



cell outlines
CHRISTMAS 2020

These Cell Outlines are written by Youth and Children's Ministries. They are available every month from our web site. For more information and other Cell resources, visit [salvationarmy.org.uk/children-and-youth-resources](https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/children-and-youth-resources)

HOW CAN I BE JOY-FILLED THIS CHRISTMAS?

Luke 1:26-38 – An angel appears to Mary

Each young person will need:

- * Pens/paper
- * A blindfold (optional)

WELCOME

1. Ask everyone to take piece of paper and pencil and then to close their eyes / put on a blindfold. Tell them they will need to draw exactly what you ask them to whilst keeping their eyes closed. Instruct them to draw the following on their paper:

- * Draw three circles one above the other, one smaller than the other.
- * Draw three buttons going vertically down the centre of the circles.
- * Draw two eyes, a carrot nose, and a mouth in the top circle.
- * Draw a hat on top of the smallest circle.
- * Draw stick arms on both sides of the middle circle.
- * Draw a broom in one stick hand.

Have them open their eyes and see what they just drew. You can award them points for things like the circles touching one another, the buttons and face being in the circles, etc.

2. Ask group members to do a quick internet search for a Nativity scene and choose a few group members to share their picture with the group. Ask: Which character in the Nativity story do you most relate to and why?

Allow time for a short response and discussion.

Say: A Nativity scene is a traditional part of Christmas. Whether it is a static Nativity scene involving models, or a living Nativity scene in which real people portray the characters, the Nativity is something that we are all familiar with seeing around at this time of year. You have probably even played a part in a Nativity play at primary school... didn't we all used to want to be Mary or Joseph?

We now know that this traditional Nativity scene doesn't accurately display the historical records of Jesus' birth (for example, it is most likely that the wise man didn't visit Jesus until he was around two years old... so not a sleeping baby, and not in the stable... and there is no mention in the Bible that there was three of them!) but the picture can help us keep at the forefront of our mind during the Christmas season the real reason that we are celebrating.

The birth of Jesus is part of a fantastic story, a big story – God's story. It is a story full of joy! When we think about all the people who played a part in the Christmas story – Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, Simeon, Anna – one thing we can notice is that they were filled with joy and excitement and wonder. And the great news is that we are all part of this story too!

The events surrounding Jesus' birth are one example of how God's presence and action is revealed where we least expect it, catching us when we are in the busyness of our lives and God is the furthest thing from our minds. God sending Jesus into the world has brought joy to millions of people. God is still present and active in our lives today, even amongst all the challenges and uncertainties, and he wants us to experience the joy of Christmas and help bring that joy to our families, to each other and to our communities, and that's what we will be looking at over these next four sessions together.

(NB. Check that your group understand what 'joy' means.)

WORD

Brainstorm on a whiteboard (or use the chat function) all the words that people think of when they think about their own experience of Christmas. You could also make a list of the events that everyone would normally be looking forward to at this time of year, even though we know that many of them won't be able to go ahead. Have any families got Christmas decorations up yet?

Say: We don't know what Christmas will look like this year – but it will most likely look different from what we are used to. This may be difficult for some of us and we may have to work a bit harder to find some of the joy and excitement that we would normally feel. We will need to look beyond all the parties, presents, shopping and fun activities that we usually get involved in for the real joy in Christmas. But although Christmas may be different, the meaning behind our celebration is the same and more relevant than ever. Instead of moaning and feeling disappointed, let's think about how we can give to others and make their experience of Christmas the best ever!

So, let's go back to how it all began..

Read Luke 1:26-38

Split the group into pairs using the breakout rooms and ask them to 'role play' the scene between Mary and the angel. Only allow a few minutes. Ask each pair to discuss how they think Mary would have been thinking and feeling. What would you have been thinking and feeling in this situation? How would you have responded to this message from God?

As the group leader you can pop in and out of the different pairs to check that everyone is OK.

Bring the group back together and discuss Mary's reaction. You may find one pair willing to show their improvisation to the rest of the group.

