

Let's Pray: December

I love Christmas carols. But it has to be said, there are quite a few that aren't exactly historically accurate. There's never been a little drummer boy in any Nativity scene I've seen; if you're really concerned about accuracy, We Three Kings should probably be renamed We Unspecified Number of Magi; and let's not dwell on the beloved Away in a Manger – Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes? I don't think so.

It's definitely possible that winter temperatures in Bethlehem hit freezing point, although neither Mark nor Luke mention frost or ice in their account of the birth of Jesus, never mind – as In the Bleak Midwinter would have it – “snow on snow on snow”. Questions of meteorological accuracy aside, this particular carol contains a powerful invitation for each of us to consider this Christmas:

*What can I give him? Poor as I am,
If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb,
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
But what I can I give him?
Give him my heart.*

The Nativity story is one full of individuals playing their unique part; bringing what they have, like the pieces of a jigsaw fitting together to make the whole picture of the scene at Jesus' birth. Elizabeth celebrates and blesses her relative Mary upon hearing she is going to have a baby who will be the Son of God (Luke 1: 39-45). The shepherds – the first to hear the news – hurry to the manger to see what has happened, and they praise and worship God and spread the word among others (Luke 2: 16-20). The Magi travel from the East to worship the new King, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They protect Jesus from Herod's plan by choosing to travel home by another route (Matthew 2: 1-12). Mary carries her baby and gives birth to a child by a manger as there was no room for them anywhere else; Joseph commits to Mary and the child not his by blood. Both raise and love their son.



Later in the gospels we read of others playing their part, bringing what they have. John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus (Luke 3: 1-20). The boy who is part of the crowd on the mountainside shares his fish and bread, with which a miracle is performed (John 6). Children spend time with him (Mark 10: 12-16). Two disciples find Jesus a colt to ride, others throw their cloaks on the horse for Jesus to sit on and the crowd lay their cloaks and branches from trees on the road ahead of him (Matthew 21: 1-9). Our attention is drawn to the poor widow who puts “two very small copper coins” into the temple treasury (Mark 12: 41-44) and Mary at Bethany who anoints Jesus with her expensive perfume while her sister Martha serves a meal (John 12: 1-8).

At his crucifixion, Simon of Cyrene carries the cross behind Jesus (Luke 23: 26). At his burial, Joseph from Arimathea wraps Jesus’ body and places it in the tomb (John 19: 38-42). And when we read of the resurrection, we read that a group of women visit the tomb with spices and perfume (Luke 24: 1-3).

The story of Jesus is sprinkled with accounts of individuals bringing what they can and what they have. Some acts are big and visible to all, others more quiet and hidden. In the final verse of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, we find the heart of the carol. We’re invited to respond to the Christmas story; to consider what we can bring. Each one of us has something unique to offer in worship of Jesus and in service of others.

*What can I give him? Poor as I am,
If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb,
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
But what I can I give him?
Give him my heart.*

What do you have?

What are you great at?

What do you love to do?

What opportunities are open to you?



We at Home for Good believe that we all have something to bring when it comes to caring for vulnerable children. For some, that might be opening their home to a child or young person through fostering, adoption or supported lodgings. For others, this might look like providing practical support to a friend or neighbour – cooking a meal, helping with the shopping, doing the school run a morning a week. Church families have a huge amount to bring by ensuring their spaces are safe and welcoming for children who have had a tricky start; teachers and classroom assistants can make a transformational difference by providing stability, consistency, encouragement and understanding. Some of us can write to those in positions of power, advocating for children and their families. Others can share their money or resources. The list is endless! We've each been given unique gifts, talents, passions and opportunities. This carol reminds us that we are invited to use them for the good of others, in worship of Jesus.

This Christmas season we want to give thanks for every single person who is playing their part. We want to pray for them, asking God to sustain them in what they're doing. We want to pray for more people to step forward to help vulnerable children and young people find places where they are safe, cared for and where they belong. And we want to invite you to ask God to inspire you; what could you bring?

Will you join us in prayer this December?

