



Taking a Second Look at Christmas

OMEGA

Single Session

Omega – Single Session

This is a shortened version of the two-part Omega studies previously available, to enable those with less time to engage with the main ideas in a single, two-hour session (including time for a good break between Parts 1 and 2).

Leader's prep

In advance:

- **Gather together** everything you need from the list below.
- **Read through** the session, the Bible passage, and the Leader's notes provided.

Equipment needed:

- Bibles
- flip chart or large sheet of paper and suitable pens
- pens and paper for all participants
- copies of Christmas carol 'In the bleak mid-winter'

Part 1: What are we preparing for?

Aims: Like the full version, this section emphasises an enjoyable and positive start to the festive season; explores what Christmas has become about in our culture, and sometimes our churches; and examines how we can focus more of our preparations on Jesus.

1.1 Season's greetings! (5 mins)

- 1.1.1 Provide a brief overview of the course and introduce this session's theme.
- 1.1.2 Encourage each person to introduce themselves. You could use an ice-breaker such as getting them to share their favourite and least favourite thing about getting ready for Christmas.

1.2 Begin by making a list... (10 mins)

- 1.2.1 Encourage everyone to sit round in a circle and invite them to play a form of word association game. (If you have quite a large group you might want to split up into smaller groups to do this exercise.)
- 1.2.2 Each person must take it in turns to say a word or thing they associate with Christmas – no word can be repeated.
- 1.2.3 Keep going round the circle, as fast as possible. If people can't think of a word, they drop out. Keep going until there's only one person left or no-one can think of any more new words.
- 1.2.4 Ensure one person – which could be you, or another volunteer – doesn't participate and is instead focused on capturing as many of the words as they can by writing them up onto the flip chart.
- 1.2.5 Invite the group to look at the words on the flip chart and to group them together into themes. How do they feel when they think about these different themes?



- 1.2.6** Say a short prayer to dedicate the rest of the session, and to reflect on what has been discussed so far, or use the one provided:

*Lord Jesus, we thank you for the joy of Christmas.
For good gifts given and received;
for laughter and quality time with friends and family;
for feasting and festivities and fun.
But we ask you to come now and remind us why you came
and how we can prepare for you to come still more
to transform our hearts, our lives and our world.
We would turn down the noise and dim the sparkling lights
to hear and see you more clearly as you are Lord Jesus – Christ our King.
For we would build your Christ-with-us kingdom
and so we need you to prepare the way again.
Amen.*

1.3 Preparing for the day or for the Christ? (25 mins)

Read Isaiah 40:1-11 as a group.

- 1.3.1** Use the questions below to encourage discussion on the passage and the issues raised. (See the Leader's notes at the end of this section of the study, which provide background on the passage and the issues behind these questions.):
- How do you feel when you read this passage?
 - Why do you think it is often chosen as an Advent reading?
 - How, if at all, might this passage influence your Advent and Christmas preparations?
- 1.3.2** Read out the facts provided in the "Christmas spending facts" box provided below and then gather reactions to them. (At a suitable point, add up the group's total expenditure for last year as indicated.)
- How do these 'spending facts' fit with your own experience? Individually, jot down a quick estimate of your own expenditure during last year's Christmas season, and give it (anonymously) to the group leader, who will add them all up and announce the grand total for the group.
 - How does all this fit with the passage we've just read?
 - Might the passage from Isaiah make you think about doing anything differently?

Christmas spending facts from 2013 (Source: *Money Advice* survey)

In 2012, total Christmas spending nationwide in the UK was estimated at a minimum of £22bn, a 10% increase from the previous year.

In December 2013, those questioned were planning to spend an average of £822 per adult, as follows:

- £599 on presents
- £180 on food and drink
- £ 43 on cards, decorations, and trees.

As in previous years, the Christmas period 2013 was predicted to account for around 30% of total annual retail sales in the UK. (The percentage is similar in the USA.)

Leader's notes

Isaiah 40: 1-11 is undoubtedly one of the best known passages in the entire book, perhaps partly because it has been immortalised and popularised over the years by Handel's *Messiah*. This famous oratorio opens with the aria "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" and is immediately followed by the chorus "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed". The passage creates a feeling of comfort and confidence in a future with God that sets the tone for our own seasonal expectations.

However, a closer look at this and other well known passages commonly associated with Advent, such as Isaiah 9: 2-7 and Isaiah 11: 1-10, indicates that they are not only foretelling Jesus' birth. For they all look forward to a time when the glory of the Lord will be revealed to **all** people (Isaiah 40: 5), and that will be at the end of time as we know it, when 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11:9).

