It’s the nativity!

Nativity service

Light readings: Luke 1:2

Aim: to remind people of God coming down to earth to rescue his people to explore the real meaning of Christmas


Getting started

This service outline can be used at any time over the Christmas period. The primary aim of the service is to help people think about what Christmas really means as the story is heard in its entirety. There are likely to be visitors in church over Christmas, so make them feel welcome and included.

The Christmas story is familiar to most church people, so it is always challenging to present it in a way that still feels fresh; but visitors and certainly many children will be hearing it properly for the first time. Keep these people in mind when you are speaking, rather than assuming prior knowledge. This will help you to keep your language clear and accessible. It is important too that in your preparation you have read the story several times over so that you do not add in details that do not come from the story in the Bible. Reindeers, snowmen and camels are very traditional but do not appear in the real story and can reduce its power.

You will need:

• vox pop for Beginning the service – download from web ref AASA3.Nat_1
• a selection of Christmas cards and envelopes, printed Bible verses, Christmas facts from web ref AASA3.Nat_2 for Bible reading/Game
• Showstoppers DVD or similar video clip to tell part of the story for Bible retelling
• pictures of four faces for the Bible talk – download from web ref AASA3.Nat_3
• star-shaped gift tags, pens/pencils for the Prayer activity
Beginning the service
With: vox pop resource, downloaded from web ref AASA3.Nat_1

Start by playing a vox pop of ‘We asked people what Christmas means to them’... If you don’t have access to this, ask members of the congregation to comment on what their friends and neighbours have said to them about Christmas.

Ask the congregation what the most common theme was in the vox pop. They should say ‘family’. State that, even though the commercialism of Christmas appears to be increasing, the people’s values are still the same as they ever were. They want to spend Christmas at home with those they love.

Emphasise that Christmas is indeed all about family. It is a celebration of when God the Father sent his only Son, Jesus, to earth in order to save us, his children. It is the tale of a parent – God – wanting to spend eternity with the people he loves.

Finish by asking people to talk in twos or threes about what Christmas means to them – not just spiritual topics but the stresses and strains of burning the turkey, experiencing a power cut or being so excited that they can’t sleep on Christmas Eve. This will help visitors to feel part of the service.

Bible reading/Game
With: a selection of Christmas cards and coloured envelopes; Christmas facts from web ref AASA3.Nat_2; printed Bible verses

Each Bible reading will be preceded by a Christmas card hunt, for all ages to join in. All four readings should be spread throughout the first part of the service, before the Bible talk.

Sort the different Christmas cards depicting secular Christmas scenes, eg snowman, Santa, robin, into four groups – at least three per subject. Inside these cards insert the words ‘Christmas means...’ followed by a seasonal fact, such as ‘eating turkey’. You could also include a statistic, eg ‘The UK consumes around 10 million turkeys each Christmas.’ A list of suggested Christmas facts and statistics can be downloaded; see above.

Also collect four cards that depict the true meaning of Christmas, eg a nativity scene. Inside each ‘nativity card’, write the words ‘Christmas means...’ followed by these Bible references:

1) Light coming into the world (John 1:1–18 or Isaiah 9:2–7)
2) God with us (Luke 1:26–38)
3) The birth of Jesus, God’s Son (Luke 2:1–7)
4) Celebrating our glorious Saviour (Luke 2:8–20)

Put one of these cards on each of the piles of secular ones and then put each pile in separate, coloured envelopes. There will be one pile for each Bible reading. Alternatively, put the cards in white envelopes marked with different coloured stars or stickers so that it is obvious that they are different. Give the ‘nativity’ card a mark to distinguish it from the secular ones and number the envelopes so that the envelopes contain the ‘nativity’ cards in the same order as the Bible verses above. Hide all the cards around the building.

Explain that you’re going to have a Christmas card hunt to discover more about the true meaning of Christmas. Invite everyone to search for the first envelope (eg the red one or the starred one). When someone finds an envelope, they should go to the front, where they can be given a prize such as a chocolate.

Ask the ‘finder’ to open the card and tell everyone what pictures are on the front of it. Then ask them to read what’s written inside. Make sure that adults are available to help young children. The ‘nativity card’ should be read last. After this ‘nativity card’ has been read, the Bible passage relating to it should be read aloud. To ensure that this is well read, arrange for the reader(s) to be prepared to come to the front when their reading has been found.

Repeat this for all four sets of cards. You could intersperse a carol between at least one of the readings and card hunts, or show the DVD suggested for the Bible retelling or light the Advent candle or lead the Prayer activity.

Bible retelling
With: Showstoppers DVD and suitable equipment to play it

For a refreshing retelling of the Christmas story, play the relevant part of the Showstoppers DVD, an SU holiday club DVD (available from Scripture Union). If you don’t have this DVD, you could use an alternative video retelling. There is a beautiful clip on YouTube, which tells the story of the nativity to the song ‘In My Arms’ by Plumb.
You can also use a clip from www.ignitermedia.com called 'Retooning the Nativity', which strips away some of the human traditions of the nativity. It's quite funny.

**Bible talk**

**With:** pictures of four faces, downloaded from web ref AASA3.Nat_3

Ask four children to come to help you. Hand each of them a picture of a face. The first child should be given a picture of a ‘stressed’ face, the second a picture of a ‘tired’ face, the third child a ‘sad’ face, and the fourth a picture of a ‘happy’ face. Ask the children not to show the congregation what face they have received.

