



Be a Star

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION DAY & LUNCH

A collection of ideas, resources and guidance
for planning a Christmas Celebration Day
& Community Christmas Lunch



Christmas
Appeal

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Guidance for running a Christmas Celebration Lunch	3
To Do Checklist	
Guests, Pray, Volunteers	4
Welcomers and Befrienders	5
Be a Star Befriender	6
Different personalities, Setting the space, Setting the table	
Food allergies / medical issues,	7
Gifts and cards, Time for Tea, Transport	8
Safe Mission risk assessments	9
Inclusion Guidance by the Enabled Team	10
Suggested wording for inviting guests (editable)	15
Guest details information form (editable)	16
Suggested timetable of the day	18
United Prayer for volunteers and staff	20
Christmas Service Outline	21
Mary's Monologue - Donkeys and Stables	23
Shepherd's Monologue - Sheep and Stones	25
Inn Keeper's Monologue - Overbooked but Overjoyed	28
Comfort and Joy - Short Talk Outline	31
Fun and Games	34

INTRODUCTION

This year's resource is based around the thoughts of Mary, a shepherd and the inn keeper. The first Christmas was about Christ coming into the world and we often hear the words 'comfort and joy' associated with Christmastime. This year, our thoughts focus on the reality of what comfort and joy really meant to those who witnessed the birth of Christ all those years ago in Bethlehem.

We hope this helps to bring the amazing story of Christ's birth alive again to those gathered this Christmas.

Ali Thornton-Dean

Older People's Ministries

GUIDANCE FOR RUNNING A CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION LUNCH

Christmas is a very beautiful time, but also challenging for many. These tips and suggestions are simply to help us think about how we can make it a good experience for all.

This 'To Do' checklist below can be used as reference for before you begin organising the event, and on the day.

TO DO CHECKLIST

Before the event:

- ☐ Book venue and run checks (Wi-fi availability to play videos, speakers for music etc)
- ☐ Edit and print/email out invitations (see editable template)
- ☐ Print/distribute Guest Information forms (available with invitation template)
- ☐ Edit timetables (for printing and display)
- ☐ Purchase Christmas cards (Christian-themed cards recommended)
- ☐ Organise/collect donations for gifts
- ☐ Purchase gift-wrap: brown paper bags / wrapping paper, gifts tags/ribbons (optional)
- ☐ Teatime treats such as packaged sandwiches, cakes etc
- ☐ Wrap gifts and write personalised Christmas cards
- ☐ Create seating plan (optional)
- ☐ Recruit and delegate volunteers (welcomers, befrienders, Nativity narrators, servers, cleaners etc)
- ☐ Print and provide menus (ensure these are easy to read)

For the service:

- ☐ Advent candle wreath/candles (optional)
- ☐ Nativity set with individual character pieces and stable
- ☐ Extra table
- ☐ Christmas present bag
- ☐ Star decoration / handmade silver star

For the lunch:

- ☐ Tablecloths
- ☐ Napkins
- ☐ Name place cards
- ☐ Cutlery
- ☐ Plates
- ☐ Cups
- ☐ Self-contained candles
- ☐ Small vases / recycled jam jars
- ☐ Fresh flowers (divide up a bouquet)
- ☐ Bottled drinks (Shloer, juices, water etc)
- ☐ Gravy boats

For the games (optional):

- ☐ Pass the parcel (wrapped gift with small packets of Milky way Stars tucked in between each layer)
- ☐ Soft ball

GUESTS

Take a moment to imagine you are a guest attending the Christmas celebration lunch on your own. Think about the feelings that a guest might have, such as concerns and struggles with socialising, unfamiliarity with the building and other guests, previous negative church experiences or difficult Christmas memories. This will help you to be a mindful host and get the right people in suitable volunteering roles so everyone feels safe and secure.

Things to consider when thinking about who to invite and getting word out:

- ask corps members to invite neighbours
- liaise with local external agencies, eg health and social workers, Housing Department, schools, local community groups, local Lifehouses etc
- identify local members of Enabled (Fellowship of Endeavour) by contacting our Community Services Team -communityservices@salvationarmy.org.uk

PRAY

Gather staff and volunteers for prayer in the weeks leading up to the lunch and before guests arrive on the day. Those using this resource throughout the UKI Territory will have access to the United Prayer so the whole event is underpinned by prayer, which is powerful and acknowledges our need of God's help.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers come in all ages and there is always a part someone can play. Here are some ways volunteers can take part ahead of the event:

- invite potential guests
- buy and donate gifts, eg chocolates, unisex gloves/scarves/hats etc
- ask people to write cards and wrap gifts
- children could decorate brown paper bags for 'teatime treats' for guests to take home
- help create little menus for the tables
- offer to provide transport for guests/decorations/food needed on the day

Volunteers on the day can:

- help decorate and set up the venue
- welcome and befriend guests
- share short prayers during the service
- provide general assistance to guests
- cook and/or serve food
- help wash up and clean up

The list is endless, so don't do it all yourself - get the whole church family involved.