Prayer points

- Pray for fostered and adopted children this Christmas. This season brings a change in routine, and with it a lot of expectation, excitement, memories and emotions – all of which can be particularly challenging for many children to cope with. Pray for them as they navigate the joys and the challenges of the Christmas period.
- Pray for foster carers, kinship carers, special guardians, adoptive parents and supported lodgings hosts. Pray for them as they love and support the children and young people in their care through what can be a challenging season. Pray for energy, pray for rest and pray for moments of festive fun and joy together.

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- Thank God for the communities, churches and networks who wrap around families with support. Pray for sensitivity and understanding around elements of Christmas that are fun for many, but difficult or complicated for some. Pray for those moments of gathering and celebration: carol services, big family dinners, Christmas parties and New Year celebrations.
- Pray for children facing uncertainty at this time of year, and for those waiting for a home. Pray for peace and protection in that uncertainty and waiting and pray boldly that more people will step forward to become foster carers, adoptive families and supported lodgings hosts and provide a place of safety and belonging for those who are waiting.
- Finally, we invite you to ask God, "What can I bring?". What could your part be in helping provide safety, stability, welcoming and belonging to a child or young person?



Creative prayer idea



Bring-and-share meal

The Christmas season provides a beautiful opportunity to practice hospitality and generosity. So many of our Christmas traditions focus on gathering together in churches, homes or even outdoors. It's fairly common practice to give gifts at this time of year, and many families, groups of friends and communities will share food together too.

As you reflect on your prayer of "What can I bring?" this December, why not invite others to consider the same question and host a bring-and-share meal for people you love?

Bring-and-share meals are a beautiful illustration of the power and the beauty that lies in everyone playing their part. Each dish on its own wouldn't be able to feed all your guests; some dishes in isolation might be a little strange (gravy with nothing to pour it on?!), and no one needs a napkin if there's no food on the table. But as each guest brings their one thing, the table becomes fuller and fuller. When each person brings their one thing, the result is a beautiful, full table, around which you can gather and from which you can be fed!

The rules are easy: everybody brings one dish to share, and you end up with a feast! There are a few extra tips on the next page to help you make the most of your bring-and-share meal.





Tips to help you make the most of your bring-and-share meal

- Create a sign-up sheet for your guests to assign themselves to a particular dish. You'll probably want starters, mains, sides, desserts and drinks covered, and depending on the number of guests you invite, you may need a few of each. Deciding who is bringing what in advance means you hopefully won't end up with four lasagnes and no pudding!
- Make sure you're prepared for any dietary requirements your guests may have.
- Give your guests the freedom to make something from scratch if that's something they'd enjoy, or to bring a pre-bought item if that brings them ease. Be sure to include items on your sign-up sheet that don't require spending money, so everyone feels welcome at your meal.
- If there's a risk you could run out of serving utensils, be sure to ask your guests to bring anything they need to serve their dish with them. They may want to label their items, if they want to be able to bring it home again too!
- Be open-minded to new flavours. Bring-and-share meals provide a wonderful opportunity for people to show off their favourite dishes, or food that means a lot to them.
- Consider using this as an opportunity to extend welcome to someone in your community who may be isolated or lonely this season.
- We would love to see the chaotic beauty of your bring-and-share meal! Take lots of photos, and share them on social media – tag Home for Good and use the hashtag #whatcanIbring.



Ideas for your service



What can I bring?

Thank you for choosing to use our Christmas resources this year. Along with our new short film, we have compiled some additional suggestions below to help shape your service this year. We recommend that you tailor these suggestions to fit your congregation. And we wish you a very merry Christmas, from all of us here at Home for Good!

Gathering together

We know that Churches around the UK will have varying levels of restrictions in place, in keeping with COVID-19 guidance and to meet the needs of their congregations. While some churches will be enjoying some 'normality' compared to last year, some of you may still have social distancing measures in place this Christmas, or may still be gathering virtually or with a hybrid approach. These things can make a warm welcome seem a little more challenging.

