

Week One: Unlikely Messengers

Jackie's Story



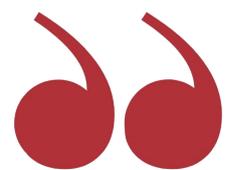
In my teens, estranged from my family, I lived in a flat for young homeless people. The heating system was inadequate, the flat was damp and in the winter sheets of ice would form on the inside of the metal framed windows. I had so little money I often skipped meals and I would walk anywhere rather than pay for public transport. I would regularly walk an 8-mile round trip to college, on an empty stomach.

Years later when my family were on in work benefits – work that we were told would lift us out of poverty, I encountered again the shame poverty brings. Imagine knowing that your kids' duvets are grotty, their pillows are stained, their cheap lino flooring is ripped, and their towels are fusty. Then you find that one of your kids has used black gaffer tape to cover a hole in the sole of their school shoe. Just imagine....

There is nothing positive in the experience of poverty and in the current climate; hopelessness among people on low incomes is endemic.

I felt helpless in the face of all this until I found my voice through the Poverty Truth Commission. As a commissioner, I was given the opportunity to meet and connect with people with similar experiences to me as well as influential public figures. We all wanted to identify and challenge the causes of poverty and create change.

Now the Poverty Truth Commission is evolving. Members who live with poverty will lead the work – going into communities to listen, learn and start conversations. Members like me will help people find their voice, like I did, and genuinely empower them to influence decision-making. After all, we are the ones who know the truth about poverty. We are the ones who can raise awareness of the damage it does to ordinary human beings. I can confidently state that it is essential that decisions and calculations about poverty be made in direct consultation with people living in poverty. Through the Poverty Truth Community, we can take small but powerful steps to resist, transform and overcome. For "Nothing About us, Without Us, Is For Us."



Jackie's story was first told by Third Forces News. You can find it in full at third-forcenews.org.uk/blogs/we-know-the-truth-about-poverty.

Reflection

In 2018, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Frameworks Institute did some research about who the most 'strategic messengers' might be to communicate a message about addressing poverty. Their research found that either Anglican Bishops or Conservative Politicians were two of the most effective spokespeople. Anglican Bishops were seen as moral leaders, the sort of people who were likely to have a positive opinion about addressing poverty already. They were believed because the message and the messenger aligned. Conservative Politicians, however, were unlikely people to be expressing this kind of attitude, and helped people to depolarise the issue and focus on solutions.

The research showed that choosing your messenger strategically can be one of the most handy tools in a campaigner's toolkit. If you want to change things, get the right people on board.

With this in mind, it's a bit surprising that the story of Jesus birth begins with God choosing a rather *unlikely* messenger. In Luke 1, an angel visits a girl called Mary. She's young, a woman and an unmarried one at that. She wouldn't be allowed to stand up at the front of the synagogue, and wouldn't be out in public alone. She isn't even at the point of leading her own household, never mind leading change in the world!

In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't seem that Mary has much power. She's a far cry from politician or Archbishop. For God to pick Mary was like choosing the person with the smallest voice to tell the busiest room to quieten down. If God wanted someone to stand up and captivate the audience in an instant, or someone who would be believed without question, God wouldn't have picked Mary.

Yet, in the opening scene of a story that would turn the world upside down, God casts Mary in the leading role. To her, God entrusts the world's most treasured message. A message of radical, social change, begun with an act which rewrites the power of society. Instead of beginning where the power of society lies, God begins good news at the heart of the places it will transform.

And the more we hear from Mary, the more we see that she understands that God's choice isn't, in fact, that unusual. In Luke 1, Mary sings:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant...
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty."

As Mary sings, she shows us that she knows a God who prefers to do things that rebalance the narrative. A God who decides that the best way to spread a message of social revolution is to begin with those who aren't usually given a voice. To invite them to hold a message the world can't afford to ignore.

When we look for God's Good News in the world today, where do we turn? How often do we dismiss the voice of those we consider to be powerless, and lose the gospel they have been offered to proclaim?

Around the country, members of local communities have come together to form Poverty Truth Commissions, like the one Jackie describes in her story. As Jackie's shares, Poverty Truth Commissions create space for those with lived experience of poverty to be the experts in leading change. They offer the chance for policy makers, community leaders and those who normally hold the power to listen.

For Jackie, this meant more than just getting a chance to speak. It gave her the vital opportunity to challenge the circumstances that had trapped her in poverty. It gave her a chance to speak truth to power, to 'resist, transform and overcome'. It gave her a chance to lift up and empower others to do the same. Because, in her words, "it is essential that decisions and calculations about poverty be made in direct consultation with people living in poverty".