Tip: If you can create a team of volunteers, ensure that people know they can do 'come and go volunteering', meaning they don't have to be around all day and can leave once they have done their part. People are likely to volunteer if they are only required to help for a limited time rather than a full day.

For those who volunteer who would normally be the ones invited to the meal, let them know they are needed and ask them to take on a befriending role (see next section). Visit OurHub for more advice on volunteering or contact the Community Team.

WELCOMERS AND BEFRIENDERS

Ensure welcomers and befrienders have been well briefed and know what they are doing before guests arrive. See the 'Be a Star Befriender' supporting resource.

Allow time and space to let befrienders introduce themselves to the guests they will be sat next to for the meal. Remember that it can be daunting going into a new place, with new faces and not knowing who you will sit with. Give each guest a 'specific befriending volunteer' who they can go to throughout the day should they need any help or support, eg letting them know where the toilets are.

Print and display a running order of the day for everyone to see. For guests who may not be able to read, however, please have befrienders explain the timetable to them at the start. People generally feel more comfortable if they know what is happening and when it will happen.

Tip: Create a seating plan and name place cards so that people know they have an assigned seat for the meal.

BE A STAR BEFRIENDER

We are looking for volunteers to come alongside our guests at Christmas, to sit with them, eat Christmas lunch together and simply be a friend.

This is a very important volunteer role as it takes someone with good listening skills, a heart for other's wellbeing and the desire to help someone enjoy their day at what can be a difficult time for many.

Some key guidelines for 'Be a Star Befrienders':

- Ask about your friend's day. How are they?
- We have two ears and one mouth, so remember to listen twice as much as talking!
- Give plenty of time for your friend to talk. You may be the only person they have spoken to in a long time, especially if they live alone.
- Share something from your own day, especially if you have encountered some unexpected kindness.
- If you're struggling to get a conversation going, you could ask 'Which character do you think you'd have liked to be in the Christmas story?' and other open-ended Christmas-themed questions.
- Listen to any concerns or questions your friend may have - no concern is too small, and it can be helpful to share something even if there is no immediate solution.
- Offer encouragement where possible and try not to speculate.
- Encourage them to keep in contact with other friends and family as we start a new year. This may be a sensitive topic, so carefully ask about friends and family beforehand.
- Treat your friend with respect, politeness, kindness and honesty.
- Respect your friend's right to confidentiality.

Be a star and be aware...

- Your friend may not have good past experiences of Christmas.
- They may want to share stories of Christmas, but they may not if this is painful.
- They may be bereaved of a partner, family member or loved one and they may find Christmas difficult.
- They may not be used to eating in a group setting, so a gentle encouragement along the way may be needed, guidance to where they need to be seated. Offer some assistance if needed etc.

DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

We have all been uniquely created. Some of us love to chat, others not so much. Some of us enjoy playing games (see supporting Be A Star fun and games resource), while others participate by spectating rather than doing. That's all OK - it's human nature to have personal preferences and boundaries! Accept that everyone is different but try to facilitate opportunities for befrienders to chat and encourage guests to take part if they wish to or not.

SETTING THE SPACE

The aim is to create an inviting, comfortable, and safe atmosphere. Here are some suggestions:

- move chairs into small clusters so that no one feels left out
- have welcome coffee and tea ready for people arriving
- play festive music in the background to avoid an awkward silence and calm any nerves
- have a screen with the lyrics for people to read and follow carols being played

Tip: Be aware of those who are sensitive to loud noises; could there be a designated quieter space in the room? If you are expecting families, consider creating a play area for toys/books. See section on including people with disability.

[Click here for the Safe Mission Guide No 24 'Older Person's Activities' on OurHub to identify any potential risks.](#)

SETTING THE TABLE

Lay out tablecloths, napkins, cutlery, printed menus, sauces, cups and bottles of drinks on tables. Ensure that gravy boats are provided rather than pouring it on someone's meal for them.

It may be the only time some people are joined with others around a table, so let's make it special. If safe to do so, place self-contained candles as table centrepieces alongside small vases or recycled jam jars filled with fresh flowers.

