



Christmas Reflection Day

A Teaching Resource for Key Stage 2

For a story that is so well known, it's surprising how many misconceptions remain around the Christmas story. More than once, children in my classes have asked where Father Christmas fits in!

This Christmas Reflection Day is for schools to share a day off-timetable where the classes can slow down and look afresh at the nativity story and consider how it might be relevant today.

Equipment You'll Need for the Day:

- 6-10 pieces of A3 paper with a circle in the middle (approx. 10cm diameter)
- Card making equipment – think about how you might want to do this; perhaps printing, pop-ups, or chalk on a dark background etc.
- A retelling of the Christmas story – there's a version included at the back of this resource.
- Examples of baptism cards – i.e. a card given to celebrate a baptism, often containing a personal message. Your local church might be able to help with this if you don't have any, or you could invite children to bring theirs in if they have them.

Session 1 (Before Break)

Aim

- To interrogate the nativity story, viewing it from a range of different perspectives.

1. **Host a circle time to explore with pupils what Christmas means for them.**

Q: What do you appreciate about Christmas, apart from receiving presents?

Q: Do you find anything hard about Christmas?

2. **Remaining in the circle, would anyone like to retell the story?**

Give the rest of the class permission to 'buzz in' if at any point they can remember a detail that has been left out.

3. **'Story Squiggles' Part 1 (a story-telling technique introduced by Barnabas in Schools).**

Pupils to work in groups of 3-5. Provide each group with a sheet of A3 paper with a circle in the middle. Pupils then to 'take their pencils for a walk from the circle, around the page, and back to the circle'. As they cross over each other's lines they will form lots of spaces on the page which can then be drawn in later (see picture below).

4. **Retell the Christmas story, broken into chunks (there is an example of this at the end of this document).**

During each chunk of your narration, pupils to each choose a space to draw an illustration/colour/ place a word to bring meaning and represent that part of the story—their doodling will facilitate their listening. They can choose a small or a large space, as they wish.

5. **Now allow time to reach deeper learning by asking the pupils to discuss the following questions in their groups (If you have time, feedback to the whole class):**

Q: Which chunk of the story is, in their opinion, the most exciting and why?

Q: Who do they think was the most 'troubled'/fearful participant in the story (it can be at any stage in the story), and why?

Q: Which participants in the story do they think experienced the greatest range of emotions? Why?

6. **'Story Squiggles' Part 2. Each group to now write the following question in the middle:**

Who was the most pleased to see baby Jesus?

Pupils should discuss answers (with reasons) as a group and, once a consensus has been reached, record this however they want to (draw/write) in the circle in the middle before feeding back to the whole class.

7. **Finally, note that it has been interesting to see how the nativity characters reacted to the birth of Jesus and ask the pupils:**

Q: But what about you? If you had been there at the time, how might you have felt about meeting Jesus?

Pupils may be happy to offer their responses to the class, but do not push this because for some their responses might be deeply personal and a profound moment for them. For some, it might raise big questions, for others they might see fear or doubt in themselves which might be a surprise to encounter. Some might have misunderstandings about who Jesus was.

Session 2 (After Break)

Aim

- To consider who the nativity characters understood Jesus was, and what they knew about his future.

1. **Time might be needed first to finish off the 'Story Squiggles' activity.**

2. **Explain that at the time of Jesus' birth it was customary amongst Jews to go to the temple and present a 'Thanks Offering' when a child was born.**

As well as being an offering of thanks, this moment in the temple also signified for the Jews a deeper understanding of this new child as a member of their much larger faith family – belonging to the Jewish people.

The contemporary equivalent in the Christian faith is a baptism service which fulfils a similar role of thanking God, dedicating the new child to him and recognising the new child as a new member of God's family. Read the account in Luke (2v22-24) with the class. We advise using 'The Message' version because the vocabulary of this is much easier for pupils. Available from www.biblegateway.com.

3. **Show the class some examples of baptism cards that people have written for a child.**

These might contain words that express what the child means to them, their hopes for that child for their future, prayers for that child—cards that would be kept for the future for when the child is old enough to appreciate them.