Just as God places Mary at the centre of the gospel story – an unlikely messenger offered the power to change the narrative – how might we choose to look to those we would least expect to share the gospel? In doing so, how can God's message of radical change begin to become reality?

Questions for reflection

As Christians, how can we ensure that the voices of those experiencing poverty are heard?

What are the benefits of having individuals and their experiences influencing and informing policymaking?

Unlikely messengers are unexpected people who have been used to challenge and transform your way of thinking. Can you think of any examples of unlikely messengers in your life?

Week Two: The Outsiders

Lina's Story



At nine months pregnant, when she should have been picking out her baby's first outfit, Lina received a letter from the Home Office stating that she would be evicted from her accommodation. "When I looked at the date of the letter, it was dated 27 April. On my due date", she recounts, "How could I remove myself from the house? I was heavily pregnant, where was I supposed to go, what was I supposed to do? I would be homeless, have nowhere to go".

The Home Office also stopped Lina's asylum support, and although this was a meagre £35.39 a week, it was a lifeline that while she waited for a decision on her asylum claim. "They took away my support – can you believe it? I was 40 weeks pregnant – 40 weeks! And they took away my support."

"It was hard, very, very, very hard. I was crying, I was so upset – I was crying all day". With no friends or family to turn to, Lina and her healthcare advisor were worried about the affect Lina's stress and upset were having on her baby.

Fortunately, Lina received help from ASHA, a charity who challenged the Home Office's decision to withdraw Lina's support, and informed the accommodation provider that they would be wrongly evicting the client. It took three weeks for Lina's support to finally be reinstated.

During the days preceding her birth and the first few vital weeks following it, Lina survived from weekly donations from a charity, organised by her worried healthcare advisor and midwife.

Lina has now been in the UK for five long, difficult years, and still longs to hear a final decision on her asylum claim. Lina struggles to provide for herself and her child on the low level of support offered by the Government, but the alternative – homelessness and destitution – is far worse. "£35 is so little to buy toys, clothes, nappies, food, baby stuff. It's not enough, but what can I do, I have to wait."

Despite Lina being entitled to asylum support, without the support of charities and Lina's concerned healthcare team, Lina would have been alone, heavily pregnant and on the streets.

"If we cut our hands, our blood is the same, you know? We are all human. When I think of that time, I don't understand how the Home Office thinks about us – I really don't know."



Lina's story was first told by Refugee Action. You can find it in full at www.refugee-action.org.uk/lina/.



Reflection

It's a familiar scene. A new born baby Jesus there at the centre, sleeping peacefully in a manger filled with of hay. His attentive and loving parents, Mary and Joseph, are kneeling beside him. Guests have come excitedly to visit this new family. Some Shepherds (and their flock!) have come hurriedly from the fields to see this new born baby; and a group of travelling scholars are also there, having made the journey from a distant land to offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to this new born baby.

To us, seeing these visitors at the manger is not surprising. We see it in every nativity play and every manger scene at this time of year. But for those hearing this story 2,000 years ago, there might have been a rather different surprise at the presence of these unusual guests.

Both the shepherds and the wise men were outsiders. The Shepherds were social outcasts, found on the margins of society. They were poor and uneducated; stigmatised and often excluded from the rest of society. Their ability to participate in wider society was limited by laws and customs that were very much designed to keep them out - a testimony from a Shepherd was not admissible in court. They weren't even allowed to be a part of temple worship as they were considered to be ceremonially unclean. They were always observing from the margins, not allowed in, not allowed a voice, not allowed to be part of the religious and political discussions of the day. Yet, here we find them, at the centre of the story which would change the conversation forever.

Whilst they might not have experienced the same stigma, the mysterious Magi travelling from the East were also outsiders in this scene. They were foreigners, bearing unusual gifts and attracting suspicion as they went on their journey. They were not from the people of Israel, and the culture and customs in Jerusalem would have been new to them. Outsiders to the city and outsiders to the community for whom Jesus was presumed to have come, finding the Magi at the bedside of this newborn King is entirely unexpected.

So why would these people, these outsiders, be the first to hear and witness the birth of the new born Messiah? Surely they would have been the ones quick to be ignored, never mind allowed a back row seat to the spectacle?

Yet even at the very start, as God enters the world incarnate in Christ, God makes room for the outsider. God prioritises those usually left on the margins, ushering in the last to be first in the queue. And not only are they in the room but they are central figures in a story repeated for centuries, given a voice and a place in the gospel message that will transform humanity. From the very start, the story of Jesus is one of radical inclusion.

Yet 2,000 years later, there still remain many places where the voices and contributions of those seen as outsiders are overlooked.

