussions during Advent and also as points for prayerful meditation during the Advent period.

The reflections are drawn from scholarly information in the book entitled *The First Christmas* co-authored by the scripture scholars Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. The book is published by Harper Collins and is available from bookselling outlets. It is not an easy book to read. Some of the scholarly information in it can be surprising at a first reading.

The book invites us to go beyond the literalist understanding of the Christmas stories that we have absorbed as small children and to move to a deeper understanding of how the bible texts are supposed to work for people of faith.

The authors, Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan are very well qualified to write about the way we can best understand the gospels and they invite us to follow their guidance in studying the deeper meaning of the gospel stories about Christmas.

These notes are intended to simplify the process. People with more time and the readiness to move more deeply into the gospel texts can get the book and study it for themselves.

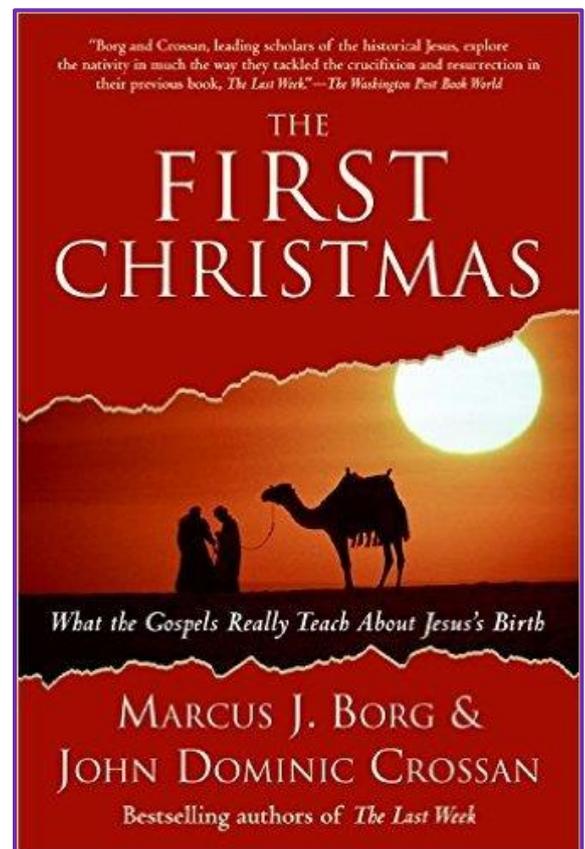
Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan have co-authored another book in a similar academic style entitled *The Last Week* and it could be used as a source of reliable scholarly information and reflection particularly during the time of Lent.

In some ways that book is easier to read. Groups could really benefit from a series of Lenten discussions based on information from that book.

But first of all, try Advent!

Christmas – What the gospels really teach about the birth of Jesus and its meaning

The book's authors write in its preface: This book, *The First Christmas*, treats what may be the best-known stories in the world. The stories of Jesus's birth are the foundation of the world's most widely observed holiday. Christmas is celebrated by the world's two billion Christians, a number about twice that of the next largest religion, Islam.



Moreover, because of the cultural and commercial importance of Christmas in Western culture and beyond, it is observed by many non-Christians as well. Indeed, no other religious holiday is so widely commemorated by people who are outside of the tradition that originated it.

The book invites us to enter the Mystery of Advent.

To begin where we are: The book presupposes that we are aware of living in a political world. Even in Australia, we have recently been reminded, again and again, of the USA election process in choosing a new president. The President of the United States, whether we like him or not is one of the most important people in the world, and even we here in Australia have been reminded of that again and again. The United States of America is something like a global Empire. In some ways it is like the global Empire that existed at the time of Jesus – the Roman Empire.

The gospels indicate that the teaching of Jesus is about the development of a new kind of Empire: The Kingdom of God.

So, as One who was a fundamental challenge to the Roman Empire, even the gospel-constructed stories about the birth of Jesus lead us to understand how the Kingdom of God, as proclaimed by Jesus, is in contrast and in conflict with the Roman Empire and with its associated political groupings.

In some ways, the gospel stories were originally political – and they still are, whether we like it or not.

Much more important than the politics of the gospel stories is the gospel method of inviting us believers to enter into the mystery of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and his establishing the Kingdom of God on earth and inviting us to be a part of that transforming reality.

How the mystery process can work for us...

When we read, or listen to a gospel story, we can imagine ourselves to be a part of the story or report. The gospels are written to help us to do this.

In some ways all the gospel stories are like parables which invite us to enter into the parable/story/report and to allow ourselves to experience, in a spiritual way, the mystery of the birth, life, death, resurrection and teachings of Jesus.

As we allow our imagination to work in this way, we can, as it were, enter into a conversation with Jesus (and with others in the stories). Or we might simply allow ourselves to appreciate the situations made present to us via our spiritual imagination.

After such spiritual reflection, we might ask ourselves what does all that mean for me now?



If we are in a reflection/prayer group we can also share with others the understanding we have received.

The gospels are not written to give us detailed factual reports, but to give us stories helping us to enter into the mystery of new life as offered by Jesus. If we hold on to the gospel stories with a literalist understanding we prevent ourselves from coming to a proper and deeper understanding of the teaching of Jesus and of the early Church.

It is a challenge for present-day, well-informed preachers and teachers to find ways of leading students and people in the pews to come to an appreciation, and an experience, of the gospel stories.

Sometimes it might be necessary to state quite bluntly that in the past we have been misled in our understanding of the gospels, when the preachers and teachers and books may have placed little emphasis on entering into the mystery as suggested by the gospel stories, and allowed the students and pew-sitters to understand the gospel stories in a literalist way.

Unless we are careful, a literalist understanding of the nativity stories can block an insight into the mystery of the Son of God in our world.

Of course, some facts are basic: Jesus was born and lived on earth. Jesus was killed. The Spirit of Jesus continued to inspire people to work for the Kingdom of God.

We are all invited to share in this process.

During the four weeks of Advent we might meditate on some of the mystery/stories about the coming of Jesus into the world.

Each of the four gospels could be used as the basis of our mystery-prayerful-experience-reflection during Advent.

The gospels according to Matthew and Luke have well-known, but different Christmas stories.

The gospels according to Mark and John do not have any Christmas stories, but do contain stories and information about Jesus, the Son of God, the Word of God, who has come into the world to transform it towards the Kingdom of God.

In the beginning of the gospel according to Mark there is a story about John-the-baptiser and the baptism of Jesus.

The beginning of the gospel according to John has poetic statements about the nature and work of Jesus.

During the four weeks of Advent we might allow ourselves to enter more deeply into the saving Mystery of God.

The Christmas stories in the gospels of Mathew and Luke are at the beginning of the accounts of the Good News that Jesus brings into the world. The good news is that God wants all people to be saved and Jesus is the One who makes that possible.

With faith, we believe in the transformation that Jesus brings into the world and to each one of us.

We have to be open to receive that gift of new life. As we appreciate this gift we will be motivated to share the good news with others.

Is this happening? If not, why not? Have we really been told about it? Have we told others about it?

Happy Advent, Fr Kevin Murphy