

Teaching Series: Winter 2018



Canford
PARISH CHURCH

‘It’s the most wonderful time of the year!’ or is it? Advent is often filled with stresses, worries and strains. Worrying about what gifts to buy your family or how on earth you are going to make ends meet at the end of the month!

As a church throughout this season we will be exploring the true meaning of Advent and looking at ways in which we can reclaim this often stressful time of year. This series is based on the book ‘The Advent Conspiracy, which the authors wrote:

The writers of the book have a fantastic video that explains a little more about the purpose of their teaching. Check it out here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yfnlhvmr-k>

The subsequent pages provide notes for each week, to help us DIG DEEPER before Life Groups, DISCUSS with one another during the week - including questions designed for families to continue the conversation at home - and then APPLY it to our lives - because it’s not head knowledge we’re after but heart and life transformation! They are a guide, not a straight jacket, feel free to go ‘off-piste’.

week 1: Worship Fully

DIG DEEPER

Read: Luke 1:26-38 and 1:46-55.

The Big Idea: *What do we worship during Advent? “Jesus” is the right answer, of course, but is it the truthful answer?*

Intro: We spend billions of pounds every year during the holiday season, hoping - whether we admit it ourselves or not - that the latest and greatest gift will fulfil us and those we give gifts to. We sprint through store after store, trying to find the perfect gift to express our love because we crave to be loved in return. We sit in church disconnected from the story because we know that deep inside we're too far from the stable to see much of anything.

The heart of what we're truly searching for - hope, peace, love, rest, worship is in Christ, but each time we try to meet our desire for fulfilment at the shopping centre, we take another step away from the true story and meaning of the nativity.

Mary was a teenage girl engaged to marry a poor man carpenter named Joseph. Yet she was the young woman to whom God extended the invitation to be the mother of the Messiah, Jesus. On learning the news Mary bursts into song, a song now known as the Magnificat (found in Luke 1:46-55). The Magnificat is Mary worshipping and magnifying God though this song she announces that God is here!

How might we join her song of worship in this Advent Season?

Personal reflection (no one's looking, try to be honest with yourself and God!)

On a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), select the number that best represents your response to the following statements...

- I feel stressed In the lead up to Christmas ()
- I worry about my finances during the Christmas season ()
- I worry about how I may be perceived by my family or friends during the Christmas Season. ()
- I feel closer to God during the Christmas season. ()

DISCUSS

1. Read Luke 1:46-55. How would you describe Mary's reaction to the news she was carrying the Messiah? Would you have reacted the same way? What worries could she have had instead of worshipping?
2. What lines of Mary's song stand out to you the most? If you had to summarise the message of the song in one sentence what would it be?
3. Why do you think God chose to reveal himself to the world in this way? Why do you think he chose Mary?

family time (Watch this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4x23dm6sPmo>)

- What do you think is the most important thing about Christmas?
- What do you think Jesus would ask for, for Christmas?
- How do you think Mary must have felt to be pregnant with Jesus?! The saviour of the world!

Did you know that we can worship God in so many different ways, it isn't only singing songs or praying but we can worship him through our generosity and through loving people who might be lonely or afraid as well. How might you worship Jesus differently this Christmas?

Activity - Consider getting involved with the 'Reverse Advent Calendar'

"He has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold from now on all generations shall call me blessed!" (Luke 1:48)

APPLY (bringing the core truths of the bible story into *your* story)

1. Mary was filled with joy on hearing the news Jesus was coming. To what extent do you believe Jesus is the root of your joy this Christmas season?
2. Mary recognises the blessing that Jesus is to her and the world. What reasons do you have this Christmas season to feel 'blessed'. How might you share those blessings with the world?
3. What practical steps could you take to ensure Jesus is the focus of your worship this season? What other things could take the focus off of Jesus?
4. What are you grateful for at this time of year? How might you express your thanks to God for those things?

week 2: Spend Less

DIG DEEPER

Read: Matthew 2:1-12 and Luke 2:8-21

The Big Idea: *If Christmas is a season of excess how might we be truly generous and loving through our giving this year?*