When asylum seekers come to the UK to seek safety, they arrive into a hostile environment. In a web of policies encouraging destitution, discrimination and distrust, they experience barriers towards accessing vital public services and are banned from working. They are kept out, unable to access the same rights and opportunities as the rest of society. They can't contribute their skills into the community through work, and as a consequence often left unable to provide for themselves and their families.

For people like Lina, this means they are left in situations risking their own lives. They are not offered the tools to build safe and nurturing homes in which the lives of their families can flourish. The situation in which Lina was left silenced her need, and silenced her chance to bring her child into a world where it would be offered care. Yet when her story *is* heard, it profoundly challenges our understanding of the gospel in today's world.

The way we see and treat those on the outside today, those who we consider 'other', is a far cry from what is modelled from the outset in Jesus' life. In the space God creates, we see radical inclusion. God brings in those on the margins to the centre of the most important story of all time.

The way we welcome the outsider in creates the chance to liberate a voice of challenge and change. How might we ensure the voices and experiences of those on the margins in our society are listened to?

Questions for reflection

How are we enriched by welcoming the outsiders in our communities?

What could we, as Christians, do to welcome and support refugees and asylum seekers?

Week Three: Home

Ellie's Story



My name is Ellie and I've been homeless for a few months now. It's tough out here, and for a woman, it's dangerous too. For 15 years, I had a house, where I lived with my three children. Now, I get shelter where I can or sleep on the streets, and my children aren't with me anymore. My days are spent trying to get food and shelter. But you've got to keep on going.

The worst thing about being homeless is being cold and wet. At the Bristol Methodist Centre, I can get some dry clothes, have a shower and get my clothes washed. I can have some breakfast and lunch. They've given me a tent, a sleeping bag – they've given me everything I need. They are wonderful people. When I'm out there, I keep to myself. But in here, I feel safe. The centre is the place where I feel the safest.

I don't know what I'd do without them. There's a stigma attached to being homeless, but a lot of us are decent and intelligent people. I pray every morning, I don't hurt anyone and I keep trying to be a better person.

I want to say to people out there: give us a chance. Give us one minute of your time, just to say "Hi, how are you?" That's the best way you could help.



Ellie's story was first told by The Methodist Church Advent Offering. You can find it in full at www.methodist.org.uk/stories-bristol-methodist-centre.pdf.

Reflection

As of November 2018, 320,000 people were estimated to be homeless in Great Britain. This means that each evening, as the light begins to fade, families and people such as Ellie across the country are searching for safe, secure and affordable places to stay. For some, this means sleeping outside where space can be found. For many, this means unfamiliar rooms in B&Bs, bedsits, a friend's house or hostel.

As the story of Jesus birth unfolds in Luke 2, the light dims over Bethlehem and doors begin to shut, and we imagine a tired couple seeking somewhere to stay. The place is already unfamiliar – no home comforts, the familiar feel of the hallway rug underfoot as they step through the door. In fact, they find themselves with few options for comforts of any kind, as doors continue to be closed – full already, too expensive, too late.

A routine of closed doors and negative responses, they find themselves in the left over anywhere, behind the last resort. Whilst this scene is often warmed with low lighting and fresh hay in our school halls each year, the space must have seemed somewhat less welcome to its first guests, its setting offering little in the way of value or worth. Disappointment wouldn't have been an unexpected response. For the son of God, couldn't more have been offered?

The housing crisis in the UK is the public face of a much wider, deeper issue with our response to need. It is often the battleground for debates which lie at the heart of our political process. Where does the responsibility for provision lie: with the state, the individual, or the voluntary sector? In the meantime, the shortage of safe, affordable housing is leaving many repeating a routine of questions which is met with few answers.

For Ellie, this means the lack of dry clothing, warm food, and access to hygiene. It means the loss of safety. With the lack of these things, it is more than Ellie's security which is taken away, but her sense of relationship with others and her place in society. Ellie's appeal for those passing by to give her, and others, a chance exposes the bias of society, perhaps both conscious and subconscious, to remove access to dignity and value alongside access to home.

Repeatedly in the stories we've explored leading up to Jesus' birth, God's choices have exposed the people behind each action. As Mary is offered a voice, God brings her power to the fore. As the outsiders are invited in, God uncovers their worth hidden behind preconceptions and isolation. In each moment, God offers value. Woven in to the story of Jesus birth are displays of God's offer of dignity, worth and love.

Arriving to a place of rest which has the power to remove your feeling of safety is not a situation which translates any of these attitudes to action. Yet it is the situation our crisis of housing in the UK is placing many in. Response to the housing crisis in the UK needs to push deeper into questions not purely of numbers, but of values and best practice which sees home as more than an open door.