To summarise (or during the discussion) say:

We don't really know anything about what Mary did or the circumstances of her life before the angel makes his announcement to her. One thing was for sure – she was not an extra special person. She was probably about 12 or 13 years old, living an ordinary life, not a community leader or a church pastor. Ordinary, just like us!

Despite her confusion and shock at the angel's visit and message, Mary knew that God was working in her life. She could have responded like: 'Slow down. First of all, I'm a virgin, it isn't physically possible! Secondly, even if God did make it happen, what will the world think since I am unmarried!? You have got the wrong person!' Mary would have known that this meant her own plans for marriage and a secure future would be in jeopardy. An unmarried mother would not be accepted and would be considered a disgrace to her family and community. Likely as not, she would be disowned by her family and fiancé and thrown out of the village.

But Mary's response was: 'I am the Lord's servant... Let it happen as you have said.' Yes, she had questions. And yes, she was probably scared of what might happen. But she responded with faith in God and the heart of a servant.

Somehow, when God turned her life around in such a spectacular fashion and asked her to be a main player in the greatest story of all time... Mary was able to say yes. She didn't hesitate, she didn't waiver, she was ready, she said yes.

ACTION

Part One

Say: God could have chosen anyone to give birth to Jesus, but he chose Mary. She wasn't very important, but she was important to God, and he chose her to do the most important thing one could imagine – he chose her to give birth to his Son. How will you respond to God when he calls you? Will you say, 'You've got the wrong person', or will you respond 'I am your servant, let it happen as you've said it will'?

God still chooses unimportant people to perform important tasks. He has given you and me the task of sharing the good news of Jesus and his love to the whole world. Can you imagine a more important task? Let's make a start this Christmas!

Allow time for response and discussion, or a few minutes of personal reflection for each person to respond in their heart.

Part Two

Ask the group to go to the nearest window and look outside for one thing that makes them happy. When everyone returns to their screen, have each person share what they saw and why it makes them feel happy.

Take it in turns for each person to tell the group about something that brings them joy. This could be something they do or see, or a person they spend time with, that makes them feel happy and joyful. If anybody chooses something that can easily be showed to the group, eg a dance, a piece of music, a joke, then you could allow some time for the individual to share this and for the other group members to experience it too. (You could split into smaller groups using the breakout rooms function to do this.)

Say: Christmas is good news, even after, or perhaps especially because of, such a tough year. The message of the baby born in Bethlehem is that God is in the mix and is with us. He wants us to find joy in the season and in the celebration – not because of gifts we may or may not receive, or activities we may or may not get to do, but because of the reason for the season. Jesus came so that we can all have God’s joy in all things. We know that it has been a difficult time over these last few months, so it’s important, before the hustle and bustle of Christmas really hits us, that we take some time to check in with ourselves and how we are doing. To spend some time with Jesus, to ask him to fill us deeply with his joy.

What is our response going to be to this unexpected Christmas? Without all the usual festive activities to clutter our schedule, how can we make meaningful time to dig into the real joy of Christmas? How can we fill ourselves up so we can share it with others?

Encourage the group to take some time this week to do something that brings them joy. This could be a piece of artwork, baking some delicious cakes, listening to some music, dancing, getting out in nature, or doing something for another person.

Using the chat function, ask everyone to post an emoji that symbolises joy to them. You could challenge them to use this emoji in all their messages this week – to remind them about making a choice to live in joy, to look for the good things around them instead of the disappointments, and to thank Jesus that he is in control.

PRAYER

Say: Right after God broke into Mary’s life in the most amazing way, and right after she said yes to him in faith and obedience, Mary sang this song of praise and thanks.

**My soul praises the Lord; my heart is happy because God is my Saviour.
I am not important, but God has shown his care for me, his servant girl.
From now on, all people will say that I am blessed, because the Powerful One has done great things for me. (Luke 1: 46–49 ICB)**

Share screen with the following lines:

**My soul praises the Lord; my heart is happy because God is my Saviour.
I am not important, but God has shown his care for me, his servant.
From now on all people will say that I am blessed, because...**

Ask each person to write one sentence to finish off the end line.