Tip: The flowerpots could be given as gifts at the end of the day to those volunteering as a thank you.

FOOD ALLERGIES / MEDICAL ISSUES

It is important to make note of any dietary requirements and food allergies (gluten, nut, dairy free etc) as all can be relatively easy to accommodate. Check Guest Information Forms carefully and consider gifts being offered, including chocolate which may contain unwelcome ingredients.

Tip: Highlight allergens in the menus provided, eg GF = gluten free, NF = nut free, contains egg/dairy etc. You can also make a note of allergies inside or behind name place cards for servers to see when serving food.

We recommend that you read and ensure you are implementing the correct Safe Mission procedures (requires access to OurHub):

- [Download Food Allergy and Intolerance - Guidance and Templates](#)
- [Download Safe Mission Guide No 06 - Catering Activities](#)
- [Download Safe Mission Guide - Safe Food Procedure](#)

(New legislation as of October 2021 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland requires all food businesses to list all ingredients on pre-packaged food including allergen labelling on foods packaged for sale on the premises. This does not apply to open food.)

GIFTS AND CARDS

Gifts could be confectionary, gloves, scarves etc. Perhaps ask for donations from the corps in the weeks leading up to the lunch and ask people to buy something they would be willing to wear themselves.

Volunteers can help wrap up the presents / write the tags and personalised Christmas cards if you have the names of guests in advance. This small gesture could mean so much to many.

Tip: Choose Christian-themed cards as this may be the only card some guests may receive.

TIME FOR TEA!

Have teatime goody bags ready for people to take home containing packaged food such as sandwiches and cakes. It would be helpful if this bag was big enough to also hold their gift, so they aren't worrying about how to carry everything.

Tip: Try to keep away from supermarket plastic bags and go more with a festive theme or brown paper bags decorated by children at the corps in advance.

TRANSPORT

Before offering transport to guests, consider seriously whether this is feasible, whether you have the resources to offer the provision and whether guests and volunteers would feel safe to share a vehicle. It may be that guests will need to find their own transport, but you could provide the contact details of any free local bus services, for example.

If you plan to use your corps minibus, then you should follow the guidance already in place in relation to:

- the training needed for the driver
- maintenance of the vehicle

- Risk Assessment for Use of Minibuses
- Guidance for Drivers checklist

All documents can be found on [OurHub Safe Mission Folder](#).

If you are asking volunteers to transport guests to the event, you will need to check whether they:

- have a valid driving licence and that their insurance will cover the activity
- have considered the need for a second volunteer in the vehicle
- are an established volunteer and have done relevant volunteer checks
- are clear about expectations around picking up and dropping off guests

Tip: Offer a secondary contact at the corps in case any issues arise, as you may be busy hosting and welcoming other guests.

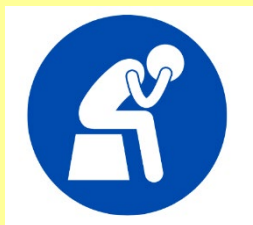
Be clear as to whether their mileage will be reimbursed, what the rate will be (45p pm) and let them know about the expenses form to complete.

SAFE MISSION RISK ASSESSMENTS

All of the below can be found on OurHub Safe Mission Folder - click on the links below for the relevant documents:

- [Download Part B Activities - Reopening Cafes, Coffee Shops and Hot Meal Drop In Sessions](#)
- [Part B Activities - email Safe Mission for a template](#)
- [Download Guidance of Drivers Checklist \(Mini Bus\)](#)
- [Download Information for passengers for community transport services](#)

Including people with disabilities in Christmas activities



Christmas can be a very difficult and lonely time for people living with a disability. Research by the Office for National Statistics shows that 13.9% of people with a disability often or always feel lonely compared to 3.4% of people without a disability.



Below are some tips that you can use to help ensure that your Christmas event is as inclusive as possible.

Participation and engagement

Ask people:



- what activities they would like to see included and consider offering a mixture of different types of activities
- if they know anyone with a disability who may benefit from coming along
- what support they require on the day and how you can help.



Use different methods for inviting people and for advertising your events. This will help reach a diverse range of people in your community - for example emails, cards, letters, social media. If possible, follow up invitations with a telephone call or visit.



Include the planned programme of the day with the invitation so that people are aware of what to expect.

Accessibility and space



Provide information about transport to and from the venue.



Arrange accessible parking spaces or drop-off/pick-up points.



