



*ALTER***nativity**

Just God, Simply Christmas



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www.alternativity.org.uk

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 JustGodSimplyChristmas

ALTERnativity's strapline is 'JUST GOD, SIMPLY CHRISTMAS'.

ALTERnativity want to encourage people to get back to the heart of the Christmas message, God being born amongst us to proclaim a new way: the way of liberation, freedom and justice for all peoples.

- Too many people are living in grinding poverty, denied basic freedoms and rights.
- Climate change is displacing people from their land as erratic weather makes traditional farming increasingly untenable.

How we celebrate Christmas in a world where so many of our sisters and brothers are hungry is a constant challenge to us as people of faith.

With this challenge before us, at ALTERnativity we want to find ways to help people think through their actions at Christmas and yet still have a joyful, meaningful and fun celebration.

In preparing for Christmas we encourage people to consider:

- What does it mean that God became human?
- How do we see the holy family as real people, coping with change, pressure and joy?
- Can we resist the pressure to over-spend?
- How do we respond to Mary's concern for the poor?

For more resources please visit: **www.alternativity.org.uk**

Or find our advent reflections on Facebook.

Supported by Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS).

Traditions

Everyone, then, went to register himself, each to his hometown. Luke 2 v 3.

It's roughly 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Every step, every mile took Mary further away from her loved ones, further away from everything she knew. She hadn't had long to get used to the idea of having a baby but, like most expectant mothers, she must have already been thinking about the birth, mentally preparing herself for the event. She would have imagined herself surrounded by her mother, the local midwives, maybe some aunties or cousins. Instead, here she was walking for days, heading for a birth, perhaps surrounded by Joseph's family – his mother, his aunties, his cousins. To top it all off, Bethlehem was mobbed and they couldn't find a proper place to stay. Hardly the circumstances Mary would have chosen for herself!

Christmas often involves lots of family – our own or other people's – whether we want it to or not. The reality of Christmas can also sometimes work out differently from what we had planned or what we would have liked. How do you cope when your great aunt announces she's coming and you don't have a present? Or when you need to spend two days with your mother-in-law, who likes to criticise your parenting? Or when you were hoping your daughter would make it home from abroad but she doesn't have the money this year?

Christmas is surrounded by traditions – from the Advent calendar opened daily in the build up to the 25th to the Queen's speech at 3pm on Christmas Day not to mention our own personal family traditions. Like the birth of a baby, it is also surrounded by a lot of expectations and pressures.



Discussion points:

- Are your Christmas celebrations the way they are because you enjoy them or because that's "how it's aye been" and that's what everyone expects?
- What would your ideal Christmas look like?
- Have you ever had a Christmas where there was a forced change of plan or something unexpected happened? What was it like?
- Sometimes changes in circumstances (such as children growing up and moving away or a loved one dying) mean that our celebrations have to change. Should we create new traditions or try and continue the old ones?

Prayer

Loving God, help us to rejoice in and be grateful for what we have – even if it isn't what we would choose. As the busyness around Christmas increases, help us to focus on your gift to us in Jesus and to spread that love to those around us.

Amen



Displacement

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. Matthew 2 v 13.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus knew what it was to be displaced. In a short period of time, their entire lives were turned upside-down and their home was left behind. The trip to Bethlehem wasn't supposed to be anything other than an inconvenient trip, however their stay was prolonged by the birth. Staying in a stable the basics would have been harder to come by – the gospel accounts don't tell us what they did for meals and clean water, perhaps they had to buy it in, more expensive than cooking for yourself, or maybe they were provided for by extended family - extended family who also had nowhere to stay, or were just unwilling to host them in more comfortable surroundings. And just when they had hoped to go home, the political situation changes, their lives are in danger, and they find themselves fleeing to Egypt.

The mental anguish of this, the stress and uncertainty, the fear and loss of community, is usually omitted from the nativity. That period of their lives is not documented, and so we don't know how they coped, whether they were welcomed, whether they struggled to make ends meet, or whether they were at breaking point, both physically and mentally, desperate to return to what was familiar and to where they belonged. Before Jesus was anything, he was a refugee. That experience must surely have shaped his upbringing and his ministry - a ministry where the care for those on the margins was front and centre and where he saw the potential in humble fishermen, rather than go looking for it amongst the religious elite.

