

KEY STAGE 1/UNIT 1.3

# INCARNATION

WHY DOES CHRISTMAS  
MATTER TO CHRISTIANS?

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### ★ OUTCOMES

BY THE END OF THIS UNIT, PUPILS ARE EXPECTED TO BE ABLE TO:

-  Give a clear, simple account of the story of Jesus' birth and why Jesus is important for Christians.
-  Recognise that stories of Jesus' life come from the Gospels.
-  Give examples of ways in which Christians use the story of the nativity to guide their beliefs and actions at Christmas.
-  Decide what they personally have to be thankful for at Christmas time.

**NOTE:** You can use this unit for Year 1 or Year 2. If you teach Christmas to every year group, the Core Learning section is suitable for Year 1 and Digging Deeper is suitable for Year 2.

### KNOWLEDGE BUILDING BLOCKS

PUPILS WILL KNOW THAT:

- Christians believe that Jesus is God and that he was born as a baby in Bethlehem.
- The Bible points out that his birth showed that he was extraordinary (for example, he is worshipped as a king, in Matthew) and that he came to bring good news (for example, to the poor, in Luke).
- Christians celebrate Jesus' birth; Advent for Christians is a time of getting ready for Jesus' coming.

**NOTE:** Teachers should read the Essential Information pages before teaching this unit.

### ➤ YOU MIGHT LIKE TO START WITH...

Most pupils have some experience of Christmas and can talk about signs that show Christmas is coming. Take the pupils on a 'looking for Christmas' walk in the local area. Which signs can they spot that show Christmas is coming? A photo record will enable them to remember and talk about what they have observed. It will be important to refer back to this later in the work. Alternatively, find some early Christmas adverts on TV or in magazines. Ask pupils why they think Christmas matters to Christians. Record their answers.

### MAKING SENSE OF THE TEXT

- Tell some familiar stories containing a character appearing to be someone she/he is not (for example, The Frog Prince, Beauty and the Beast). Pupils can spot the relevant characters, discussing what they look like and who they really are.
- Look at a picture of baby Jesus. What can we tell about him just by looking at his picture? Although Jesus might not have looked particularly special, Christians believe he was actually very special indeed – they believe he was God on Earth!
- Explain that Christians believe that God came to Earth to be with people and show them how to live. When God first came, he was not a big man, just a baby with a mummy called Mary. Discuss who in the class has younger siblings, cousins, and so on, how we feel when new babies are on the way and born, and what we do to prepare.
- Think about getting a bedroom ready for a new baby, and discuss what we would put into it. Although all babies are special, imagine the new baby is even more special than most, because this one is also God. How could we make the bedroom extra special? Hundreds of toys, the most beautiful crib, special pictures on the walls? Ask pupils to sketch the rooms. Ask pupils to imagine who would come to visit such a baby.
- Tell the story from the Gospel of Luke in an interesting way. A Christmas story trail is recommended, in the hall, or even around the local church, with stations being a) Nazareth – Gabriel visiting Mary. b) Journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. c) Bethlehem – Jesus being born and placed in a manger. d) Fields – Angels appearing to shepherds. e) Bethlehem – Shepherds visiting the baby. At each stop on the trail, pupils should hear the relevant part of the story and collect an applicable picture to take back to class. Pupils should use pictures to retell and consolidate knowledge of the story; for example, make short books with one picture per page (pictures should be in the correct order) and write a sentence for each; stick the five pictures to five sides of a cube with the word 'God' on the sixth side – whenever the cube is rolled pupils should talk about the relevant parts and ideas in the story.
- Look back at ideas for Jesus' bedroom. Compare with the living conditions Jesus actually got. Remind pupils who it was that came to visit Jesus – not rich people, but poor shepherds. Explain this shows that God came to earth to bring good news to everyone, even poor people. The good news was about God and how to be close to him. Ask pupils to act out what the shepherds might say to Mary and Joseph, and the questions they might ask.
- Talk about why Christmas matters to Christians today – what are their ideas now?



## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT

- Revisit pictures taken on 'looking for Christmas' walk (or show some taken by staff of the area, or look at the Christmas adverts). Can pupils see any signs of the Jesus story?
- Look at some Christmas cards and work out which have signs of the story, and which do not (NB: do not use cards with pictures of wise men because these feature only in Matthew, which pupils will not study until the Digging Deeper section, or in Year 2). Ensure that cards not explicitly linked to the story are not dismissed as 'wrong'. They are part of secular traditions surrounding Christmas, but pupils should understand that the activity is focusing on Christian reasons for the festival.
- If possible, walk to a local church – which signs of the Jesus story can be seen here in the run-up to Christmas? Which colour vestments will the vicar wear at this time of year, and why? If a trip cannot be arranged, a local vicar or member of the church could visit the class with photos of the signs. Explain that Christmas Day is the day when Christians celebrate Jesus' birth. This is why there are lots of clues about Jesus being born, in the church and elsewhere. It is celebrating Jesus' birthday!
- Introduce the word 'advent' as the arrival of something or someone. Explain that the four weeks leading up to Christmas are Advent, when some Christians wait and prepare for celebrating the birth of Jesus. Introduce some Advent traditions and make sure pupils know their meanings (this may be done as part of the church trip). For example, make an Advent wreath – a circle to show that God lasts forever; light four candles on Sundays leading up to Christmas, with the fifth candle symbolising the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day; make a crib scene as a reminder of the birth story; make an Advent calendar to count down to the day Jesus was born.
- If appropriate, help the local church with their Advent preparations. Can crib scenes or religious decorations for the Christmas tree (based on the Gospel of Luke) be produced for the church to use?
- Revisit the key question: What answers can pupils give to it now – 'Why does Christmas matter to Christians?'



## MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Explain that Christmas is a time when many Christians thank God that Jesus came to earth to show and tell people how to live. It's also a time when people put up decorations. Discuss who puts up decorations for family birthdays and explain that at Christmas, many people put up decorations to celebrate Jesus' birthday. What decorations do pupils use?
- Get pupils to think about thankfulness in relation to the Christmas story. What 'thank you' prayers and sentences might people in the story (Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels) have said at different moments? Make a paper chain of these 'thank you' words as part of class Christmas decorations (use big links, and supported writing and talk to enable deeper thinking; some pupils may choose/need to show their ideas with pictures). Use red and green paper to make this chain.
- How do people show gratitude at Christmas? Discuss whether pupils have anything to be thankful for at Christmas this year. Make another paper chain (use two different colours, maybe blue and purple this time) of all the 'thank yous' the pupils can think of that they need to say this Christmas: to family, friends, teachers, dinner supervisors and so on, for all that makes Christmas a special time of year.

### ★ OUTCOMES

BY THE END OF THIS UNIT, PUPILS ARE EXPECTED TO BE ABLE TO:

- Recognise that Incarnation is part of the 'Big Story' of the Bible.
- Tell the story of the birth of Jesus and recognise the link with Incarnation – Jesus is 'God on Earth'.
- Give at least two examples of ways in which Christians use the nativity story in churches and at home; for example, using nativity scenes and carols to celebrate Jesus' birth.
- Think, talk and ask questions about the Christmas story and the lessons they might learn from it: for example, about being kind and generous.

**NOTE:** You can use this unit for Year 1 or Year 2. If you teach Christmas to every year group, the Core Learning section is suitable for Year 1 and Digging Deeper is suitable for Year 2.

### 🧱 KNOWLEDGE BUILDING BLOCKS

PUPILS WILL KNOW THAT:

- Christians believe that Jesus is God and that he was born as a baby in Bethlehem.
- The Bible points out that his birth showed he was extraordinary (for example, he is worshipped as a king, in Matthew) and that he came to bring good news (for example, to the poor, in Luke).
- Christians celebrate Jesus' birth; Advent for Christians is a time of getting ready for Jesus' coming.

### ➔ YOU MIGHT LIKE TO START WITH...

Recap Core Learning (this might be from last year). Present pupils with images of three normal-looking pupils. Ask them to talk in pairs about what each child is good at – are any of them kind/brilliant footballers/good at playing the piano, and so on? Discuss the difficulties of doing this – we don't always know what someone is like by looking at them. Remind pupils that Jesus did not look special on the outside. See if they can remember why he actually was special to Christians – they believe he was God on Earth.