Go around the group and ask each person to read the first two lines and then their own line and ask everyone to say ‘AMEN!’

Finish with this prayer together:

Lord Jesus, thank you that you came into the world to bring us great joy in life. Help us to keep our focus first on you this season. Please forgive us for giving too much time and attention to other things. Help us to reflect again on what Christmas is really all about. Thank you that you came to give new life, peace, hope, and joy. Please fill me with your peace and happiness this Christmas, as I celebrate your birth with family and friends, and help me to share this joy with others. Amen.

HOW CAN I SHARE JOY WITH MY FAMILY THIS CHRISTMAS?

Matthew 1:18-25 – Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

Each young person will need:

- * Pens/paper
- * You could also ask everyone to wear a Christmas hat

WELCOME

1. Play 'Pass the action'. Start by one person calling out a person's name and stating an action for him/her to do. S/he does the action, and then calls out another person's name with an action, and so on.

(Suggested actions: Bend and touch your toes two times; Stand up, turn around and sit down; Pat your head and rub your tummy; Blink your eyes; Pick your nose; Five star jumps; Give yourself a hug.)

Or

2. Word memory game.

Start by saying, 'Last night I had a dream about...' then add a subject – ideally just one word. The next person then says, 'Last night I had a dream about [what the first person said] and [their thing].' This continues around the circle, adding thing by thing to the dream. Continue for as long as possible then start again.

You could specify that all the items need to follow the alphabet, so the first thing begins with A, the next with B, the next with C and so on. Or that each new thing must start with the letter the last thing finished with. The group leader will need to call out the order of participants.

If you have a group that do not like to play games, you could try this question as an icebreaker instead: If there were no financial restrictions, what would be the best gift you would give to someone and why?

Share the Find Your Party Elf Name sheet (attached below and sourced from <http://www.blessedbeyondadoubt.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Christmas-Party-Games-for-Teens1.pdf>) and ask each person to select their Christmas elf name. You could just use first names or go crazy and add in middle and last names too! (Do you have an artist in your group? If so, you could ask them to draw a group portrait of everyone as elves with their elf names!)

Say: In the last session we talked about when Mary was visited by an angel. But Mary was not the only one visited by angels in advance of Jesus' birth. In the story we will read today, God sends an angel to prepare Joseph for his very special role in the Christmas story. The angel told Joseph that Mary would have a baby and that they should name him Jesus.

WORD

Read Matthew 1:18-25 and/or watch this dramatic reading of the Scripture passage.

An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream (1min 51sec). Matthew 1:18-25
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmgW-LloLsc>

Say: *We can often think that Joseph isn't the most interesting of that little group huddled around the baby in Nativity scenes on display around the world every Christmas season. His wasn't the miracle pregnancy or the close encounter with the whole host of heavenly angels. (He slept through his own angel visit.) He is 'just the dad'. His job is just to do what men do. Take care of the pregnant lady. Find a place to stay. Protect. Provide. Remember your two lines and then stand back and to the left.

Still, Joseph is the one who could most easily have skipped out on the photo op in the stable. All he would have had to

do was the respectable thing: Don't marry the pregnant teenager carrying a child that you know isn't yours. Pretend that dream about the angel was indigestion. Be nice about it, but find another girl. Quick.

Instead, he did the hardest thing God asks of any of us: he demonstrated his faith in God by obeying even when it cost him his public honour. He showed that he believed the God of Heaven had sent the rescuer by manning up and marrying the girl he hadn't touched. He agreed to parent God's child before having any of his own.

(* Text adapted from <http://skitguys.com/blog/post/the-living-nativity-devotional>)

Discuss:

- 🗨️ How do you think Joseph felt when he found out that Mary was pregnant?
- 🗨️ Do you think that he was justified in believing that Mary had cheated on him?
- 🗨️ What does it tell us about Joseph as a person, that he wanted to save Mary the embarrassment and shame by ending the marriage quietly?
- 🗨️ What must have been going through Joseph's thoughts when the angel appeared to him and he heard what he had to tell him?
- 🗨️ How do you think he felt when he found out that the baby Mary was carrying was God's son?
- 🗨️ How do you think Joseph felt about being a 'stand-in father' to God's only son?
- 🗨️ How would you have reacted to all of these things?