Today there are an unprecedented number of people on the move, some people displaced due to climate change or conflict; people seeking a better life, security and opportunities somewhere else.

Personal stories of people who have been displaced can be found at www.christianaid.org.uk or www.mediterraneanhope.com

Discussion points:

Have you ever been displaced from your home, even for a short time?

- What did this feel like?
- What was the hardest part of not being at home?
- What did you miss most? What did you struggle with?

Can you imagine having to celebrate Christmas in temporary accommodation?

Can you think of one way in which you can support people who are displaced this Christmas, locally or globally?

Prayer

God of all people, you know what it is to be displaced, to live a life dictated by circumstance, fear and uncertainty.

Be with all who are making dangerous journeys in search of a better tomorrow and help us to raise our voices to demand justice for those who end up on our shores.

Amen



How do we celebrate?

I am the Lord's servant...May it be to me as you have said. Luke 1 v 50.

It is believed that Mary was a young girl at the time of Jesus' birth. She lived in an age and a place where women were not equal to men; where gender roles would have been fairly clear cut. Yet she was given recognition by God to be the mother of his Son. What would have happened if Mary had refused? She humbly answered 'I am the Lord's servant – may it be as you have said'.

Life in the 21st Century still seeks to stereotype people by gender; or by place in society; or by faith etc. In many communities in our world today it is still expected that woman do the cooking and cleaning, and look after the children. In some situations, that may be as well as holding down a job! In the UK there are still jobs where women and men are not paid the same for the same work. In some churches there are rules about women which prevent them from being leaders.

Often we feel we are our 'own person' but yet in certain circumstances we fall back into these stereotyped roles. This is often magnified at Christmas.



Discussion points:

Not everyone finds Christmas a joyful time because it is a time of too much preparation and organisation.

Think about your Christmas celebration.

- Who organises the food, gifts and activities?
- Do those who you share the celebration with have specific roles?
- Who brings the wine and who do you ask to bring a pudding for example?
- Who carves the turkey?
- Is the burden of work equally shared?
- What can you change to allow everyone to play their part in both the work and the rest of the celebration?

During Advent, remember others who might be struggling with the burden of responsibility placed on them.

- What one thing can you do that could be helpful at this time?

Prayer

Gracious God, you unexpectedly came as a baby into the arms of a mother who humbly took on her role with love for you. Help us to recognise the gifts and talents of others around us and allow us to make use of them for the benefit of others...including ourselves!

Amen

Unintended Consequences

When Herod realised he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, he gave orders to kill all the baby boys in the area around Bethlehem. Matthew 2 v 16.

There may have been times in all our lives when the decisions we have made have set in place a chain of events that end up with a result that was not what we had intended. Sometimes that's positive and sometimes, as was the case with the Magi, it is not.

The Magi travelled from the East with the very best of intentions. They were following a star, looking for a king. Is it unreasonable that they assumed they would find that king in a palace? They were well read and educated people but they did not fully understand what they had read. Their assumption alerted Herod to the birth of Jesus and their talk of a 'new king' made Herod insecure and jealous. The decision of the Magi to stop at the palace set in place a chain of events that led to serious unintended consequences. They could not have known that their decision would have enraged Herod so much that he ordered the slaughter of hundreds of innocent children. Nor could they have known that in order to escape that slaughter Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus would need to flee their own country and begin their lives as a family, as refugees in Egypt. The Bible is full of examples of unintended consequences some good and some like that of the Magi - disastrous for the very people they wanted to help!



Discussion points:

Take time to think about a time where a decision made around Christmas celebrations led to unintended consequences for you.

Around gifts

- Think about a time when you spent more than you could afford for a particular gift at Christmas.
- What was the consequence of that?
- If you bought what you had intended did you have to make hard choices later because of your decision? How did that make you feel? Would you make a different decision now?

Around people

- How do you decide who to invite to join in some part of your Christmas celebrations?
- Who is part of that decision? Has there ever been a time when people you invited made your celebration extra special?
- Has there ever been a time when people you invited made your Christmas difficult? Did that put a strain on you? Your family? Your friends?
- How could you avoid a similar thing happening in the future?
- What could be the unintended consequences of inviting or not inviting certain people to your Christmas celebration?

Prayer

Lord of all people; help us to make wise decisions and to recognise the consequences of these we make and these we don't make! Make us aware of how we may influence others and may we know your peace in our hearts at this time.

Amen