Intro: “Spend less” is ambiguous. Spend less than last year? Spend less than my neighbour? Spend less than the average person, who spends up to £1000 on Christmas gifts? Yes and no is the answer. How much is too much? The line between excessive wealth and simplicity is hard to find - but it’s hard to escape the conclusion that nearly all of us have too much. The challenge is to balance our desires with the needs in our communities and the rest of the world. This means that shopping will become less about entertainment and more about necessities. It means that researching purchases may become more complicated than simply seeking the greatest value or the highest visibility. Many children are overwhelmed by gifts, the sheer volume of which distracts them from the celebration of Jesus.

Spending less does not mean spending nothing; rather, we strive to thoughtfully evaluate what we support with our spending and allow our spending to support products, people, and causes that are worthy of being supported. Are we willing to rethink how we use our wealth? Do we long to discover the true beauty of giving? How could we give gifts this year with true meaning?

Personal reflection

On a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), select the number the best represents your response to the following statements...

- I think deeply about the gifts I give at Christmas ()
- I spend excessively at Christmas ()
- If someone buys for me, I feel I have to respond by buying for them ()
- I receive and give presents that are unwanted or unnecessary ()
- I find I compare myself a lot to other people during Christmas ()

DISCUSS

1. The Magi brought gifts from far away lands to Jesus recognising that he was to be honoured above all things. How might our giving and generosity honour Christ?
2. The Shepherds brought words to Mary that she 'treasured up' and 'pondered in her heart' (Luke 2:19). How might we use our wealth wisely so that our gifts are truly treasured this year?
3. The Magi and the Shepherds are on two different ends of the spectrum; the poorest of the poor and richest of the rich. What similarities do you see in the way they approach Jesus? What unifies these otherwise polarised members of society?

family time - Activity!

- Think of one or two family members or friends and write their names in the middle of a piece of paper. Ask your children, what does this person really love? What do you think they would treasure the most at Christmas? Try and think of the most meaningful gift you could buy them this Christmas and write down your ideas . Bonus Challenge: Give them a budget of under £5 or even nothing at all!

God loves generosity, he loves when we share with others what we have and give them joy.

"And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening up their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh." (Matthew 2:11)

APPLY (bringing the core truths of the bible story into *your* story)

1. Would you agree that sometimes gift giving at Christmas can be excessive? Why?
2. How much do you really think about each gift you are giving at Christmas?
3. What are some of the benefits of generosity? Conversely what harm can excess cause us? What damage can comparison do to our well-being and spirituality?
4. How could your gifts help those most in need this Christmas? How might we be generous to the world around us?

week 3: Give More

DIG DEEPER

Read: Matthew 1:16-25 and John 3:16.

The Big Idea: *During this season we can choose to be radically generous and give gifts honouring to Christ.*

Intro:

The best gifts celebrate a relationship. The reason a father keeps a simple frame with a pictures of his girls glued in the middle isn't because it is an expensive work of art. It's because his daughter gave that gift specifically to him, and they created it with their own energy. When the father looks at that particular gift, he's reminded of two girls who love him and a relationship that he's still celebrating.

It sounds so obvious, yet we seem to have drifted away from this liberating straightforward truth: The Father gave his one and only Son. God's answer for the world's problems has never been material things. God did not give us more stuff - even good stuff like work, food or health. He gave us himself. This simple truth is why giving is still a good way to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It also points to a way out of the chaos of consumerism that Christmas has become, taking us back to the joy that can still be found at the heart of this story. Our giving can actually reflect in some small way the power and beauty of God coming into our world as one of us.

Personal reflection

On a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), select the number the best represents your response to the following statements...