4. **In their groups, pupils are to prepare a card for Jesus,** writing their card from the perspective of the person they named last session as the person/group that they think would have been most pleased to meet baby Jesus. As well as considering what to write inside, encourage the pupils to consider what image to put on the front of their card.

5. **For their message on the inside, pupils could reflect on the following questions:**

- How did they (in character as Mary/an angel/a shepherd etc) know Jesus?
- What were their feelings upon meeting him?
- What were their hopes and fears for his future?

Session 3 (After Lunch)

Aim

1. **To listen to how Simeon and Anna reacted to meeting Jesus at his dedication, learning what they saw ahead for him.**
2. **To consider what Mary pondered from her experiences, and what ponderings the story leaves for pupils.**

1. **Question: Why are Christians so pleased at Christmas to celebrate Jesus being born as a baby?**

Challenge every first answer that you are given, to yield deeper thinking (see examples below). Create a class mind map of ideas.

- 'Because he was God's gift to us.' Isn't that a rather strange gift? Why would you celebrate that?
- 'Because he is the centre of their religion.' Why is that? Isn't Christianity just about people being kind and loving?
- 'Because it gives us hope.' Why is that?
- 'Because he came to die for us.' Isn't it rather weird to celebrate someone's death – a bit macabre? Why was it 'good' that he died?
- 'Because it shows that God cares for us.' How?

2. **Role play: Sort the class into groups of four pupils (Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna).**

If numbers don't work out, have some groups of three and leave out Joseph. Pupils to role play being a modern family bringing their child for baptism (with Simeon and Anna being two older members of the church congregation). Role play arriving at church with their baby, meeting Simeon and Anna inside and the sort of 'nice' comments that Simeon and Anna might make to this visiting couple and their baby.

3. **Return to the story in Luke 2 (again using 'The Message' version) and read on (2v25-40) about Jesus' dedication at the temple.**

Notice what is strange about how Simeon and Anna react (in comparison to what they have just enacted as a group). Discuss as a class:

Q: How might the other people milling around in the temple have reacted to this poor couple who were bringing their child for dedication?

They might have ignored them, hurried on past minding their own business, some might have stopped and smiled to see a young baby with his parents, others might have looked down on them for being poor... etc.

Q: What is strange about how Simeon and Anna react?

The strength of their joyous response. They see this couple and they view Jesus as special - not just another baby. Simeon says he will bring salvation and be a light for all people. He says that reactions to Jesus will be divided—Jesus will be misunderstood by some and contradicted by others. But Simeon says that having met Jesus, he can now die in peace. Likewise, Anna is overjoyed to meet Jesus and declared that he is the person they are waiting for expectantly.

Q: Why did they react like this?

The Holy Spirit had shown them—God had told them to expect Jesus, and so they were patiently and expectantly waiting. Messiah is an old word for someone who saves people. They knew that the Jewish scriptures taught that there would one day be someone sent from God who would save the people. They were confident that Jesus was this person and so they were overjoyed.

4. **Hot seat Mary.**

Choose a Mary and get pupils to ask her questions about the different parts of the nativity story and how she felt. For example:

- How does this final scene in the temple leave her feeling?
- How does she react to Simeon explaining that Jesus will be misunderstood by many?
- The Bible says of her (Luke2v19): 'But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.'
- What things did she treasure up?
- What did her experiences leave her pondering (what questions might she have had)?

5. **Quiet reflection time: pupils to have space to consider their day.**

Perhaps play the song 'Mary did you know?' (there is a spine-tingling version by Pentatonix) which poses the question – Mary, did you know who this child in your arms would grow up to be...? Perhaps put these questions on the board:

- What do you make of the angel's claim that Jesus' birth was 'good news of great joy for all people'?
- If you had the chance to meet Jesus now, how would you feel about that?
- What would you like to say to him? This is what Christians believe prayer is. As you listen to the song, remind the pupils that they are free to pray if they wish.
- What in today's learning might affect how you celebrate Christmas this year?