Here are some ways you can make your service a space of welcome at this time when many might still be feeling isolated or apprehensive about gathering with other people:

- Write 'Merry Christmas' or 'Welcome' in different languages on your screen or your Order of Service handout.
- Have a diverse range of voices, ages and faces contributing to your service, through readings, worship and prayers.
- Services often share The Peace at Christmas; think of an alternative to shaking hands this year. Perhaps you could sign 'Peace be with you' in British Sign Language? [Click here](#) to learn how to sign The Peace in BSL with an instructional video from the Church of England.
- Allow time for people to connect with one another – for some, this will be the first time they've gathered in a group like this in a long time! In accordance with current local guidance, you might want to schedule some time for discussion in small groups, over tea/coffee and a mince pie, or in a pre- or post-church video call.
- Encourage your congregation to send a hand-written card to someone else in church, maybe someone new to your church family.

Engage congregation members of all ages by kicking off your service with a game! Hide some jigsaw pieces around the room you gather in. Place some in easier-to-find spots – a windowsill or the armrest of a chair – to allow everyone to play, but don't be afraid to hide a few in some trickier places, such as slotted into a Bible or hymnbook, or in amongst the biscuits!

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Invite your church family to bring the piece they find to the front of the room, and create the picture together to illustrate the beauty and power to be found in what each of us has to bring.

Songs

Lots of carols and Christmas hymns remind us of God's heart for the lonely and marginalised, and of our call to pursue justice and care for the vulnerable:

- **O Holy Night**

*Truly He taught us to love one another; his law is Love and His gospel is Peace.
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease.*

- **Once in Royal David's City**

With the poor, and mean, and lowly, lived on earth our Saviour holy.

- **O Come, O Come Emmanuel**

And ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.

Our Christmas resources this year are focused on the question, 'What can I bring?'. One carol which encapsulates this theme is 'In the Bleak Midwinter'. We're invited to respond to the Christmas story and consider what we can bring. Each one of us has something unique to offer in worship of Jesus and in service to others. You may want to include this carol in your service, placing a particular emphasis on the final verse by unpacking the lyrics beforehand or repeating it when you sing.

What can I give him? Poor as I am,

If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb,

If I were a wise man, I would do my part,

But what I can I give him?

Give him my heart.



Bible readings

The Nativity story is full of individuals playing their unique part; bringing what they have, like the pieces of a jigsaw fitting together to make the whole picture of the scene at Jesus' birth. You may want to use some or all of the following verses to illustrate the different roles and parts played in the story of Jesus' birth, either as readings, to guide moments of reflection, as points for a sermon or for children's and youth ministry.

Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39-45)

Elizabeth celebrates and blesses her relative Mary upon hearing she is going to have a baby who will be the Son of God

The shepherds (Luke 2: 16-20)

The shepherds – the first to hear the news – hurry to the manger to see what has happened, and they praise and worship God and spread the word among others.

The Magi (Matthew 2: 1-12)

The Magi travel from the East to worship the new King, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They protect Jesus from Herod's plan by choosing to travel home by another route.

Mary and Joseph (Matthew 1: 18-25, Luke 1: 26-38, Luke 2: 1-7)

Mary carries her baby and gives birth, laying him in a manger as there was no room for them anywhere else; Joseph commits to Mary and the child who is not his by blood. Both raise and love their son.



Congregational prayer



God of Elizabeth,

Who celebrated and blessed her relative Mary upon hearing her good news.

Thank you for the power of relationships, and the difference our words, prayers and actions can make.

May we be a people who celebrate and bless others.

Make us encouragers, Lord. Give us eyes to see the gold in those around us, especially in those who are often overlooked yet have so much contribute.

Use our words and our actions to lift those feeling low, to remind others of their worth, to speak truth when they can't hear it and to let them know they are loved.

Fill us with your joy, that we can't help but rejoice when we see what you are doing through others in our lives, our communities and our world.

Open our eyes, Lord, to what we can bring.

God of the shepherds,

The first to welcome and worship the newborn King.

