

THEMES FOR CHRISTMAS

A Resource



Themes for Christmas

The traditional image of ‘The Nativity’—the story of Jesus’ birth—is of a baby in a manger in a stable full of hay, surrounded by his parents, shepherds, angels and three wise men. It is an idyllic scene which has been reproduced in Christian art and recreated by millions of schoolchildren ever since.

But when Christians celebrate Christmas, they are worshipping and remembering more than a greetings card image. The principal message in Jesus’ birth is that God has revealed himself in a baby born into poverty in a small rural village. What does that say about God? Christians believe that God has therefore shown himself to be alive and present in the world. It draws Christians’ attention to where God can be revealed today.

At the heart of the Christmas message is both God and human life. For Christians, Jesus’ birth means that God gives life; it is abundant, it is open, it is universal. But the Christmas story also reveals the vulnerability of human existence and the delicacy of faith, represented in a baby lying in a manger, surrounded by shepherds and strangers from abroad. It reminds Christians that life is vulnerable and precious; yet even on the edge of community and the edge of life, God is present.





One of the most enduring symbols of the Christmas period is the candle. At this cold and dark time of the year, the candle represents the belief that God came to earth in Jesus to bring light to the world.

Candles are also an important part of worship at this time of year. In the weeks preceding Christmas, Christians observe Advent. Advent is a period of preparation. Each Sunday, four Sundays before Christmas, churches light an Advent candle, each representing how different Biblical figures prepared for God: the prophets, John the Baptist, the patriarchs, and Mary. On Christmas Day a fifth candle is lit to symbolise Christ's birth.

Christians look towards Christmas from Advent in a position of darkness, waiting and watching for Jesus' birth. Christmas is a festival of light, God illuminating the world with love and hope.

Carols, sung and loved the world over, are a way for people to come together to celebrate the message of Christmas as a collective body. Many Christians will have sung the same carols every year since childhood and they will be a reminder of Christmases past. Singing therefore acknowledges the passing of time, the continuity of God through challenge and change, and the durability of faith into an uncertain future.



Whilst carols contain some of the most beautiful poetry written about Christmas, they also reveal some of the challenging theology that has affected Christian Jewish relations. For example, Charles Wesley's hymn *Lo He Comes With Clouds Descending*, often sung during Advent, contains the anti-Jewish words: 'those who set at nought and sold him/ pierced, and nailed him to the tree/deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing/ shall the true Messiah see.' Christmas can therefore pose problems. It is essential that Christians avoid the historic theology which saw Jesus as replacing or repudiating Judaism. Replacing the words 'those who' with 'we who' and 'the true' with 'our true' is a suggested first step. More fundamentally, Christmas conveys that God can be found anywhere and at any time or as the psalmist says: 'O that today you would listen to his voice!'

At Christmas Christians share gifts with friends and family. Christians see God's love for the world embodied in Jesus' birth and Christmas presents are a way for the individual to share their own love with their fellow human beings in the spirit of community which reflects God's presence in humanity. But not everyone is lucky enough to give or receive presents. Love can be shared at Christmas in many ways: through food, conversation, hospitality, charity, or prayer and Christmas is a time when Christians are particularly reminded of the need to be universal in their outreach.





Christmas is not simply a day of celebrations once a year, it is also a calling for Christians to act as disciples for change all the year round, sharing love and generosity with other people. At its root Christmas is the story of the birth of an extraordinary figure, one who causes many to think again about the world which they thought they knew. For Christians it is a gentle reminder that everyone is in need of constant renewal and that, just like in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, the future is anyone's guess and it can be shaped by people of faith in the presence of God.

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