The passage here, like others in Isaiah, is foretelling **two** future events. One is the birth of Christ (Isaiah 9:6; 11:1), which at the time of writing was still seven centuries away. The other is the **second** coming, when he will return in glory and in might. The birth of Christ is envisioned by Isaiah as the beginning of a revolution that would one day lead to the social order as we know it being turned upside down: as symbolised by valleys being exalted, mountains being laid low, crooked paths made straight and rough places smooth. It is a revolution that Christ would start by being born in human form (Isaiah 11:6), and that he would exhort us to continue until he returns. It would be a work in progress, not one that would be completed in his lifetime – though through his death and resurrection, he set in motion everything required for its completion.

This passage, therefore, reinforces the idea introduced in earlier chapters of Isaiah that the first coming of Christ would be the precursor to a second. It is an idea taken up, for example, in Matthew 25: 31-46 and in Revelation 1: 1-8. It was the reason for the introduction of the season of Advent in the early Church as a period of preparation for that **second** coming. Perhaps our own preparations for Christmas – when we celebrate Christ's appearance in human, mortal and vulnerable form – should therefore also reflect our preparations for the second, when his appearance as the Messiah and as our "sovereign Lord" will be unmistakable. It will be in glory, "and all mankind will see it together" (Isaiah 40: 5).

So how should we prepare for our own encounter with Christ, whether in this world or in the world to come? Jesus made it very clear that our focus should be on loving God and loving others – and there are many examples throughout the Bible of this truth being lived out by his followers. For today's purposes, two passages in the Gospels give us some specific help with this question; and although the words are spoken by different individuals in different contexts, their meaning is exactly the same. In Luke 3: 11, John the Baptist urges his followers to prepare for their future encounters with Jesus, in their own lifetimes, by sharing their clothing and their food with those who have none. And in Matthew 25: 35-36, Jesus admonishes his disciples to prepare for his coming again by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison – because "whatever you have done for the least of these [my people], you have done for me" (v. 40). In other words, our preparations for Jesus' coming should perhaps be governed by the principle of sharing our material wealth with those less fortunate than ourselves.

How might this be reflected in our own Christmas planning? In the light of the statistics discussed in this session, what difference might it make to our own "Christmas spending facts" and to the wider world?

We suggest having a short break at this point.

Part 2: What can I give him?

Aims: Following on from the earlier general consideration of Christmas preparations, this section looks more closely at our own activities during Advent; reviews how we spend our time and money; and considers what type and direction of giving seems to resonate best with the first Christmas, and with Jesus' kingdom as a whole.

2.1 Giving to Jesus (30 mins)

- 2.1.1** Explain that in this session, we will be looking at two different groups of people and their reactions to Jesus' birth. They are the only instances in the Gospels of those who witnessed the events around the Nativity, and how they responded is worth considering!
- 2.1.2** Read Matthew 2:1-12 as a group. Use whichever one of the following methods you prefer:
- Read the passage to the group.
 - Cast different people in the group to read different parts – narrator; Herod; Magi; Prophet.
- 2.1.3** Use the questions below to encourage discussion on the passage and the issues raised. See the Leader's notes at the end of this study, which provide background on the passage and the issues behind these questions:
- What would you regard as the key points of this passage?
 - How do the facts in this account of the journey of the Magi compare with the way it is often depicted in art and on stage?
 - Read the passage again, this time up to and including v. 16. What does it tell us about the actual journey of the Magi?
 - Have a closer look at v. 11. Is there one word in particular that stands out?
- 2.1.4** Now ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:8-20.
- 2.1.5** Use the questions below to encourage discussion on the passage and the issues raised. See the Leader's notes at the end of this study, which provide background on the passage and the issues behind these questions:
- The Magi took considerable risks to see the baby Jesus. What risks did the shepherds take?
 - What were the main similarities, and/or differences, between the reactions of the shepherds and those of the Magi to the news of Jesus' birth?
 - What lessons might we learn from both groups about our own response to this news?
 - What did the shepherds do after seeing Jesus? How might that affect our own celebrations on Christmas Day?
- 2.1.6** Read out the facts provided in the "Christmas spending in context" box provided below and get people to compare them with the Christmas spending facts in session. Then gather reactions to them:
- In light of the experiences of the Magi and the shepherds, what might gift giving to God at Christmas mean for us?
 - In addition to material gifts, what other kinds of gifts could we give him?