ACTION

Part One

Say: When the angel spoke and made God's plan clear, Joseph was obedient. His friends and family must have thought he had made a disastrous decision – his honour and reputation would now have been at an all-time low. But he didn't seem to worry about what anyone else would think. He didn't have to understand how everything was going to happen. Joseph trusted God and obeyed him. He chose to do things God's way, and in so doing he had the great joy and privilege of being the earthly father to God's own son, Jesus.

There will be times when God asks us to do things that seem totally obscure or unreasonable to us. We may not understand at all how things will work out, but it is at times like these that we must be totally faithful and obedient to God.

Can you think of a time when you had to obey and trust in God, even if you didn't know how it would turn out? What happened?

Ask the group for some examples of this in their lives; or, looking forward, situations coming up in which they will need to totally trust God.

Part Two

Say: Joseph made a sacrifice to look after Mary. We talked in the last session about how Christmas will probably look a bit different this year. We can think about joy as a gift we can share with others. Christmas is a great opportunity to stop always thinking of ourselves first and do something amazing. There's always a way for each one of us to make a special difference at Christmas, and this year it may be needed more than ever. How can you help those in your family experience joy this Christmas?

Watch: The Greatest Gift | Sainsbury's OFFICIAL Ad | Christmas 2016 (3mins 35secs)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq5SGSCZe4E>

In this advert the main character is searching for the greatest gift he can give to his family.

Split into two smaller groups and chat about the message in this video.

Some questions you could ask:

- * What message is this video trying to give us?
- * When do the characters experience the most joy?
- * What is the real 'greatest gift' of Christmas?
- * What is the greatest gift you can give your family this year?

Ask everyone to think for a few minutes about one thing they can do to bring joy to their families this Christmas. Have one person in the group note down some ideas, and then when you bring the two groups back together you can share the ideas with each other. You could even create a poster on the whiteboard with everyone's ideas!

PRAYER

Share a whiteboard and, using the annotate function, ask the group to add the names of their family members.

Ask the young people to watch and reflect on the following video, and as they do so to pray for their family members and all the names written on your whiteboard.

A Christmas Prayer (2mins 30secs)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3v3KeWVjstw>

Loving God, we thank you for the joy you bring us. This is the joy we pray for each one of us: that the longing for happiness you inscribed on our hearts will be fulfilled by Jesus. Help us turn from all the distractions of the season and focus on you, the source of all hope, peace, love and joy. Help us to prepare our hearts for this gift.

We ask in the name of the One born in Bethlehem.

Amen.

Find your Party Elf Name

The First Letter of your Name:

A - Holly

J - Tinsel

S - Cocoa

B - Jolly

K - Eggnog

T - Gingerbread

C - Kringle

L - Prancer

U - Cranberry

D - Snowflake

M - Sugarplum

V - Glitter

E - Frosty

N - Marshmallow

W - Tinker

F - Twinkle

O - Gumdrops

X - Sprinkle

G - Mistletoe

P - Figgy

Y - Merry

H - Peppermint

Q - Cookie

Z - Chestnut

I - Poinsettia

R - Snowball

Your Birth Month:

JAN : Pointy-Toes

JULY : Mug-Warmer

FEB : Jelly-Pots

AUG : Party-Popper

MAR : Sparkly-Pants

SEPT : Bell-Ringer

APR : Swirly-Twirler

OCT : Jingle-Jangle

MAY : Star-Shimmer

NOV : Stripey-Socks

JUNE : Shiny-Shoes

DEC : Nipper-Nose



HOW CAN I SHARE JOY WITH MY COMMUNITY THIS CHRISTMAS?