6. **Consider closing the day with a time of prayer after the song, giving thanks for the birth of Jesus.**

You might find that if you offer a simple, one or two sentence, prayer that some children may be happy to also join you in praying aloud. Alternatively, they might prefer to sit and take it in silently.

A Retelling of the Christmas Story

Session 1

This retelling can be read aloud whilst the pupils doodle in their 'Story Squiggles' activity (session 1). To give them sufficient time to draw, it pulls in some of the background and contextual information to enrich the retelling. It has been divided into recommended chunks – one chunk per drawing.

Mary

Mary was probably a teenage girl, perhaps no more than 14. She lived in a small town called Nazareth and was 'betrothed' to Joseph. This meant there was an agreement in place between her family and Joseph's that she would one day marry him.

And the gospel story starts with an angel appearing to Mary. I cannot imagine this. An angel... What would that have been like?! Terrifying? And the news she received was that she was to bear a son. How could this be?! And the shame...

In those days, women who had children outside of marriage were at best shamed – not spoken to, cast out by their family and community. At worst, they might be taken outside the city walls and stoned – killed by people hurling rocks at them.

What then did Mary make of the angel's news that she was pregnant? What questions must this have left in her mind?

Joseph

Joseph was a kind man. We know this because when he finds out that Mary is pregnant he doesn't immediately turn her over to the unkindness of the community but instead looks for a way to quietly get out of marrying her. How must he have felt to discover that Mary was pregnant? And what of her explanation that an angel visited her? Did he believe this?

The Bible records that Joseph was then visited himself by an angel. The angel announced that he wasn't to divorce Mary quietly, his was to be the role of supporting her. How did he feel about this...about all the mutterings within the community as Mary's pregnant belly began to show their news of the impending birth?

And then comes the news that there is a census being taken and that they must travel all the way to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was at the other end of the country, requiring many days' journey.

And the best help Mary could hope for was a ride on an animal. How uncomfortable for the pregnant youngster. Now she would be forced to give birth away from the support of her community, the security of her familiar surroundings. How must the young couple have felt as they set out?

Wise Men

Meanwhile, Mary and Joseph were not the only ones given special knowledge of the important birth that was coming. Wise men (who you will sometimes hear referred to as 'Magi') from a far off land in the east seemed somehow to find information in the stars about the impending birth.

Who knows how much they understood. Did they know of the Jewish prophecies – predictions that a saviour was going to rise up from Bethlehem? Without much certainty or knowledge, but somehow expecting to find a king being born, they set off to track this new king down.

Their journey must have been long and gruelling. Did they second guess themselves and catch themselves wondering whether they were being foolish?

Regardless, they persevered. Upon arriving in Israel they went to the logical place to look for a royal birth: the palace in the capital city, Jerusalem. They had brought with them some strange gifts. What inspired these gift choices...? I wonder what you would give as a gift to a baby destined to be king?

These wise men had brought with them: gold—a natural choice for a king; frankincense, which was a perfume or incense often used by priests in their worship in the temple; and, myrrh which was used as an anointing oil for dead bodies. Did they realise that their gifts pointed forwards into the roles Jesus would undertake when he was grown up?

Having arrived at the palace in Jerusalem, the wise men had an audience with Herod, the ruler. He was known to be a very cruel man and was not widely liked. He was none-too-pleased to hear what the wise men were looking for: a baby who would be king...?

He sensed the threat to his throne and wanted to find the baby as well claiming it was so he could worship the child too. Instead he intended evil.

Shepherds

In the fields outside Bethlehem, shepherds were looking after sheep. This was no pleasant farming job. This was a tough living that was often dangerous.

The sheep needed defending from predators. The men slept and journeyed with their sheep. They smelt — no home comforts for them.

These men were often ill-educated and so not really respected in society. In many ways they were an extremely strange choice for God to announce the birth of his son to. Were the shepherds themselves aware of this, of having been chosen ahead of the religious leaders, ahead of the rich and powerful, ahead of the elders of the city?

They had been somehow singled out to hear the angels bring their, now famous, message. And upon hearing it, they reacted with faith. They left their fields and went to find the baby Jesus and to bow down and worship. Then they would return to their sheep, praising God.