Ensure the building entrance, activity rooms and toilets are accessible to those who use wheelchairs and walking aids.



Allocate a volunteer at the entrance to welcome people and offer support when required.



Ensure there is space to allow easy movement for wheelchair users and those with guide dogs and mobility aids.

Remove clutter and trip hazards from rooms and aisles.



Provide clear signage that is easy to read and placed at a height that everyone can see.

Communication



Ask people what their preferred method of communication is.



Provide materials in alternative formats such as large print or Braille.

Use Arial or Comic Sans fonts with a minimum size of 16.

Ensure there is a good contrast between the colour of the font and the colour of the background (eg a yellow font on a blue background).



Provide both verbal and written instructions using short and simple words with symbols and images.



Avoid overlaying text on images as this can make it harder to read.



Provide support to those that may need verbal prompts and sign language.

Food and drink



Consider asking people to let you know in advance if they have food allergies or dietary needs, such as on the invitation/form. This will help you to better prepare.

Include some options for different dietary requirements such as vegetarian, gluten free, soft diet, allergies.



Offer a variety of foods such as savoury, snacks, fruit, treats, crisps, and cakes.



Offer a variety of drink options such as hot/cold, caffeine free, fizzy, squash / diluting juice, water.

Noise and sensory awareness



Be mindful that too many people in a place can cause sensory overload for some people living with a disability. People with anxiety, those who are neuro diverse or individuals who have hearing loss may find the event overwhelming and struggle with overcrowded room noise.



Offer breaks between activities.



Reduce visual distractions, noise and sound, and ensure that lighting is suitable for people that are autistic.



Consider holding activities in smaller groups.



Consider using a buddy/befriender or having a support volunteer during activities.



Provide a quiet room or space for people who wish to take some time away from the noise.



SUGGESTED WORDING FOR INVITING GUESTS

Dear *(insert name here)*

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION LUNCH

You are invited to join us for Christmas celebrations and lunch on:

(Insert date here)

Christmas is a time when we remember that people gathered to celebrate the birth of Jesus long ago, and so we warmly invite you to join with us. We know it can be difficult for those who haven't joined us before, so if it is your first Christmas with us please don't worry - it was our first time once too, so we do understand and hope you will be able to come and celebrate.

You are invited to join us for coffee between 10 am - 10.30 am and our short morning celebration service starts at 11 am. Lunch will be served at 12 noon and the afternoon will finish at 2 pm. (There will be some teatime treats for you to take home.)

Should you require transport please make your request on the attached form.

Christmas blessings from

(Insert first name and corps name to personalise this)

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION LUNCH

Guest Details Information Form

Name:

Date of Birth:

Address:

Telephone Number:

Preferred name to be called by:

1. Do you require transport to attend the Christmas Celebration?
Yes / No (Please circle)

(Remove if you as a corps are not able to provide transport)

2. Any dietary requirements?

3. Is this your first time coming along to the Christmas Lunch Celebration with us? Yes / No (Please circle)

4. Is there anything you wish to tell us to help make your visit more comfortable for you?

5. In case of an emergency please provide details of someone we can contact and please state their relationship to you:

(If you prefer us to not contact anyone, please leave this blank)

6. In case of an emergency and a situation arising where we need to seek medical help on your behalf, please share any medication that an attending medical person would benefit from knowing:

7. Would you like us to keep you informed of any future events that may be happening? Yes / No (Please circle)

Signed _____ Date _____

PRINT NAME HERE PLEASE

The personal details you provide will only be used for this event unless you have indicated that you would like us to keep in touch with you in the future. We will keep your data safe. All your details will therefore be carefully disposed of after the event. Please see the privacy statement for further information: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/privacy-statement

SUGGESTED TIMETABLE OF THE DAY

(FOUR HOURS MAXIMUM)

Time	What's happening	Further Information
9.30 am	Gather volunteers/staff for United Prayer	See United Prayer provided. Explain how this will be used throughout the UKI Territory to pray for guests joining the lunch.
10.00 am	Guests start arriving	Have coffee/tea ready and a nice welcoming seating area. Have music playing or a screen with words of Christmas hymns or pictures playing.
10.30 am	Coffee and gift opening	Have a small gift wrapped and tagged personally for each guest and a hand-written Christmas card with a Christian theme to ensure that if this is the only card someone receives, it is a reminder of the true meaning of Christmas.
11.00 am	Christmas Service	See service plan and sermon outline provided.
11.45 am	Comfort break and time to 'Meet your neighbour'.	Befrienders to guide people to meet who they will be sitting next to for the meal.
12.00 pm	Christmas Lunch	See guidance for set up, tips and suggestions.

