

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.