Christmas spending in context (*compare with Christmas Spending Facts, session 1*)

- According to various sources, 1 in 10 Christmas gifts may be immediately donated to charity shops. 40% of Christmas toys are broken or thrown away by March.
- According to the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the post-Christmas period sees a significant rise in personal debt and related problems, including depression and divorce.
- According to the director of a leading aid charity, we give 2.5% of our total Christmas spending to charitable causes.
- As little as 3p may go to charity from the sale of some charity Christmas cards.
- In 2013, an extra £1bn was needed by Christmas to provide sufficient emergency aid until just the end of the year for those Syrians displaced by the civil war who were already in UN refugee camps.

2.2 Giving like a shepherd (10 mins)

2.2.1 Read out the Shepherd devotional (below) to the group.

2.2.2 Afterwards, read out the following questions, giving space between each one for each person to quietly reflect on their personal response.

- a) How does the story make you feel, physically and emotionally?
- b) What does it tell us about the meaning of the Nativity?
- c) What do we learn about the sacrifices made by the shepherds in their quest to see Jesus?
- d) How might this affect what we do this Christmas?

Shepherd devotional

I'll never forget that night. It was clear and bright. And freezing! The stars were shining and there was one in particular that Shem – who reckons he's a right expert on the night sky – was saying he'd never seen before. I don't know about anything like that, but it was certainly low and incredibly bright.

But that was nothing compared to the light that burst the sky just moments later. Light that's made any other light I've seen since dull and dark in comparison. Brighter than dawn, or that blinding sensation you get when you come out of a hillside cave you've been sheltering in. And so pure.

It was like a dream. A normal conversation between a few of the lads ribbing each other. Then a flood of light. And then – them.

I was flat on my face before I could even think "what's happening?" It was just so bright. Too bright. Pure. Holy... glorious.

Omega – Single Session

Of course now I realise they were angels, but at the time I was just terrified. This holy beauty was like nothing a poor shepherd had ever seen – come to think of it, it was probably more than even the richest kings from the east would have seen. So to me – it was breathtaking.

What happened next was insane. They spoke. There was a baby born in Bethlehem. *The* baby. The *Christ*? The Christ! The one people like Shem and me had been waiting for all our lives – someone to save us; deliver us; provide for us; lead us – change this hard life into something worth living.

They were singing glory and praise and peace and the sound was incredible but I didn't stay – I couldn't stay. I was running before I even knew it. Desperate to see this baby and to have seen this change that must now come.

I don't know how long it took me to think of it, but I was already out of breath by the time I paused. What could I give? What could I take to honour the child? I had pretty much nothing – I didn't really have anything – just a few sheep that were my everything.

But surely, I didn't need them in the same way now the Christ had come? I could risk giving everything to him couldn't I?

When I got there and saw his mother, there was so much I wanted to say and yet I was no poet or statesman with impressive words. I wanted to welcome the Christ; to say thank you; to pledge allegiance; to promise to follow. But I just laid down a single lamb at the foot of the manger he was lying in and hoped somehow they'd know how much it was worth to me – and how much that meant he – this baby king – was worth to me.

I don't know if he ever understood how much that sacrifice cost me – though I'd do it again and again. But I like to think perhaps he did because one day, more than thirty years later, I was on a hill in Jerusalem when I heard him say that he was a shepherd, and those who followed him knew him by the sound of his voice.

"Master, I hear you," I wanted to cry out, "and I'm still following".

And I did cry out on that dark day when he offered up his life on another hill. It was then I knew that my sacrifice had been too small, and I wished I'd have brought every sheep I had to honour this King.

2.3 Rich as I am (10 mins)

2.3.1 Distribute the copies of *In the bleak mid winter* that you have brought with you.

2.3.2 Put the group into twos or threes and ask them to look at the last verse of this famous carol. Ask them to answer the following questions together:

- a) How big a gift might a lamb have been for a shepherd living at the time of Christ?
- b) What might the wise men "doing their part" actually involve?
- c) What do we have that we can give?
- d) What kind of giving from us would match the wise men and the shepherds?
- e) If we really do give him our hearts, what does this mean? Does it mean we don't need to give anything else that we have?

2.3.3 Bring the group back together to feed back their responses.

2.3.4 Put them in their pairs once more to write an alternative last verse to the carol starting with the line, "What can I give him, rich as I am?..."

Omega – Single Session

2.3.5 Close in prayer, perhaps saying the one provided below in unison, and give each person a copy of the Individual Participant’s follow-up sheet, *The end is just the beginning* (http://www.casc-aid.org.uk/media/downloads/omega_-_individuals_follow-up_resource.pdf) to take away and complete over the coming weeks.