Time	What's happening	Further Information
1.15 pm	Christmas fun and games 'Time to watch and play'	Remind volunteers/staff that it's OK for those who don't want to join in, as many find enjoyment in watching others taking part.
2.00 pm	Home time	Packed tea / goody bag ready to be given to each guest. If possible, avoid using plastic bags and use paper bags that look special. Perhaps the children of the corps could decorate brown bags for people and personalise them.

UNITED PRAYER

for volunteers and staff to pray prior to the Christmas Celebration

Dear Father God,

We pray for those who will share this day with us.

Give courage to those who are nervous and anxious.

Comfort those who are grieving.

Bring joy to all who will share this day with us.

Strengthen our hands and calm our anxious thoughts.

Lord, hear our prayers in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

CHRISTMAS SERVICE OUTLINE

THEME: COMFORT AND JOY

Bible reading contained within the 'Sermon Outline' - Luke 2:4-16 (NIV)

Handy music tip: Music to accompany the carols can be easily downloaded from:

<https://samusicindex.com/celebrating-christmas-at-home/carol-accompaniments>

Handy monologue tip: These are intended to help build the story as you go through the service and are light-hearted. Download and print copies of the scripts for each character and use simple costumes or headwear or accessories to help build the character. If possible, choose readers of different ages who can bring a sense of joy and wonder to the reading. Give the readers plenty of advance notice, rather than asking them just before the service, as this will allow them time to make sure they are happy with what is expected of them as they take on these character roles.

For something different: If you are serving a three-course meal, you might want to break up the service into three sections, eg Parts 1 to 5 outlined below and then have the starter, continue then with Parts 6 to 8 before having the main course, followed by the final Parts 9 to 12 and serve dessert. This would break up the meal, giving time for people to clear tables and offer a slightly different type of Christmas meal experience with the service running through each part of it. You may find this is quite an interactive way of leading a meal celebration service for a change.

1. Opening video clip while people are settling into their spaces - 'Angels from the Realms of Glory' by the Piano Guys with over 1,000 people coming together

<https://youtu.be/PrLoWt2tfqg>

2. Carol - 'Hark the herald angels sing' (SASB 108)

3. Prayers (*If appropriate, ask children with parents/adults and older people to come and light the Advent wreath*)

4. Carol - 'O little town of Bethlehem' (SASB 118)

5. Monologue - 'Mary: Donkeys and Stables'

6. Carol - 'Once in royal David's city' (SASB 121)

7. Monologue - 'Shepherd: Sheep and Stones'

8. Carol - 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night' (SASB 132)

9. Monologue - 'Innkeeper: Overbooked but Overjoyed'
10. Short Thought Outline - 'Comfort and Joy'
11. Carol - 'Joy to the World' (SASB 113)
12. Benediction and Closing Music - 'Merry Christmas Everyone' by Rend Collective

www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3jn0LnxS5c

MARY'S MONOLOGUE - 'DONKEYS AND STABLES'

(Woman walks in carrying a baby (doll) in a blanket and wearing a blue headdress to signify the character Mary)

Isn't he wonderful? My beautiful baby. We've named him Jesus and I can't begin to tell you how blessed I feel. I imagine all mothers feel the same, but I just can't help feeling I really am the most blessed mummy of all time! He sleeps, he eats, and I have to say he's the most peaceful baby I have ever known. All my friends can't believe it.

'Sleepless nights?' they ask. 'Thankfully not,' I reply.

'Wind and projectile you know what?' they say. 'No,' I simply say.

'Unable to soothe himself?' they enquire. 'No, he seems most at peace when I lay him in his crib.'

Well, at that they soon leave me alone. But I understand that my baby boy, my Jesus, is a little different from the rest. Don't be mistaken - the donkey and the stable were a challenge. You see, I always expected to give birth in my own mother's home, with family surrounding me with water and blankets warming by the fire. Familiar surroundings, safe and warm. Giving birth at home was what I expected. But instead my Jesus was born with a different kind of family surrounding him.