### 🔍 MAKING SENSE OF THE TEXT

- Briefly recap the story from Core Learning (or last year) of how Jesus brought good news to very poor people. Explain that there are two more stories in the Bible about Jesus being born. Introduce stories of the angel appearing to Joseph, telling him that the baby is from God and should be called Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25), and the visit of the wise men (Matthew 2:1-12). Tell each story in an interactive way: for example, using props, keywords, drama.
- Look at the 'Big Story' frieze, recapping pupils' knowledge of it. Explain that God coming to Earth as baby Jesus is also part of the 'big story'. Find this on the frieze/timeline and teach the word 'incarnation' – which means 'in the flesh' (Latin word *carne* = flesh; think carnations – flesh-coloured, or carnivore – flesh-eating).
- List together people in the story who know that Jesus is God: for example, Mary, Joseph, wise men, shepherds, angels. Use drama activities to check how well pupils can explain that Jesus was more than just a normal baby: for example hot-seating pupils as a relevant character/asking them to role-play the story of the nativity, with the teacher asking pertinent questions to relevant characters at appropriate points in the action.
- Explain that there is one more important thing for pupils to know about the birth of Jesus. Ask pupils to sketch a king and discuss features of kingship. Look at Botticelli's 'Mystic Nativity' – just show the characters in the stable and let pupils identify them. Ask which looks like a king – do any have the features of kings from sketches? Recap parts of Matthew 2 where the wise men are looking for the King of the Jews and worship Jesus as a king. What signs are there that Jesus is a king? Where would pupils expect a king to be born?
- Talk about the gifts that the wise men gave: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Allow pupils to experience the gifts, for example, see and feel some gold, smell frankincense (perhaps with an incense stick or oil burner). Look carefully at the gold and discuss its qualities. Why do pupils think it was given to the baby Jesus? Gold is very expensive, so it would have been a suitable gift to give to kings and shows that Jesus was a very important king even if he did not look like it.
- Expand pupils' view of the 'Mystic Nativity' so they can see the whole picture. Even though the baby itself doesn't necessarily look like a king or God, how is the artist showing he is special? Pupils might like to speculate on why the baby is so large in this picture. Give pupils a card frame and ask them to frame the parts of the picture that are most interesting, most puzzling and most important, and say why.
- Ask the key question: Why does Christmas matter to Christians? Gather and record your pupils' answers. Do they remember the word *incarnation*?



## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT

- Look with pupils at images of crib scenes in churches. Can pupils spot all the characters? Pupils can explore several different sets of nativity figures from around the world – ensure that shepherds and wise men are included. Explain that Christmas is celebrated by Christians in many countries, and ask what is similar and different between nativity figures. (Google search 'crib scenes global Christianity'). You might get pupils to create a crib scene of their own.
- Show pupils sets of three images from the nativity story (see Resource Sheet 1 for some images). For example, Joseph/Mary/Gabriel, Joseph/Mary/Jesus, Jesus/Mary/shepherds, Jesus/wise men/shepherds, angels/manger/comfortable bed at an inn (or any other combination), and ask pupils to spot which one is the odd one out, and say why. There is no correct answer here, but pupils' understanding and reasoning will be tested.
- Use the images again and ask pupils what the characters might have been saying or thinking at certain points in the story. You can also use this as an opportunity to help pupils recall links between parts of the story and messages they have learned from it: for example, Jesus being God, Jesus being a king, Jesus coming to share good news, Jesus coming for both rich and poor.
- Put all the images together – add some extras, such as a donkey – not actually mentioned in the story! – for example sheep, stars, gifts. Ask pupils which ones you can take away and still keep the Christian meaning of Christmas and incarnation. Remove them one at a time and see if you can get down to three, two, or even one.
- Explain that there are many songs about Christmas and winter, but during Advent and at Christmas, lots of Christians sing special songs about Jesus being born – carols. Listen to, and if appropriate sing, some of them. Look at some choruses and verses from suitable carols, asking pupils to spot key words linked to Jesus and the Christmas story. If necessary, help pupils to expand their thinking so they understand more fully what the carol is saying about the birth of Jesus. Give pupils the opportunity to write another verse for a carol, or give them some words from existing carols to cut up and rearrange, to make a good summary of Christmas.



## MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Remind pupils of the expensive gold that the wise men gave to Jesus to show he was a king. What sort of presents do kings expect? Pose pupils a problem: what would a poor person visiting Jesus give? Would they give nothing at all?
- Listen to another carol – 'In the Bleak Midwinter' – telling pupils they must listen especially carefully to the last verse. Think together about the words 'What can I give Him, Poor as I am?' and 'Yet what I can I give Him, Give my heart'. Discuss what this might mean for a Christian: loving Jesus and giving your heart and life to God is not a seemingly expensive gift, but to Christians it is still an important one.
- List together the sort of qualities that pupils in the class might possess that it would be excellent to give to and share with others, whether or not they are a king. Sit in a circle – go around, and each pupil suggests what they might have to share. Or as you get to each pupil, ask others to tell them what great qualities they possess, drawing out the good gifts and qualities of all. You could draw around pupils' hands and get them to write in each other's outlines their special gifts.
- Explain that Christmas is a time for giving – the wise men gave presents when Jesus was first born. It's also a time to remember that poorer people (shepherds) visited Jesus, who came for both rich and poor people. As Christmas is a time for both giving and thinking of the poor, lots of Christians like to give presents and help to those in need at Christmas time. Learn about two charitable projects for Christmas, one local if possible. These could include helping the homeless, sending Christmas boxes to people in need, or giving 'world charity gifts'. What can the pupils themselves do to be kind to others this Christmas? Make a class list and see how many things your pupils can actually do. Perhaps get involved with an organised local, national or international project.
- Make the link back to why Christians try to help others, and talk with pupils about how it is not only Christians who want to care for others, and it is not only Christians who celebrate Christmas, but it is only Christians who believe Jesus is God in the flesh, God *incarnate*.

SELECT AND WEAVE TOGETHER ACTIVITIES TO ACHIEVE THE OUTCOMES

MAKE SENSE OF THE TEXT

UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT

MAKE CONNECTIONS

OUTCOMES

## BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS

The birth of Jesus is recorded in two of the Gospels – Matthew and Luke. Although this happens near the start of the New Testament, it is quite a way into the 'big story' narrative of the Bible if we consider that this starts with Creation.

With 'the Fall', sin enters the world and remains in it. God therefore carries out a 'rescue mission' for humanity to help save people from their sin. This is partially achieved by cultivating a relationship with the People of God. The attachment between God and the People of God in the Old Testament shows many Christians what it is like to be in a relationship with God. The stories themselves are also pointers for the coming of Jesus and what this will mean. For example, Abraham being called upon to sacrifice his only son can be seen as foreshadowing Jesus, God's son, being sacrificed on the cross.

The culmination of God's rescue plan starts with the birth of Jesus. This is crucial to the Christian faith. By coming to Earth as Jesus, God is able to show and tell people how they should be living, and demonstrate what it is like to have a close relationship with the Father. Without the Incarnation, Christians believe, God would not have been able to make the ultimate sacrifice, leading to the salvation of his people.

Christians use the birth stories not only to guide them in their celebrations at Christmas, but also to remind them about the place of Jesus in the 'big story' of God's relationship with humans. Jesus is the saviour and rescuer, whose birth was prophesied but came to pass in unexpected ways, amongst poor and marginalised people.

## THE BIRTH OF JESUS: COMMENTARY ON THE TEXT AND ITS MEANING(S)

### LUKE 1:26–38, 2:1–20, MATTHEW 1:18–2:12

The birth of Jesus is recorded in the Gospels of both Luke and Matthew. There are elements of the story in these Gospels that match up – Jesus, the Son of God, from David's line, was born to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. However, the Gospel writers do include different information – Luke sees Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem for the census and being visited by shepherds who have been alerted by angels. Matthew has the wise men following a star and being Jesus' visitors. Some Christians will put the two stories together to give an overall understanding of what happened at Jesus' birth. Although there are differences within the storyline between the two Gospels (for example, where the family travel to after Jesus' birth), these are not major factors in the

overarching message of the story itself. Luke and Matthew selected elements to fit their overall intentions.

Traditionally, both stories are taught to pupils in schools and are often taught as one story at this age. Older pupils are likely to look at the two stories separately and find similarities and differences for themselves. Elements with which school pupils have become familiar over the years, such as Jesus being born in a stable and visited there by kings, are not mentioned in the Gospels.