Luke 2:8-20 - The Shepherds and the Angels

Each young person will need:

- * Pens/pencils and paper
- * You could also ask everyone to wear some Christmas socks

WELCOME

Ask the group members to go around their house and collect three items that start with the letters J.O.Y (one item for each letter). The first person back with all three items wins!

Ask any group member who wishes to share a funny joke or short story with the group.

Ask: Can you tell me about one piece of good news you have heard this week/month and how did you find out about it?

Allow time for response and discussion.

Say: In this session we are going to read about another visit of an angel. We have talked about Mary and Joseph, who both received messages about the birth of Jesus through an angel. Who else do you know in the Christmas story who heard the good news about Jesus from an angel?

(Allow time for response)

Yes, that's right – the shepherds.

Do your group know any funny versions of the carol 'While Shepherds Watched'? Have some fun singing them to each other! For example:

'While shepherds washed their socks by night, while watching BBC, the angel of the Lord came down, and switched to ITV.'

'While shepherds washed their socks by night all seated round the tub, the angel of the Lord came down and gave their socks a scrub.

And when their socks were squeaky clean and sparkling like a gem, the shepherds put them on again and walked to Bethlehem.

And when they got to Bethlehem all looking nice and neat, the Christ child said, "You've got nice socks, but next time wash your feet!"

Say: So, let's read about what actually happened!

WORD

Read Luke 2:8-20 and watch:

The Shepherds meet the Angels (1min 57secs)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdJE-B0h9_k

Get a message conversation going between the shepherds!

Use the chat function ask the young people to type in a response as if they were one of the shepherds messaging each other. What would they be saying to each other?

Say: Although the shepherds were terrified at first, their fear turned to joy as the angels announced Jesus' birth. First the shepherds ran to see the baby, then they spread the word. They had discovered a joy so wonderful that they couldn't help sharing it with everyone they met!

Discuss: What was this news and why did it bring them great joy?

Could you write a news report, or do a pretend news interview, about this good news? Perhaps you could share this on social media in the lead-up to Christmas – a creative way to share the good news with others in your community!

Summarise:

The angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people.' (Luke 2:10 NCV)

The good news was the news that Jesus was born. Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Saviour. The Jews had waited a long time for this news. This verse sums up the message of the Nativity – it's not just about a manger, some angels, shepherds and wise men – it's much, much bigger than that. It's when God sent his son as saviour to the world. This tiny helpless baby lived an amazing life, died for us, ascended into Heaven, and will come back to this earth as King of kings. This is something to fill us with great joy!

Discuss: How do you feel when you think about God sending his son to earth? Does this make you feel happy, excited and joyful, just like the shepherds?

Allow time for response and discussion – or for a moment of personal reflection if you prefer.

WITNESS

Part One

Say: The greatest event in history had just happened! The Messiah had been born! For ages the Jews had waited for this, and when it finally occurred the announcement came to humble shepherds.

As it said in the video we watched:

When God wrote his musical birth announcement, he didn't deliver it to popular celebrities or the local news. He gave his song to average shepherds, who were minding their own business, head down and rejected. He wanted forgotten people to be the first to hear the good news – 'Jesus is here!'.

The shepherds represent everyone, all humanity. They were poor people, but they were rich because they accepted God's news. Once they accepted the news, they then praised God and couldn't wait to tell others.

The good news about Jesus is that he comes to all, including the plain and the ordinary. He comes to anyone with a heart humble enough to accept him. Whoever you are, whatever you do, you can have Jesus in your life.

Discuss:

- 🗨️ Why did God choose to have shepherds be a part of Jesus' birth? Why were they selected to visit Jesus?
- 🗨️ How important are the shepherds to the story?
- 🗨️ If shepherds weren't really accepted by society, why would God give his joyful message to them? Why not the king? Or the Temple leaders?
- 🗨️ What encouragement can we take from the fact that the lowliest of people – shepherds – heard the news of Jesus' birth directly from angels?

Part Two

Say: At the first Christmas, the angel and the shepherds told people about Jesus. God still wants people to meet Jesus. But he has other messengers now – us! We know God and we know about him. Therefore it is up to us to tell people about Jesus, to bring them to a place where they can meet him for themselves. As the angel said in the video: 'Chill out! I've got a special message that I need you to share!'