Eternal God, you brought the world into being and gave it life. Then you gave it yourself, on the cross of human suffering. Show us a different kind of world, a different cost of living, where the pain will be eased not by the money we spend on ourselves but by the way we spend ourselves for others, and the way we value life. **Amen.**

(Source: Iona Abbey Worship Book, Wild Goose publications [2005], p. 156. Used by kind permission.)

Leader’s notes

Only two of the Gospels make any mention at all of the birth of Christ. The first one, Matthew, does so almost in passing. Matthew does not describe the nativity itself in any detail. Interestingly, for a Gospel writer whose target audience was probably predominantly Jewish, he concentrates instead on the fact that the Star of Bethlehem manifested itself to the Gentiles as well.

There are many theories about the Magi. They may not have been kings at all, but rather astrologers. To such people, the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem would have had even more significance than to other contemporary observers. It is also quite possible that they led a nomadic existence, and were travelling in a caravan or convoy. This could mean that, contrary to the usual depictions, there were considerably more than three of them – a likely safety precaution when entering foreign territory – and that they were actually travelling with their accumulated wealth as a means of trading and of securing their own supplies.

It is uncertain how long the journey of the Magi actually took. Our only clue is in Matthew 2:16, when Herod sent his soldiers to kill all male babies under the age of two “based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance”. At any rate, it does seem likely that the journey took a long time: denoted by the Church’s observation of the Feast of the Epiphany, a symbolic 12 days after the actual birth of Christ is celebrated. The main purpose of Epiphany, notably that of celebrating the manifestation of Jesus to Gentiles, is often overlooked. Moreover, it is almost never celebrated as the culmination of the Christmas season, but rather as its conclusion. In view of our belief that Jesus came to bring Good News to the whole world, perhaps it might be appropriate to give Epiphany more prominence in our churches?

It is also evident that the gifts of the Magi to Jesus were extremely valuable both in real and in symbolic terms. Gold was symbolic of royalty, incense of priesthood, and myrrh was a costly spice used for the preparation for burial of the bodies of those whose status was thought to merit it (most bodies would have been buried with little or no preparation whatsoever).

Most notable in this passage from our point of view is verse 11, in which it is clear that the Magi – whoever and however many they were – were presenting those gifts to God incarnate, not to each other. They were moreover gifts that would have made substantial inroads into their life savings.

By contrast with Matthew’s account, Luke gives a much more detailed description of the events leading up to the nativity. The shepherds in Luke 2, coming as they evidently did from somewhere in the vicinity of Bethlehem, were – unlike the Magi – almost certainly Jews. And unlike the Magi, they did not specifically see a star, but rather “an angel

Omega – Single Session

of the Lord”, around whom shone “the glory of the Lord” (Luke 2:9). But this light had a no less dramatic effect on the shepherds than the star had on the Magi. It caused them to drop everything and rush to see the reason for it.

The fact that the shepherds were out in their fields at night may possibly indicate that Jesus’ birth occurred at some point during the warmer months of the year, rather than in mid-winter. There is some astronomical evidence that the Star of Bethlehem may have appeared during those months. The selection of 25th December as the date on which the western Church celebrates Christmas originated from the desire of the early Church fathers to supplant two pagan festivals, the Roman Saturnalia and the druidical winter solstice, with a Christian one. It has little to do with historical accuracy. Thus from its earliest times, Christmas evolved around a tradition of exchanging gifts with others: a tradition directly attributable to the Saturnalia and certainly not one that originated in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth. While the Magi brought gifts to Bethlehem, we have already noted that they presented them to the baby, and not to each other. And there is no scriptural evidence that the shepherds brought any gifts at all. If, as in the story here, one of the shepherds did bring a lamb, that would have been a huge sacrifice from someone who lived, literally, “on the edge”, the margins of society, and whose only wealth was in the form of a few sheep.

However, even if there is no evidence that the shepherds brought any gifts, there is no doubt that they risked their entire livelihoods in going to Bethlehem that first Christmas night. Typically, their job was to guard their sheep against both human thieves and animal predators. According to Luke, they dropped everything in their haste to reach their destination. There is no indication that they appointed one of their number to stay behind and watch their collective flocks. They all went together. Their potential sacrifice to see their infant Lord was far greater than this account appears to indicate.

Nor was that the end of their story. After they had seen Jesus, they did not go directly home to their own families and their own dinners. They “told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child” (v. 17) and then went back, “glorifying and praising God” (v. 20). How does this compare with the way we spend Christmas Day after we ourselves have worshipped at the manger?