Explain that Christmas can mean different things to different people. Ask the first child to hold up the ‘stressed’ face. People can often get stressed at Christmas-time. The rush to buy presents, food and drink can be too much, and it seems to get more manic every year. Families spend more time with each other at Christmas than at any other time of the year, and this can also, sadly, lead to stresses and strains.

Ask the second child to hold up the ‘tired’ face. This is what a lot of parents will relate to, particularly mothers! Christmas is often the busiest time of the year. The day starts very early for whoever is cooking the turkey, and hosts barely sit down throughout the whole day – ensuring that their visitors are catered for and have enough to eat and drink. There is the rush to visit friends and family, often travelling long distances. This busyness often means that people return to work in January feeling more tired than they did when they left in December. Children are even glad to go back to school!

Christmas can also be a time of great sadness for some people (ask the third child to hold up the ‘sad’ face). It can be a time when we remember those whom we have lost – relatives who have died, or friends we have lost touch with. We can find that we ponder on those moments where we have been hurt or rejected by others. Ensure that you are sensitive in this section as there will probably be visitors to your church who will be able to relate to these feelings.

Ask the fourth child to hold up the ‘happy’ face. Emphasise that there is nothing wrong with people wishing each other ‘Merry Christmas’, or indulging in traditions such as putting up the tree, eating mince pies or watching *The Snowman*. It is rare for people to be this friendly and joyful, and it is a wonderful thing. However, we need to be aware of why we celebrate Christmas. Ultimately it is because of the birth of Jesus. Our God came down to earth and that is something to really celebrate. He knew what it was like to be stressed and tired. (Show the first and second faces again.)

But Jesus also came to die a painful and cruel death. He was going to suffer to rescue his children – people who had forgotten about God’s love for them. So the sad face has a place in the real Christmas too.

Conclude by expressing your hope that people will put their trust in Jesus this festive season, and wish everybody a happy and peaceful Christmas.

**Prayer activity**

**With:** star-shaped gift tags; pens/pencils

Give each person a gift tag and pen or pencil. (Alternatively, these can be handed out at the start of the service as people arrive.) Ask them to think of something they would particularly like to pray for; this Christmas. They may simply want to thank God for sending Jesus. Or they may want to ask him to bring peace to an area of conflict in the world, or to resolve a personal problem.

Encourage them to write or draw their prayer on the gift tag during a time of silence or quiet music. If your church has a Christmas tree, you could invite people to hang their gift tags on it as a way of offering their prayer to God. Or people may prefer to take the gift tags home to hang on their own trees as a reminder.

This is a significant time when people can stop rushing and be still. Draw attention to the importance of finding time for reflection over Christmas. You could encourage parents to build in special times for the whole family to do this – perhaps you could encourage them to use the SU Advent calendar, see page 69.

**Prayer of confession**

A simple call and response prayer:

Father God, as we rush around buying, wrapping and exchanging gifts this Christmas, we are sorry for the times we forget to thank you for the gift of your precious Son. 

Forgive us, we pray.

Lord Jesus, as we spend time celebrating with family and friends this Christmas, we are sorry for the times when we do not think of others and we forget to celebrate your birth.

Forgive us, we pray.
Holy Spirit, as we get swept up in festive parties, decorations and overindulgence this Christmas, we are sorry for the times we forget to invite you to fill us with the true spirit of Christmas. **Forgive us, we pray.**

**Ending the service**

Finish the service with a rousing carol such as ‘Joy to the world’, and send people out with a blessing.

You may like to use this prayer by Robert Louis Stevenson:

‘Loving Father,
Help us remember the birth of Jesus,
that we may share in the song of the angels,
the gladness of the shepherds,
and worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.
Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings,
and teach us to be merry with clear hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children,
and Christmas evening bring us to our beds with grateful thoughts,
forgiving and forgiven, for Jesus’ sake.
Amen.’

**Notes and comments**

Christmas 2008 was the first time that Christians in Nepal could celebrate Christmas. Their Christmas did not have all the commercialism of a western Christmas. To find out more, visit www.biblesociety.org.uk.

Christmas provides an excellent opportunity to reach people who wouldn’t normally come to church. You may want to be proactive about this by sending invitations to the local community, letting them know the times of the Christmas services. At the same time, you could inform them of events coming up in the New Year that they might be interested in, such as a new children’s club or an Alpha course.

The service itself also provides a good opportunity to talk to people and to make them feel welcome in your church. Invite people to stay for tea and mince pies afterwards, and organise a welcoming team to chat to visitors.

Visitors with young children may feel embarrassed if their children misbehave or are noisy during the service. Make sure they are informed about any crèche facilities or special children’s area you have available. You could reassure people at the start that the service is intended for all ages, and that they do not need to worry if children are a bit noisy.

**Helpful extras**

**Music and song ideas**

Most people, especially visitors, will expect to sing traditional carols at a Christmas service, and will be disappointed if they don’t. So make sure you include some of the following: ‘Angels from the realms of glory’; ‘Hark! the herald angels sing’; ‘Joy to the world’; ‘O come, all ye faithful’; ‘O little town of Bethlehem’; ‘Once in royal David’s city’; ‘Silent night’.

You could also include a couple of contemporary Christmas songs such as: ‘From heaven You came’ (SOF 120); ‘Light of the world’ (SOF 342) or ‘This child’ (ts 511). The songbook Carol Praise (HarperCollinsPublishers) contains many new carols and reshaped ones.

If your church has a choir or a good vocalist, you could ask them to perform one or two songs as people are arriving.