WEEK
THREE

Allow a few minutes for group members to reflect on your discussion. Ask them to consider what they personally will do to share this Christmas about the impact and joy that Jesus has had on their life and the good news that he is here for everyone.

Brainstorm together some small practical ways that you could share joy in your community this Christmas. Maybe make a list together on the whiteboard. Here are some examples:

- * When you are out walking or exercising, try to make eye contact and smile at everyone who you pass. Keep a count of how many people smile back and report back to the group next time.
- * Paint some stones with joyful colours or messages, and then leave them around your community to make others smile.
- * Create a window display for your house to spread joy to all those who walk past, eg posters, toys, flowers, positive words/phrases. You could use Post-it Notes to spell out the words 'Joy to the world'!
- * Make a fun film to share on your social media (is there a community Facebook page you could share it on?). How about creating one of those group films where everyone passes around a paper ball, or dances to the same tune?
- * Donate to a charity that is collecting items to give away to others at Christmas.
- * Make and deliver 'Joy Bags' filled with Christmas treats.
- * Sing some carols for your neighbours.
- * Create a treasure hunt for your community. This could be a virtual treasure hunt using photos of Christmassy things in your area; or you could work with local shops to plan a treasure hunt for other children to take part in, for example, finding different pictures in shop windows.
- * Could you come up with an idea that you could do together as a group?

Challenge group members to pick one of your ideas to put into practice over the next couple of weeks.

WORSHIP

Say:

'Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."' (Luke 2:13-14 NLT)

It's unlikely that the 'armies of heaven' celebrated quietly... this was a celebration that would have been loud and proud... it scared the shepherds half to death!

Psalm 98 says: 'Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.' (KJV)

Read Psalm 98:4-8 out loud all together and with as much noise as possible! Shout, clap, bang things, stamp your feet, play your cornet, make a joyful noise unto the Lord!

Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Burst into songs and praise.

Make music to the Lord with harps, with harps and the sound of singing.

Blow the trumpets and the sheep's horns.

Shout for joy to the Lord the King.

Let the sea and everything in it shout.

Let the world and everyone on it sing.

Let the rivers clap their hands.

Let the mountains sing together for joy.

(ICB)

All read this closing prayer out loud together.

Father God, we thank you and praise you today for the miracle of your son's birth. Thank you for bringing great joy to the whole world! Thank you for giving us the assurance that because you came to us in the form of a human, we who believe in Jesus can know with absolute certainty that we'll spend eternity with you.

We thank you, Lord, for the many reasons we have been given a merry Christmas. And we rejoice for each blessing. New life. New love. A home. Friendships. New opportunities. Second chances. And more.

You are still our Joy. You are still our Peace. You are no longer a baby in the manger. You are Lord of lords and King of kings. And we still celebrate you as Lord – this Christmas and always. Amen.

THE JOY OF GIVING

Matthew 2:1-12 – The Wise Men visit Jesus

Each young person will need:

- * Pens/paper
- * A large book, sheet of wrapping paper and Sellotape
- * Gift tags
- * You could also ask everyone to wear a Christmas jumper
- * Could you take a small gift around to each of your group members, that they can open in the session – perhaps some gold coins?
- * Additional idea: take around to your group members some dried spaghetti and pack of marshmallows. Challenge them to make a star by pushing the spaghetti into the marshmallows. The star should be able to stand up on its own. Ask them to complete this task before the session and then bring their star along. You can make it into a competition if you choose to and awards prizes for the most star-shaped, the biggest, the one that stands alone for the longest etc.

WELCOME

Play a Christmas scavenger hunt with your group. Simply come up with a list of items that they need to find around the house. Tell them the items one at a time and the first one back to the screen with the item is the winner. Here are some ideas:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| * Something the colour gold | * A candle |
| * A star | * Some Christmas chocolate |
| * Something that smells nice | * Bells |
| * A Santa | * An unusual Christmas tree ornament |
| * A reindeer | * Something that sparkles |
| * Something that tastes bitter | * Oil |
| * A baby Jesus | * A Christmas present |

If you don't want to do a scavenger hunt, you could do the 'make a star out of spaghetti and marshmallow' activity above.