I know some say that donkeys are foolish, but I think donkeys are far from foolish. We needed to use the strength of the donkey to carry us to Bethlehem. Nine months pregnant and riding a donkey - I don't call that comfort and joy, to be honest! However, our donkey was such a gentle soul. He carried me as carefully as he could, navigating each bump in the road, each boulder, each crevice ... and I knew he was trying to bring comfort in my discomfort. He must have been so tired

by the time we reached Bethlehem, yet he helped to keep my precious baby Jesus safe in my womb. So, while that journey wasn't the most comfortable or joyful, it was beautiful knowing that even an animal cared for me, cared for my son. Even in a stable that was a bit dirty, a bit uncomfortable, our precious donkey lay close to the manger, bringing his warmth. Joseph and I also lay close by the donkey to keep warm, feeling the softness of his fur, the warmth of his breath - yes, comfort, in the form of a donkey. It's surprising how God sends comfort in the most unexpected of ways, and that brings joy.

Come on, little one, your daddy will be wondering where we are.

(Mary exits as she continues to talk to the baby). He's got so much to teach you, he's a wonderful carpenter. His soul is gentle, and he loves you as his own...

SHEPHERD'S MONOLOGUE - 'SHEEP AND STONES'

(Shepherd walks with in with a crook and wearing a headdress (tea towel and tie would suffice) or carrying a fluffy sheep under his arm)

I've just been to the shepherds' monthly get together. Oh my, today was interesting - and I have to say, quite joyful indeed. We all gathered in a field on the outskirts of Bethlehem, and as I got closer to the field I could hear this beautiful sound. And you would have never guessed it, but all of the shepherds gathered were singing a new song! We do like to sing, you know, especially around the fire when we're keeping warm when the night air is chilly. It also helps us to know where we all are in the dark, too! Well, the song they were singing rang a few bells with me, I have to say, because I'd heard the words before. The main gist of it was 'Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth.'

Ooh, it took me back, it did! I remember as though it was only last night. The angels surrounding us, and us being a little nervous of them to start with, if I'm going to be bluntly honest. But then realising that these angels meant us no harm - quite the opposite actually. These angels were messengers from God! I've often been asked if I felt comfort and joy in those moments before we went running off to find the baby; and I guess, to be frank, the first sighting of a huge angel followed by what felt like hundreds of angels didn't actually feel comfortable at all. It was a shock! It's not every evening you have a chorus of angels in your sheep fold, I can tell you! However, those feelings quickly passed, and a joy like no other filled spaces in my heart I never knew possible!

Now did you know that shepherds are known to be good runners? No? Well, we are, and we often have to run after wandering sheep that need to be found, and we need to act quickly and run fast! So, on that evening as the stars shone brightly in the sky, as the angels sang their song about the birth of Jesus, I had the urge to run. I wasn't running away from the stars or the angels, honest friends, I was running *towards* something - or should I say, someone - running to the new king, baby Jesus.

The ground was rough, with stones, boulders and crevices everywhere. I felt my skin burn as another stone found its way into my sandals, with the sand from the hillside making its home in between my toes,. And then my ankle gave way with the force of running downhill at speed. Pain seared into my calf muscle, but I could not and would not stop. Yes, it was uncomfortable, but I knew I needed to be the first to meet the new king. You see, sometimes you have to be uncomfortable to experience true beauty. And you know something else? Meeting baby Jesus gave me a peace and comfort in my heart like I had never known before. And then do you know what else? That comfort brought a joy that made me start singing - and I have never stopped! In fact, I'm going to sing that song until the day I die because everyone needs to know! Life might not always be comfortable, but that baby Jesus taught me that comfort and joy can come when you least expect it - even in the form of a newborn baby.

Well, now I've said that all out loud, it's reminded me that at the next shepherds' monthly meeting I might encourage even more singing, as it turns out us shepherds are in tune with the heavenlies! I wonder if one day someone might even sing a song about us ... Now, I wonder how would that go ...?

(Shepherd walks off mulling and thinking about a song)

‘As shepherds watched their sheep by night’ - no, no that’s not right ...

‘As shepherds watched their lambs” ... no, no not that either. Let me think again ... /As shepherds watched their flock by night ...’ Now that sounds like a good first line to a song, don’t you think!

(The music could start for the next carol as the shepherd leaves).

