

The subversive

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You know subversives. They are the people who quietly undermine stable government and accepted institutions. They're usually regarded as a threat to all that is good and ordered in society. They're a threat, because they want to turn everything on its head.

This Christmas story is essentially subversive. Look closely—something disruptive is going on.

There's this unwed mother at the heart of it. Sure—we know she's pure—but do you think that everyone looking on would have known that? She comes at the end of a long line with skeletons in the closet. When the Bible writers list Jesus' forbears, there are several people who don't quite match up. There is a cloud over his legitimacy and his ancestry.

The baby is lying in hay. Many of us have been through the hospital thing and the bassinette-in-the-nursery thing. You wouldn't put your son or grandson in a place like this. None of us would. If we met people living like this, we'd be disgusted.

There's the shepherds. Shepherds had a poor reputation back then—they were almost as good as vagrants. Maybe one peg up from those people who live in those big communities on social security on the north coast.

Then there's these foreign visitors that we're going to hear about next. We think of them as noble dignitaries. But people were as racist then as now. You may as well have Kalahari witchdoctors arrive to visit at the hospital.

It's all subversive. It's God coming into the world in a way that he shouldn't really—in a way that pays no respect to accepted values. He comes almost as a member of the underclass. He reveals himself first of all to vagrants and foreigners. He lies down in filth.

Mary picked it when she sang about this God and his subversion—that he takes an almost mischievous delight in knocking over the well-off and the self-satisfied in favour of this world's losers.

And in fact, nothing changed when Jesus grew up. He never made anything of himself. The Rotarians of his day called him everything from an alcoholic to a pleasure-seeker to a street person. They even said he was a subversive. It's all well documented in the Bible. He hung out with the wrong crowd, that's all there is to it.

He went on to die a death which matched his life and birth. They killed him as one of society's vermin, with a style of death that was worse to them than a gang killing would seem to us.

Jesus was born and lived and died in a way that reversed all the accepted norms.

But the real worry was the statement that God made through all of this. The Bible lets us in on it: "God made Jesus, who had no sin, to *be* sin, so that in him we could become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). At Jesus' death, God acted toward Jesus as though he were a sinner, so that he could act towards us as if we'd always lived like Jesus.

In the birth and life and death of Jesus, God made a subversive statement to humanity that he will forgive those who are bad and treat them as if they'd always been good. He's turned the whole matter on its head, and people aren't happy.

That is, people who think they are upstanding, respectable and in need of none, aren't happy. But the rest of us—well, we shout "Joy to the world!"

Christmas is on the side of the little people, the lowly people, the people represented by the shepherds and the foreign visitors and the stinky manger. Christmas is the time to come alongside the subversive called Jesus, who turned everything on its head so that unworthy people like us could become friends with God. **B**



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