The birth stories found in Luke and Matthew reflect the theology and the interests of the Gospel writers. Luke is concerned with the poor and humble, therefore the shepherds are the first to hear the news and visit Jesus. Shepherds

were traditionally marginalised – uneducated and often seen as untrustworthy; right from the start, Luke’s Jesus overturns expectations.

Matthew’s Gospel wows the reader or listener by making events sound magnificent: Jesus is presented as a king. This Gospel is written for a Jewish community so there are some clear parallels with the Old Testament, for example the flight to Egypt – a land to which Jacob’s son, Joseph, and the rest of his family went in Genesis. The fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies is a feature of Matthew’s Gospel.

One scholar (Mark Allan Powell) suggests that the wise men are not actually so wise (they get the date wrong,

they get lost, they don’t notice that Herod is scheming and false); nor are they kings (they are sent by royalty, and so must be underlings). This would mean that Matthew also paints Jesus as preferring the outcast and lowly to the rich and powerful.

Many Christians today accept the birth narratives as historical accounts and see the two Gospels as complementing each other, although not all Christians agree. For most Christians however, the key significance of this text is the Incarnation – that God came to earth as Jesus and lived among people as a human himself, as part of God’s plan of salvation for human beings.

#### WHY NOT LINK WITH...?

The Jewish celebration of Hanukkah. Compare with Christmas: both are winter festivals, celebrated by retelling the story and giving gifts, special foods and customs, and remember God giving gifts to his people, sustaining the light in the Temple in the Jewish tradition, and the gift of Jesus in Christianity.

## RESOURCES

If schools are splitting this unit across Year 1 and Year 2, teachers should remember the differences between the storylines in the two Gospels when choosing appropriate resources for each year group. Resources focusing on wise men should mainly be used in Year 2.

You might like to examine the words of these **carols** with pupils. Please select most appropriate verses:

- ‘Come and Join the Celebration’
- ‘Away in a Manger’
- ‘Calypso Carol’
- ‘Down to Earth’, from [www.fischy.com](http://www.fischy.com)

**Crib characters** can be created from a number of materials: for example dolly pegs, pipe cleaners, cards. Some pupils might enjoy using these DIY flatpack characters by Christian artist, Si Smith: [www.proost.co.uk/25-advent-flatpack-models](http://www.proost.co.uk/25-advent-flatpack-models)

Some **charity alternative gifts** can be found here: [www.charities.co.uk/charity-gifts.php](http://www.charities.co.uk/charity-gifts.php)

Pupils may find it interesting to find out about **sending Christmas gifts** to children overseas, although note that not everyone agrees with the inclusion of Christian literature within these gift boxes:

[www.samaritans-purse.org.uk/what-we-do/operation-christmas-child](http://www.samaritans-purse.org.uk/what-we-do/operation-christmas-child)

#### ARTWORK

‘Mystic Nativity’ by Botticelli: [www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/sandro-botticelli-mystic-nativity](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/sandro-botticelli-mystic-nativity)

There are lots of images you could use for the visit of the wise men (or Magi), including:

‘Adoration of the Magi’ by Aertsen

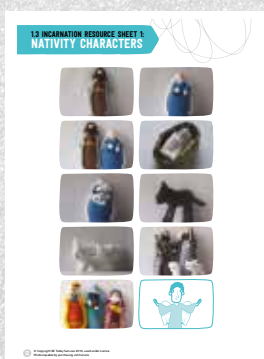
[www.artbible.info/art/large/654.html](http://www.artbible.info/art/large/654.html)

‘Adoration of the Kings’ by Strozzi, [www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/probably-by-zanobi-strozzi-the-adoration-of-the-kings](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/probably-by-zanobi-strozzi-the-adoration-of-the-kings)

You might like to look at some clips of what Christian children of KS1 age say about celebrating Christmas:

[www.faithinschools.co.uk/faces-of-faith](http://www.faithinschools.co.uk/faces-of-faith)

**DOWNLOADABLE RESOURCES AVAILABLE AT:  
WWW.UNDERSTANDINGCHRISTIANITY.ORG.UK**



**NATIVITY  
CHARACTERS**