INNKEEPER'S MONOLOGUE - 'OVERBOOKED BUT OVERJOYED'

(Innkeeper to walk in with his head in his hands)

Oh my, I can't quite believe what's happened. How can you feel so uncomfortable yet overjoyed within a matter of moments? *(Takes a big breath)* Sorry, let me introduce myself - I'm Isaac and I'm the local innkeeper down at the bottom of the hill. You may have seen my inn as you travelled here today, and I have to say, you are most welcome to come and join us and book in an overnight stay. Well, when I say you can book in, you can after two weeks on Wednesday because we've been fully booked for weeks now! In fact, being fully booked has a lot to do with what I want to tell you about, because we were so booked up with everyone wanting to be in the same place at the same time! *(You know what censuses do to people! Tends to leave folk with no sense!)*

That's why when this young couple came knocking on our door in the middle of the night, I was very uncomfortable at having to turn them away. Not least because of the large bump that was evident underneath the young woman's cloak and the look of complete anxiety on the face of her husband Joseph. Yes, this young woman called Mary was with child, and she looked ready to pop. So when they asked if I had a place for them to stay, I felt so uncomfortable saying no and turning them away. Thank the tiny bright shining stars that my good sense prevailed, because as I saw the sorrow and anguish in their faces, I remembered that the cattle shed was somewhat warm, out of sight and vacant - well, apart from a few animals, obviously. I didn't think they would want to actually take up my offer, but I guess when

you are desperate and about to give birth to a baby, comfort isn't at the top of your list of priorities. I guess in those moments, when life is literally bursting forth, you take the discomfort to bring forth joy.

Now I've been around when my wife has given birth to our seven children, so I know a thing or two about childbirth. Erm, actually just let me clarify - when I say I've been around, I mean I've been in a nearby room while my wife's mother and sisters have helped her give birth. Four boys and three girls - yes, I'm a proud father. But I did feel sorry for Joseph the father, as he was going to have to help deliver the baby on his own. That made me feel uncomfortable too, that they had no one else around them. I felt sad - I didn't know what to say, and I felt, to be very honest, I felt distressed that this poor young woman was having to give birth in a stable. I felt like I had let them down. There, I've finally said it. My discomfort was because I couldn't do what I felt I needed to do. That made me feel uncomfortable.

However, by some miracle of God, with a few clean cloths and a bucket of clean water warmed by the fire by my wonderful wife, that husband helped his young wife give birth. Not only that, they wanted to share their experience - share their first newborn with anyone and everyone, it seemed.

My wife went to check on them, and they said to bring me to meet Jesus - that's what they named him. Me? For some reason this felt like nothing I'd ever experienced before. There, among the animals - a donkey, cattle, not forgetting the sheep - it was the most beautiful scene. A mother, a father and their newborn. The stable was lit with a glow like I've never seen. I couldn't even tell you where that glow was coming from, but glow there was. I felt overjoyed, I felt a peace like

I've never felt. And the joy within me was even more than when I'd seen my own children for the first time! Better not share that information with my wife! I really don't understand it!

Anyway, my discomfort left me as I realised that all this couple needed was each other and their baby boy. Sometimes, we have to put aside the discomfort so we recognise what's important, because what's important brings real joy - everlasting joy - and I can tell you now, no money, no power, nothing can ever touch real joy.

Now that is a comfort!

Well, best be going - beds to make, animals to feed. And since that baby was born in our stable, we can't keep up with bookings - so remember, if you want to book a room give us two weeks on Wednesday, friends - we might have some availability then!

COMFORT AND JOY - SHORT TALK OUTLINE

Introduction

We often think about joy at Christmas, don't we? The joy of hearing again the story of the birth of baby Jesus - the joy of the angels singing, the shepherds happily rejoicing, and the joy of gift giving as a reminder of the gifts the wise men brought to Jesus. Christmas can be a very joyful time, but for lots of people it can also be very stressful. Some of us may feel a pressure to have bought gifts we couldn't really afford, or we may worry about all sorts of other things that come along at Christmas time. Yet what the Christmas story reminds us again this year is that the reason for the season is Jesus! It isn't about the turkey or the meal, although they can be very yummy! It isn't about the gifts, or even the tinsel and the sparkling lights. It's about Jesus, who was born as a baby to bring joy, peace and love to this world.

The First Christmas

As we have listened to the thoughts of Mary, the shepherd and the innkeeper, we have been reminded that there may have been some uncomfortable times in that first Christmas scene. But actually Jesus came to bring us comfort.

Let's just remind ourselves of that first Christmas when Jesus has just been born.

Luke 2:4-16 (NIV)

So Joseph ... went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Great Joy

The shepherds were told by the angels that the birth of Jesus would bring 'great joy to all the people'. Interestingly, the birth of Jesus took place over 2,000 years ago, yet when we celebrate Christmas, the birth of Jesus, we still feel a great joy. Those angels were right!

That joy is still available for each one of us today. We want you to feel the joy that Jesus can bring. If you don't know Jesus, or perhaps don't understand the Christian faith, we still hope and pray that you will have found joy here today through this corps/church/community. We hope that the joy of Christmas and the real meaning of Christmas will have shone through because you are welcome here - and just you being here today has brought great joy to us too.

