

## **The Christmas Story**

*The script for this service is based on a variety of sources, including "Christmas Uncut" by Carl Laferton (The Good Book Company 2012) and a version of the Inn-keeper's story that I found online in 2012 but cannot now trace. If I have used any of your resources without acknowledgement, please accept my apologies and contact me via the Deanery website so that I can put things right.*

### **Welcome**

**Carol:** *O come, all ye faithful*

### **Opening Prayer**

**Carol:** *O little town of Bethlehem*

**Reading:** The Angels' Story

**Carol:** *On Christmas night all Christians sing*

**Reading:** Mary's Story

**Carol:** *Joy to the world*

**Reading:** Joseph's Story

**Carol:** *Silent night*

**Reading:** The Inn-keeper's Story

**Carol:** *Once in royal David's city*

**Reading:** The Shepherds' Story

**Carol:** *While shepherds watched their flocks by night*

**Reading:** The Wise Men's Story

**Carol:** *In the bleak midwinter*

**Closing Prayer and Blessing**

## 1. The Angels' Story

Christmas is coming!

And we're all getting ready:

buying presents;

baking cakes;

visiting relatives;

writing cards...

And there never seems to be enough time for it all.

Two thousand years ago, God's people had already spent hundreds of years getting ready for the very first Christmas. They were in all sorts of trouble, but they knew - because God had told them - that one day he would send them someone to rescue them from all their problems. They called this person the Christ. And they'd been waiting for him for *years*.

And now the time was near. Christmas was coming - they just didn't know it yet.

But God knew, and he sent his angels to tell people the good news. Can you imagine what it would be like if an angel of the Lord appeared to *you* - in a dream, on a hillside, in your own home? No wonder the angel had to start by saying "Don't be afraid"!

First he went to Mary - a teenage girl from an unimportant little town called Nazareth - and told her that she was going to have a baby - oh yes, and he would be God's Son. *But don't be afraid. God's got it all sorted.*

Then he went to see Joseph - a carpenter who was planning to marry Mary - and told him that his new wife would be having God's baby. *But don't be afraid: this baby's going to make everything ok.*

And then a whole host of angels went to see some shepherds out on the hills above Bethlehem, to tell them that Christmas was coming. *But don't be afraid: this is the best news of all - for everyone!*

But what did it mean? *Why* was Jesus such good news?

In the beginning, God made everything, including our world. He loved it and it was good. He made people, and asked us to take care of his world. He gave us everything we needed, including the rules that we'd need to keep if we wanted to stay safe and do what's right.

But people aren't very good at doing what we're told. We all break God's rules, no matter how hard we try to keep them. We mess up. We hurt each other and we damage the world and we hurt God. And even when we're sorry, we can't change the bad things that have happened. It's like a big gap's opened up between us and God, and no matter how hard we try, we can't close it.

But when Jesus grew up, he died on a cross to pay the price for all the bad things that we've done.

And this is where we get to the good news. Because the story doesn't end there, of course. Jesus came back to life. He shines like a light in the world, bringing us hope when we trust in him. Because of him, there isn't a gap between us and God any more. We just need to say sorry and mean it, and we can know him as our loving Father again.

And it makes an amazing difference in our lives when we know that God loves us so much he'll do anything for us - even send his Son to die for us. When we let God into our lives, he answers our prayers and gives us strength and changes us so that we can be everything he's made us to be.

## **2. Mary's Story**

So there she is: a pregnant teenager from a town that everyone thinks is rubbish.

There was a saying about her town: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

It turns out that the answer was very definitely "Yes!"

And that's not just Jesus. Mary herself must have been pretty special. God knew what he was doing when he chose her.

First, when she'd got over the shock of talking to an angel and understood what he was saying - that she was going to have God's baby - she simply said, "Yes. I'll do whatever God wants me to do."

And then, when she'd had a bit longer to think about it - and by now, no doubt, there were rumours flying all over Nazareth and beyond - what did she do? She burst out in a song of praise to God.

I'm bursting with the good news, she said. I'm the most blessed woman on earth! What God's done for me will never be forgotten. God is so wonderful: he loves us and cares for us; he protects us and forgives us and gives us everything we need. He keeps all his promises. He's awesome!

### **3. Joseph's Story**

Two thousand years ago, there lived a good, kind man called Joseph. A long time before that, way back in Joseph's family, there had been a king. That's why Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem that first Christmas: the Roman emperor wanted to count everyone in their country, so they had to go to be counted in the town where their family came from. And Joseph was part of King David's family, which came from Bethlehem.

King David was the greatest ruler his people had ever had. But Joseph himself wasn't royal and to most people he didn't seem important. He was just a carpenter from Nazareth.

But remember: God doesn't see the things that we see. He doesn't care about whether we're rich or famous. He sees into our hearts - and when he looked into Joseph's heart he saw a good, kind man who always tried to do what's right.

So what do you think Joseph did, when an angel came to him in a dream? The angel said, "Joseph, Mary's baby has come from God. So don't be afraid. Go ahead and marry her. When the baby's born, you should call him Jesus, which means 'God saves'."

When Joseph woke up, he did exactly what the angel from God had commanded him. He married Mary, and when the baby was born, they called him Jesus, just as God had commanded.

#### 4. The Inn-Keeper's Story

Sorry, what was that? The *inn-keeper's* story? You're kidding, right? Nobody *ever* wants to hear my story.