Say: In this session we are going to read about how the wise men (sometimes called the Three Kings or the Magi) followed a star to Jesus. It was a journey of great joy, and when they found him they gave him some special gifts. What items in your scavenger hunt do you think represent these gifts? (Something the colour gold, something that smells nice, something that tastes bitter.)

NB. If you didn't do the scavenger hunt, you can ask: Why is a star important in the Christmas story?

WORD

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Ask group members to search for an image of the wise men and to share with the group. Ask them to explain how they feel the image they have chosen represents the story. Discuss what is portrayed in the image that is factually written about in the Bible, and what is added from the artist's imagination or traditional thinking.

Say: The wise men knew that Jesus was very special. In fact, they knew that he was the King of the Jews that everyone had been waiting for.

It doesn't actually say in the Bible how many wise men came from the east, nor does it mention their names, if they were kings or their method of travel. Three is only a guess because three gifts are itemised.

It is speculated they were learned men and perhaps even astrologers (though not the kind in today's popular papers!). They would have probably been very rich and held in high esteem in their own society and by people who weren't from their country or religion. They most likely would also have had many servants with them.

It may have taken approximately two years for the wise men to reach Jesus after their disastrous visit to Herod. Jesus would by then have been a toddler living in a normal house, rather than the stable scene so often depicted.

The wise men travelled hundreds of miles to bring their gifts to Jesus, items that were very precious and undoubtedly expensive, and were an indication of the highest honour and respect which they wanted to give to Jesus.

The Bible tells us: 'When the wise men saw the star, they were filled with joy' (Matthew 2:10 NCV). They were on a joyful journey, knowing that they were going to celebrate meeting the King of the Jews. They knew this was the beginning of a new era. When they finally found Jesus, they bowed down before him and worshipped him. Full of joy, they gave him gifts fit for a king – the King of kings!

The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that the wise men brought to Jesus may on the surface seem rather strange gifts to bring to a baby. But when we look closely we can see that these gifts help us to understand what they knew about Jesus, the kind of person they believed he was going to be, and that from the beginning Jesus' birth was part of God's plan.

Look at the lyrics of the carol 'We Three Kings' and point out where it mentions the gifts. Split into three groups and ask each group to research one of the gifts to discover what is generally thought to be the symbolic meaning behind the gift. Bring the groups back together and collate your answers on the whiteboard.

Use any of the notes below in your discussion.

Gold: Gold is the gift to honour a king. It signifies Jesus was a King of his kingdom – more than that, he was God come to earth. When the wise men presented gold, they were honouring Jesus with the very best that they possessed, and they were also recognising that Jesus was King. Jesus' parents also may have used it to help care for him as he was growing up.

Frankincense: is resin that comes from the sap of a tree. It is used as incense, which means that it is burned for its perfume. Frankincense looks like small milky brown rocks and was very valuable in the time of Jesus. Ancient people burned frankincense in worship, believing it to carry their prayers to Heaven. When we think of frankincense, we can think about how Jesus is not only the King of kings, but he is holy, he is with God and he is always praying for us.

Myrrh: is another expensive resin that was used as incense or for anointing the dead to prepare them for burial. Myrrh implies 'bitterness' – it was myrrh mixed with wine that Jesus was offered to drink whilst on the cross. Myrrh was given as a gift of great value, but it also represents the sacrifice that Jesus would make on the cross to pay for the sins of the world. The gift of myrrh reminds us of Jesus' sacrifice, his very life for our salvation.

ACTION

Ask the young people to get ready with their large book, sheet of wrapping paper and tape. Tell them you are going to have a quick competition to see who can wrap a present (the book) the fastest. When everyone is ready, say go! And then declare a winner. Instead of judging by speed, you could judge the winner on the neatness of the wrapping.