Many years before Jesus was born, there was a prophet called Nehemiah and he had a big task to do for God in difficult circumstances. In the Bible book that bears his name there's a very short verse that reminds us that joy can bring strength, and this was Nehemiah's experience too. In Nehemiah 8:10 from the Old Testament, we hear Nehemiah tell the people, 'The joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Christmas is the best time to experience the joy of Jesus, and experiencing this joy can give us strength to face whatever may come our way, today, tomorrow and all the days that lie ahead.

Peace and Comfort

The characters earlier reminded us that things weren't always that comfortable at the first Christmas. We had Mary on a donkey - not the most comfortable mode of transport for a pregnant lady. We had the shepherd who had stones in his sandals from running down the hillside. Ouch! - again, not too comfy! And then we had the innkeeper who reminded us that sometimes we can feel uncomfortable in our inner selves and not just physically. He was worried and this brought an uncomfortable feeling.

Well, Jesus grew from a baby to a man, and as a man he taught many people about God and his love for them. On one occasion, Jesus was found on a hillside teaching hundreds of people, and we call this teaching of Jesus 'The Beatitudes' found in Matthew's Gospel. One of the things he was keen to tell people was about comfort! In that passage Jesus says, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (5:4). That might be difficult to understand when our hearts are perhaps hurting for lots of different reasons. But Jesus was basically saying that, by the grace of God, even in difficult times, Jesus is there to bring us comfort. So

that's why Christmas is so important - it is a reminder that Jesus came for a reason! Yes, there is a reason for the season! Jesus came to bring joy to everyone, because he loves each one of us. He brings comfort, because Jesus knows that sometimes life can be tough, and every day doesn't always feel like Christmas Day.

Conclusion

So today, if you've heard the Christmas story lots of times or if this is the first time, let's try and remember two things. First, Jesus Christ was born as an act of love for this world, and you are part of this world, so that act of love is for you. Secondly, we want you to feel comfort and joy and know that you are always welcome here, God's church - but more importantly you are welcome in God's Kingdom and family. Jesus came to bring us comfort and joy, and we hope you experience even a little bit of that this Christmastime.

Happy Christmas, everyone!

FUN AND GAMES

Games are a great way of breaking the ice with people and making sure that people keep entertained and feel part of something. Remember that not everyone will want to take part in games. Often people enjoy watching others having fun, and this becomes their own way of joining in and being part of the activity.

Whatever games you play, ensure that they are suitable for all ages and abilities. Try not to do games that require people to read things out loud as this can be daunting for many. With any games that you do play, ensure that clear instructions are given so that no one is left feeling embarrassed or left out.

Some people love quizzes, while others hate them. If you decided to engage people in a quiz, ensure that everyone is either in pairs or small teams (up to three people), so that no one is embarrassed if they don't know an answer.

The main thing to remember is, this is about having fun - so getting people laughing and enjoying the game, or even laughing and watching those playing, is the goal. Often people love to play games but don't get the opportunity if they live alone, so give permission to play and have some fun. And one last thing: get the volunteers playing too. This makes everyone feel they are on the same level playing ground and that everyone is equal.

Suggestions for Christmas Celebrations Games

Pass the Parcel

Choose an inexpensive gift such as a box of chocolates to wrap up for the traditional game of Pass the parcel. Try to include enough layers, but not too many that it becomes tiresome. Between each layer or wrapping add a bag of chocolate 'Milky Way Stars', and each time tell everyone that they are all superstars because God loves them. Explain that if they win the chocolate stars, they can either keep them to take home or give them away to other guests. The choice is theirs!

Christmas Pass the Ball

Gather the guests into a circle, each with a chair to sit on, and have a 'leader' in the middle of the circle with a large soft ball. The leader throws the ball to different guests at random, ensuring that everyone has a turn without just going round the group one by one. When someone catches the ball, they have to shout out something related to the Christmas theme, eg baubles, kings, Mary, presents, turkey etc.

Have fun!



Written by

Ali Thornton-Dean, Older People's Ministries

ali.thornton-dean@salvationarmy.org.uk

in collaboration with Clare Watson, Community Services



**Older
People's
Ministries**



The Salvation Army Trustee Company acting as Trustee of The Salvation Army Trust (Central Funds). A Christian Church and Registered Charity No. 214779 and in Scotland SC009359. The Salvation Army Territorial Headquarters, 1 Champion Park, London SE5 8FJ.