As we seek to respond to a crisis which leaves many without options, how could the role of the Church bring value back into the conversation? In Ellie's experience, the welcome of the Bristol Methodist Centre has given her the chance to find somewhere safe to rest. She has been able to ask for and receive support, without stigma or judgement.

We believe in a God who has a plan for each person, and longs to see them liberated to fulfil their potential. The choices we make as we seek to offer support to those trapped in homelessness hold the opportunity to bring this to life.

Questions for reflection

How could you show dignity, worth and love in all your interactions?

How might the church, both locally and nationally, respond to rising levels of homelessness in a way that upholds the value and dignity of all human life?

What opportunities are there in your community to be part of responding to the housing crisis?

Week Four: Room for All

The Beginning



They couldn't believe what they had seen. Nothing ever happened to them – their life was just the hillside, sheep and more sheep. But today! Today they had seen a miracle. In all their days counting sheep, the Shepherds had never imagined that they might feel the way they had today. They had been invited into something awesome, the real life promise of great hope to come. They had a suspicion that things were really going to change from now on.

As they left the stable, they couldn't run fast enough. It was early morning, yet they began to shout at the top of their voices about what they had seen. People were amazed at what they said! They sang praises and thanks to God for letting them be part of this moment. Today was going to be a busy day – they simply had to tell everyone the good news.

Sometime after, three rather more subdued guests left the house where Mary, Joseph and the baby had been. These guests had travelled far to be part of this moment, yet what they had seen far surpassed their expectations. They could not have anticipated that this promised King really meant all that it seems he did.

On their way to visit, they had called in on King Herod, and promised that they would tell him where they had found the child. But something didn't feel quite right anymore.

Caspar had a dream, warning him that perhaps King Herod didn't have good intentions. So, they decided to begin their journey home by another route, carrying with them the great story to tell to all those they met on their way.



This story was based on [Luke 2: 17-20](#) and [Matthew 2: 11-12](#).

Reflection

And so, all are gathered in. After hours, weeks, months, perhaps years, the travellers have reached their destination. Mary, Joseph and their new family member find themselves at the end of one journey and on the edge of another. A band of Shepherds find their lives transformed in the blink of an eye, as they go from their quiet hillside life to being in the midst of a radiant host of angels and a newborn messiah. And the wandering Magi land halfway across the world, finally in the presence of a promise told long ago.

Whilst we will never know if shepherds sat next to gold-adorned Magi on a stable floor, the picture of this gathered group helps us to clearly see the distinction of this moment.

At this place of arrival, God gathers in these unexpected journeys.

In the inviting of the shepherds, people from the outside are welcomed in and the ordinary is made extraordinary.

In the long pilgrimage of the Magi, the Good News is opened up for all.

And in the carrying great change, the quiet and previously ignored voice of Mary declares transformation to the world.

And all this because God's choice of welcome made space for everyone around the manger.

But this scene is certainly not the end of the story. As soon as they are gathered in, each traveller returns to their space in the world. And as they go, the transformation of this experience goes with them.

In Luke 2, we hear that the Shepherds saw Jesus and, presumably after some rather excited conversations, left that place to spread the word. As they stepped out, these people who were previously found on the outside, often ignored and their voices not heard, were the first to share the message of redemption to the world. In their own words, they become the very first messengers of the gospel.

The Magi too arrive to see Jesus and find themselves in awe at what they see. This meeting with the King promised in the Jewish scripture, even in the form of a child, is enough to make them fall down and worship. And, despite their agreement to return to King Herod and tell him where Jesus is, they decide to return by a different route. Their path ahead is altered because of their encounter.

And Mary, called to play a leading role in the great story, is left with her child. She too has undergone a transformation – from quiet and left aside to carrying, and carrying a great message of redemption. Luke 2 tells us that her response to all this was small, but not lacking power: she *"treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."* Mary, an unlikely messenger, is invited into the process of change for herself, as well as for the world. As the world is changed, so is she.

When each one is invited in, they leave changed.

In so many ways, this story paints a picture of what inclusion could mean for those involved. When the boundaries of the narrative are moved so that those on the margins are at the centre, we see with a fresh perspective. When we offer value to the voices we usually exclude, we hear so much more of the Good News. When we are open and willing to encounter with all, we ourselves can be transformed.

When we look to create change, who do we seek to lead us?

Are we willing to let power be disrupted, that change might come from an unlikely place?

Are we open to being changed ourselves, that we might become part of transformation?

Questions for reflection

As you have returned to the Advent story this Christmas, what has changed for you?

As you seek change in your area, or in our country, what could you do differently to raise up the voices of those unheard?

Whose story could you try and listen to, in order to learn how power could be disrupted?