Look in the Bible if you want proof. One line - half a sentence - that's all I get. And it's not exactly flattering, is it? "She wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger, *because there was no room for them in the inn.*"

Which is just great. Fantastic! Two thousand years later, and I'm still the baddy in every Nativity Play that ever happens.

What was I supposed to do? The whole town was packed with people, and as a matter of fact there *was* room at the inn. And it wasn't just my inn, by the way. It was every inn, every house, every spare corner in the town. But does anyone care about that? Oh, no. It's all my fault.

I mean, I said to Joseph when he knocked on the door, I said to him, "It's not my fault, mate. You can see how it is."

He looked like a nice guy, and I thought he'd understand, but to be honest he seemed a little tense. He pointed to Mary, and ok, I could see that she was going to have a baby. But d'you think she was the *only* woman pregnant that night? I'd got two of them inside already, and one of them looked ready to pop any minute if you asked me.

So I said to him, I said, "Look mate, I'm full up with pregnant ladies."

And of course he said that *this* baby's important. Well, he would, wouldn't he? So I said, "Look, mate, I don't care if he's the Son of God, I don't have any more rooms."

Yeah. Well. What can I say?

But you've got to remember - I *did* find them a spare corner in the end. I don't really understand what made me do it. I mean, I'd had enough by then. Been up

all day and half the night, looking after all the other guests, and for two pins I'd have slammed the door in their faces.

But then something made me look again at the pair of them. Maybe it was when I said that thing about the Son of God. Something about the way they looked at each other, maybe. I don't know. But I suddenly thought about the room where the animals sleep. It might not have been posh, but it was nice and warm, and these two didn't look like they cared about posh.

So I let them in. D'you hear that? *I let them in*. The Bible's right: there *was* no room at the inn - but I found them a space anyway. I did my best for them - really I did.

And d'you know what? When I think about that baby - when I remember what I saw when I looked into his eyes - I don't care what everyone thinks of me. Go ahead! Make the inn-keeper in your Nativity Play as grumpy as you like.

Because I know now - I know deep inside - that when you do your best, even though you think you have nothing left to give, then God thinks you're fantastic. And that's good enough for me.

## 5. The Shepherds' Story

Out on the hills near Bethlehem, some shepherds lay around their camp fire, guarding their flocks of sheep during the night. Suddenly, they saw a brilliant light in the dark sky and an angel stood in front of them. They were very scared.

“Don’t be frightened,” said the angel. “I have wonderful news for you, and for all people. Tonight the Son of God was born in a stable in Bethlehem. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

As the shepherds stared at the angel, more angels appeared in the sky, singing praises to God. “Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to all people who love him,” they sang. Then the light faded and the angels were gone. The night was dark again.

*Tonight, the Son of God was born in a stable in Bethlehem.* Of all the messages that the shepherds might have expected an angel from God to give them, surely that wasn’t it! If God really came to live in this world that first Christmas, that’s amazing. It means that we can know what he’s like. It means that we can know what he wants us to be like. If there really was a baby lying in a manger somewhere in Bethlehem who was the Son of God, then that was the most important news that anyone had ever been given. Ever.

So the big question for the shepherds was: Was it true? Had the angel made it up? Had they made the angel up? Was it all just a dream? There was only one way to find out for sure. Sensibly, they said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see.” The angel had told them that they’d find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying - very unusually - in a manger.

So they went to look for themselves. Either this baby in a manger would be there, or he wouldn’t. Either the Son of God had been born, or he hadn’t. So off they hurried, to check it out. And we know what happened next: they discovered God’s Son lying in a manger, just as they had been told.



## 6. The Wise Men's Story

Who came to visit you after you were born? Your grandparents, maybe. Aunts and uncles. Friends. Neighbours. All very lovely.

What about the Queen? Did she rush to your house when she heard you'd been born?

No, mine neither. The President of America didn't call in, either.

What about the professors from Oxford and Cambridge? Were they so excited to hear you'd been born that they made a bee-line for your front door? No?

And, to be fair, if some of the most powerful and intelligent people in the world *had* dropped everything to come and visit you or me, it would be a bit surprising.

But that's exactly what the wise men did two thousand years ago, when Jesus was born. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly where they came from - the East, somewhere - nor how many of them there were - only that they brought three gifts for Jesus - nor even, really, what they did - only that they were some kind of professor or local ruler. Just wise men.

But what we do know is that they travelled hundreds of miles, for months and months, with incredibly expensive gifts, to see a baby born in a little town in a little far-off country.

And we know that when they got to the house where Mary was staying with Jesus, these powerful, intelligent men got down on their knees and worshipped a little child.

Which is astonishing, when you think about it.

We're not so different from those wise men, ourselves. We might not be among the most intelligent or powerful people on earth right now, but we do have other things in common with them. Most of us here today aren't from Israel. We

might not know much about what God's prophets said. Lots of us have probably ended up, at some point in our lives, gazing at the stars and trying to guess what it's all about.

And we've all got to make the same decision that they made. Is Jesus the Son of God? Should we be worshipping him, like the wise men did?

Lots of people might say we're silly even to think of it. But perhaps the really wise thing to do is look at the evidence and think things through for ourselves.

The Bible tells us that God loves us so much that he leaves us free to make up our own minds about him.