IT WASN'T A CHRISTMAS CARD SCENE

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Category: Observations

We all know the scene. Mary and Joseph gathered around the manger, with a cow and a couple of sheep in the background. Perhaps there is a shepherd or two in there, or even a wise man (or three) or an angel looking on. Whatever other players are there, Mary and Joseph are centre stage. Mary, with a beatific smile on her face, is resplendent in a blue robe, while Joseph looks manly and supportive. The baby, whether lying in the manger or snuggled in Mary's arms is quiet and sleepy.

Except, it wasn't like that...

Let's get the big one out of the way first; there wasn't a stable.

Mary and Joseph had made their way to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home to register for a census. In a hospitable culture, such as the one in the Middle East, it is inconceivable that one of Joseph's relatives would not take them in. However, because the guest room was full, they ended up staying in the family room, which was shared with the animals (to stop the animals from being stolen and to keep the family warm). Before we start thinking disparaging things about having cattle in the living room, we should remember that plenty of people in our society keep cat litter trays in their living space!

So, this young couple (Mary was probably only a teenager) dossed down with the family in the main room of the house and then Mary went into labour.

No doubt Joseph started to flap around and panic - that's what guys do in this situation (I know - I was that guy). Probably, the men in the household ushered him out of the way, perhaps to next door's house. There they would have wound him up with stories about how his life would never be the same, and probably offered him a drink or two. Meanwhile, he would have paced back and forth, panicking about his wife.

Meanwhile, the women of the house would have gathered round Mary to encourage and care for her. Perhaps there was a village midwife who was called over to help. And Mary screamed. She called out for Joseph, she called out for her mother and she desperately wanted the pain to stop. There was no epidural, no gas and air, not even aspirin, just pain and blood. Eventually, after who knows how long (but it seemed longer to Mary) the little boy was born. The midwife slapped his bum, cleaned him up and passed him to his mum. It was a miracle, they both survived - not something you could take for granted in those days (or for most of history, for that matter). At some point, Mary and Joseph would have had a moment to themselves, deliriously happy,Â Â but physically and emotionally drained, they wouldn't have said much and they probably nodded off to sleep pretty quickly. They certainly wouldn't have been up to putting on improbably perfect clothing and posing for a photo-op Christmas card.

OK, I've undoubtedly got some details wrong, but my description is closer to reality than the perfect nativity scene of cultural imagination. I'm not just trying to be awkward or (almost literally) iconoclastic. This is important.

Jesus life started as it ended, with pain, blood and cries of agony. When God became man and "tabernacled" with humanity, he didn't stay at one remove, floating above the ground with a halo and a heavenly glow to his perfect clothing. He became fully human, made of the stuff of the earth - stuff that he had created - and he lived a real human life and died an agonising human death. The story of Jesus is gritty and earthy, rooted in poverty and pain and it has to be so. By living a fully human life, Jesus could fully identify with humanity and could take the punishment for mankind's wrongdoings on the cross. A super-spiritual, semi-detached Jesus ultimately has nothing to offer to a lost humanity.

The good news is that the story doesn't end in Bethlehem or even at Calvary. The baby born in poverty and pain rose again in glory and has ascended to the right hand of his Father. One day, he will return and earth and heaven which were united in the incarnate Son of God will be united forever in the new creation.