- I can think of numerous instances of God's provision in my life ()
- I feel content with my relationship with God ()
- I have a deep friendship with Jesus ()
- I understand the cost of Jesus' love on the cross ()

DISCUSS

1. Why do you think John 3:16 is such a treasured verse amongst Christians? What is its significance?
2. If 'Immanuel' means God with us, what does it mean for God to be *with* us? What does the name Immanuel tell us about God's character? In what sense is he *with* us?
3. How would a close personal relationship with God differ from the Old Testament Jews understanding of God? Why do you think 'God with us' was such a radical thing?
4. Read Philippians 2:5-11, What was the cost of God's giving himself to us? What does that tell us about his love for us?

family time

- What does a best-friend do? How does your best-friend make you feel?
- What does it mean to be God's friend?
- Who do you think you could be friends with at Christmas who might be lonely?
- How does it feel to know that Jesus died so that he could be your friend?

Jesus wants to be close to us. John 3:16 says that 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life'. Jesus has given you the gift of eternal life, isn't that amazing!

APPLY (bringing the core truths of the bible story into *your* story)

1. What is the best present you have ever received? What made that present so special? Why is it so important to give gifts that are personal?
2. What do you think it means to give gifts that reflect the nativity story? How can we be more relational in or gift giving?
3. How can we nurture and develop relationships with friends and family this Christmas? What are some of things you do to make your family feel loved?
4. How can we give sacrificially this Christmas?

week 4: Love All

DIG DEEPER

Read: Luke 2:1-16

The Big Idea: *The priceless gift of a restored relationship with God and others is now offered to those who could never afford it.*

Intro:

There is no way around it: Jesus calls us to love and care for the poor. At Christmas, one of the things that should distinguish a Christ-follower is a love that reaches out to the hungry and thirsty and sick and imprisoned. Such giving is an act of true worship. There is a close connection between how we treat each other and how we treat God. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says that whatever we do for one of the least of his brothers and sisters, we do for him. God takes these acts of love (or moments of rejection) very personally.

And why wouldn't he? Jesus himself was poor. He chose to be born into the poverty of a family struggling beneath the heel of imperial Rome. Writer Scott Bessenecker suggests that "the very first statement Jesus ever voiced about his concern for the poor, oppressed, marginalised people was when he cried out as one of them - eyes shut tight, mouth open wide, wailing, kicking... It was one of the most profound acts of solidarity with the poor that he could make."

For all of the other aspects of his Advent we celebrate each year, let us not forget this part of the story: "When God voted with his birth, he voted for the poor".

Personal reflection

On a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), select the number the best represents your response to the following statements...

- I encounter marginalised groups of people regularly ()
- I make a conscious effort to help the poor ()
- I do not judge others ()
- I want to grow in my ability to love others ()

DISCUSS

1. We read in this passage that there was ‘no place for them in the inn’. Jesus experienced rejection and poverty from the moment of birth. Can you think of other biblical characters that were rejected? How did God use them?
2. Jesus was born in the equivalent of a (cheap) hotel lobby or car park. Yet he was the most precious gift to humankind. What does this tell us about the last and the least in our society?
3. Can you think of other stories or teachings within the gospels that feature the poor? If we took a wholly Biblical stance in how we treat the poor what would that look like?
4. Jesus not only was born poor, but he chose to reveal himself to shepherds, the poorest group of people in Jewish society. How can we reveal Jesus to the last and the least this Christmas time?

family time

- Imagine everything was taken away from you and you were left in a completely alone in an empty field. If you could ask for one thing what would it be? Would it be a friend? Or some shelter? Or some water to drink?
- Many people all over the world are in this position they don't have the basic things they need. What do you think you could do to help them?

Jesus loves the poor, he also loves when we help those in need! You can make a difference in so many ways! Maybe think of charity to support as a family or a person you could invite to Christmas dinner.

APPLY (bringing the core truths of the bible story into *your* story)

1. What is your experience of poverty? Can you think of a time when you either experienced poverty or saw poverty somewhere else? E.g. a mission trip.
2. Where do you see poverty locally? How might you help in that situation?
3. How might Jesus' experience of rejection comfort us? How should Jesus' experience with rejection impact our relationships with those around us?
4. How might you as a Life Group become even more loving and charitable?