Use any of the following questions in a short group discussion. You could ask group members to write/draw the answer and hold it up to their camera, or reply using the chat function. You could split into smaller groups using the breakout rooms function.

- 🗨️ What was the best Christmas present that you have ever received?
- 🗨️ What was the Christmas present that you have been most excited to give to someone?

- 🗨️ What was the most bizarre Christmas present you have ever received?
- 🗨️ When have you made someone happy by giving them a gift?
- 🗨️ Have you ever received a Christmas present that cost someone time instead of money? What was it?
- 🗨️ What gifts can you give, or have received, that can't be wrapped up?
- 🗨️ If your parents told you they didn't have any money for presents this year, what gift would you ask for?

Say: One way people celebrate Christmas today is by giving gifts to each other. The giving of gifts at Christmas is something that is often thought to originate in the bringing of gifts to Jesus by the wise men. Just as the wise men brought gifts to Jesus to show their love for him, we can give gifts to others to show our love for them.

Discuss:

- 🗨️ How do you decide what gift to give someone?
- 🗨️ How do you feel when you give someone a present?

Say: Giving to other people is one great way of increasing our own joy, and the joy of others. This is backed up by science! A study has found that the happiness levels of people who give gifts is much higher than those who receive gifts. Giving to someone else makes us happy!

In one experiment, students received a certain amount of money each day for five days and they were randomly assigned to either spend the money on themselves or on someone else, such as dropping the money into a collecting jar. From this experiment, researchers found that the students who spent the money on themselves had a steady decline in happiness over the five days, but the students who spent their money on someone else were consistently happy; they felt the same amount of joy the fifth day as they did on the first.

Discuss: Why do you think giving to someone else increases our joy?

Say: When we choose a gift for someone, we try to fit the gift to the person, to find something that suits them, something they like or will use, or that says something about the way we feel about them. Our gift shows that we care about that person, that we know what they are interested in and what matters most to them. And of course there is nothing better than seeing someone you love and care about happy and smiling!

Discuss: How can we make our gifts to friends and family special this year?

Allow some time for the young people to think about any special gifts that they may like to give to a family member, friend or neighbour, and to write their ideas on the gift tags.

Remind the group that gifts don't need to cost money; they don't even need to be something physical that can be wrapped up.

For example: offer to babysit for a couple of hours; help someone with their errands (buying stamps, posting Christmas cards); visit someone who is on their own and stay for a cup of tea; give some time in the local homeless centre or refuge; participate in a virtual Christmas service; busk with music or singing to brighten up the Christmas shopping experience for harassed shoppers (and give any money raised to a local charity). (NB. Ideas may not all be possible depending on Covid-19 restrictions!)

Discuss/share your ideas with each other if appropriate. Encourage the young people to actually give the gifts that they have decided on.

Reflect: The wise men gave their gifts with great joy, and their gifts were personal and were things that will last. How will the gifts that you give this Christmas match up?

¹ https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2018-12/afps-tjo121918.php

PRAYER

Say: In their joy, the wise men presented Jesus with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. With the brand-new year coming up, what kinds of gifts do you think Jesus wants from us? How can we give gifts of time and talents, skills and energy in service to him?

Allow a few minutes of personal reflection.

Say: This Christmas we will all enjoy the tradition of giving and receiving gifts. But let's not forget that God's greatest gift to us was Jesus, his own son. His coming was not by chance, but part of God's plan to show his love to mankind and give us the opportunity to restore our broken relationship with him.

“ ‘Realising that God held back nothing, pulled out all the stops, and used the mighty resources of Heaven to give the greatest gift of all, ought to give us fresh reason to celebrate his birth – no matter how the world tries to twist or gloss over the truth.’

(Ron Mehl, Love Found a Way).

Watch this short video, and as you watch ask the young people to prayerfully consider what they can offer of themselves back to Jesus this Christmas; and what they can offer to others.

'Christmas in a Nutshell' (2mins 03secs)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXgH8Zl9jQ>

Finish by asking each person to say a short prayer in turn.