

Advent Reflection: Angels, Shepherds and Wise Men



The aim of this resource is to explore the different characters in the nativity story and what they teach us about the real meaning of Christmas. It may be used in an assembly or to form the basis of a longer Advent liturgy and can be used with or without slides.

In this four-week season of Advent, when we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas, primary school pupils across the country are rehearsing their nativity plays. Who remembers taking part in a nativity? Raise your hands if you were: a shepherd, a wise man, an angel.

These characters, alongside Joseph and Mary, helped us to understand as children the real reason behind our Christmas celebrations – we don't go to parties and get presents because Santa came, but because Jesus did.



The nativity scene is familiar to us now, but for centuries it wasn't. That all changed thanks to one man. Raise your hands if you can tell us which saint made the nativity a favourite tradition in our Christmas preparations?

Answer: St Francis of Assisi.

Until 1223, when St Francis recreated the first nativity scene in a small village in Italy, people didn't think much about the Christmas story. The main reason for this was that the big Christian festival was Easter, when attention was drawn to Jesus' death and resurrection.

But St Francis wanted to celebrate the birth of Jesus too. That God, the source of all life, at a certain point in history became incarnate. Incarnate means that God took on flesh. By focusing our attention on the nativity, St Francis helped us celebrate the fact that God became one of us because he wants to be close to us. And the way in which he did so would help the world see how precious **all people** are to our heavenly Father.

The characters in the nativity story help us understand these lessons more clearly, but only if we know how shepherds, wise men, and angels were seen in Jesus' day. Which is very different to how we see them today. Let's take a closer look at these characters now.

The shepherds

We'll start with the shepherds – raise your hands again if you ever played a shepherd.

Forget the clean tea towel head-dress and innocent smiles. Shepherds in Jesus' day were considered dirty, rough and untrustworthy. These views were founded on the work they did, which was tough, poorly paid, and kept them far off in the hillside for weeks at a time. On their rare visits to towns, shepherds were shunned. People didn't want to be seen with them. They were regarded by all as second-class citizens.

- What, then, are we to learn from their presence in the story?
- What key words and clues can we find in this scripture?

[Click to reveal scripture and / or have a student read out Luke 2:8-12,15-19, found on last page with responses.](#)

The wise men

Raise your hands if you've ever been a wise man.

No doubt you had to wear fancy outfits to suggest you were wealthy, exotic, and different. Often people struggle with difference and the wise men were different in so many ways: in their culture, language, beliefs. The wise men were not Jewish, some would have called them non-believers. For such reasons many would have closed their doors to these strange outsiders.

- What are we to learn from their presence in the story?
- What key words and clues can we find in this scripture?

Click to reveal scripture and / or have a student read out Mt 2:1-3,7-11, found on last page with responses.

The angels

Finally let's focus on the angels, raise your hands if you've ever been an angel.

Forget cute wings and halos. At the time of Jesus' birth, people knew about angels through their understanding of Hebrew scriptures (what Christians also call the Old Testament). There they learned that angels were messengers from God who were far from cute. Angels could be very frightening and, people believed, capable of bringing about destruction for those who did not follow God's plan. But when angels appeared to the shepherds, they communicated a very different message.

- What are we to learn from their presence in the story?
- What key words and clues can we find in this scripture?

Click to reveal scripture and / or have a student read out Luke 1:9-14, found on last page with responses.

These were the characters you were asked to play as children. Now you are older and know more about them, which character would do you most identify with today?

Are you a shepherd? Often overlooked by others, but confident that God knows your true worth - and has plans to use it. Are you courageous enough to confront fears and faithful enough to share the message of God's love, whatever people might think? *Pause to reflect.*

Are you a wise person? Considered by some to be different, but open to difference in others. Not overawed by wealth and status, but ready to recognise true riches in the world. Are you humble enough to seek out truth and honour goodness wherever you find it? *Pause to reflect.*

Are you an angel? Hindered by people's negative expectations of you, but ready to change their opinions for the better. Are you willing to be sent into the world as a faithful messenger of God's love, changing people's outlook with a joy that is infectious? *Pause to reflect.*

Almost 800 years ago St Francis recreated the nativity scene so that we could reflect on the many lessons God wanted to teach us through Jesus' birth. Not least, **the new life we bring into the world** when we chose to follow the example Jesus set from the manger: to recognise that all people are made in God's image and as such are worthy of welcome, love, and care.

- Let's finish with a moment in silent prayer, asking God for the grace to be shepherds, wise people, and angels, this Christmas and beyond.
- Let's pray too for those in need of welcome, love, and care. Asking God to send us, as missionaries of his love, to make a difference in their lives, to make a difference in our world.

CALL TO ACTION: Manger on a Mission

There's another way you could share the lessons of Jesus' birth. Why not organise a *Manger on a Mission*. This is a great way to remind people of the true meaning of Christmas and a novel way to raise funds for Missio. Ask students to dress as characters from the nativity (remembering that the scriptures don't mention just how many shepherds and wise men were present). Aim to create a complete crib set. Then take your manger on a mission tour around your local town centre or school grounds. Remember to take a Missio Red Box to collect donations on the way. Keep us informed of your efforts on twitter @MissioUK or Instagram.

It's intended that students devise their own responses to the scriptures below, rather than be told what to 'discover'. However, if key words and responses are in short supply, we've provided suggestions in blue.

The shepherds

In the countryside close by there were shepherds who lived in the fields and took it in turns to watch their flocks during the night. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord... Now when the angels had gone from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.' So they hurried away and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds had to say.'

The shepherds were initially terrified, but their faith in God's goodness overturned negative expectations. They had been chosen, not disregarded, by God. They were commissioned to share momentous news; this gave them confidence and courage. The judgements others made about them didn't matter anymore; God believed in them. Their real worth had been recognised.

The wise men

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east. 'Where is the infant king of the Jews?' they asked. 'We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage... Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared and sent them on to Bethlehem. 'Go and find out all about the child' he said 'and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And there in front of them was the star they had seen rising; it went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage.

The wise men were very different to the shepherds. They were wealthy, learned, and used to being in exalted company - but they were not influenced by status and didn't bow to worldly power. They listened, watched, and reflected before making judgements. They recognised power-mad Herod as untrustworthy and Jesus as a true king.

The angels

The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. And here is a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.' And suddenly with the angel there was a great throng of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those who enjoy his favour.'

The first words spoken by the angel to the shepherds were 'Do not be afraid'. In stark contrast to old expectations, this angel wasn't communicating dread and destruction. The message shared was a joyful one, echoed by a host of angels. The almighty God, who so many feared, had entered our world as a vulnerable baby, ready to welcome everyone, ready to help us find peace. This was a new kind of message about a new kind of saviour.