Thank you for your Church.

May we, the Church, be a people of welcome and hospitality.

May we always be receptive to those on the edges of our congregation, and invite them in.

Will you help us notice those with an empty seat beside them, and be the ones to fill it.

Draw our attention to those who are missing from our Church family.

Help us create an environment where they feel safe, valued and that they belong. May we bend so that others can fit in.

May our welcome of others be worship to you.

Open our eyes, Lord, to what we can bring.

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God of the Magi,

Those wise individuals who studied, and who engaged with rulers, leaders and kings.

We thank you for those who lead us – locally, globally, academically, politically, spiritually, in community. We pray for our policy-shapers and decision makers, and for the next generation of leaders, who you are already raising up.

May those of us with influence use it to help others see the needs of the vulnerable.

May those of us with skills to listen, learn and investigate use them to search for solutions.

May those of us with a platform step aside to make room for and amplify the voices of those who aren't heard enough.

May we be filled with and driven by hope. May we be passionate about and committed to justice.

Open our eyes, Lord, to what we can bring.

God of Mary and Joseph.

Who raised and loved your son, Jesus.

We thank you and we pray for those who open their hearts and homes to vulnerable children through fostering, adoption, kinship care or supported lodgings.

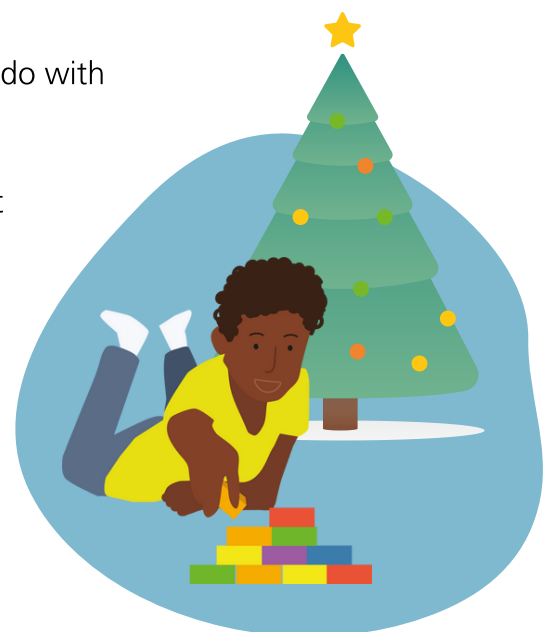
We ask for more individuals, couples and families who will provide a place of safety, stability, love and encouragement to children and young people who need it. Show us, Lord, if this is something that we can do.

And if we can't, help us step in to wrap around families who do with encouragement, prayer and practical support.

May we, your Church, be a people who step forward to meet the needs of those children who are waiting.

Open our eyes, Lord, to what we can bring.

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Emmanuel, God with us

Thank you that each of your children has something unique to offer in worship of you and service of others. Help us to see the gifts and passions you have given us, and help us to call out and encourage what we see in others.

You call your Church to take up the cause of the vulnerable, marginalised and oppressed.

Holy Spirit, equip us to do this – whatever our role may be.

Show us how we can play our part. Use us to make a difference.

Open our eyes, Lord, to what we can bring.



Children's activity

Preparation: cut out the jigsaw pieces on the next page and hand one to each child.

Jesus came at Christmas to show everyone how much God loves us. How amazing is it that we get to do that too?

Each and every one of us has been made with different things that we love, different things that we're great at, different things that are important to us, different opportunities to meet people. I wonder what you have that you could share with other children? I wonder what you could do to treat another person with love and kindness? I wonder how you might use the things that are so special about you to show someone else that God thinks they are amazing?

Take a moment to think of an answer to one of those questions, and write or draw your answer inside your jigsaw piece.

Each of our jigsaw pieces are beautiful and powerful on their own. But what happens when we connect our pieces together?

Invite each child to bring their own piece, and connect the jigsaw pieces together.

We can make a beautiful and powerful difference when we each play our part to show others just how much God loves them!



Children's activity worksheet

