

GOD WITH US

A Prayer Guide for the Season of Christmas
in a Time of Pandemic



2020

What is Christmas?

Christmas has become one of the most important feasts in the Christian calendar. The New Testament gives no date or year for the birth of Jesus. In fact, for the first three centuries there is very little evidence of Christians celebrating the nativity of Jesus. The first Christmas celebrations seem to begin around the beginning of the fourth century. In an effort to Christianise the Roman winter festival of light, Christians began to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, whom the author of the Gospel of John describes as “a light that shines in the dark...” (Jn: 1:4) on the 25th of December. The English word, ‘Christmas’, first appears around the tenth century as *Cristes-messe*, or literally ‘Christ’s Mass’ celebrated on the day of his birth.

A Spiritual Opportunity

The contemporary celebration of Christmas is a mix of religious and cultural traditions and customs. While modern times have seen the feast take on commercial and secular tones, at its heart, it still remains for many the celebration of the Birth of Jesus Christ. Retelling the story of the first Christmas has the innate power to inspire moments of spiritual reflection and renewal along with the practice of charity and outreach to those who are in need. It has become an important time to gather as a family and indeed to gather as a Christian community. This year, the restrictions in place because of the Coronavirus mean that we may not be in a position to gather as usual for our religious services. This situation challenges us to find new ways of reflecting on our faith and praying in our homes. It is hoped that this guide will assist you in doing just that.

Christmas Traditions

Christmas is a season rich in traditions from the lighting of lights to the decoration of trees - from the giving of gifts to the magic of Santa, from gathering for midnight Mass to the customary meals together. The singing of carols and the construction of the nativity scene or crib, all help to make the season special and to bring the birth of Jesus to life in our day.

For Younger Family Members

At various points throughout this guide there are places for the younger members of a household to get involved. Art materials – paper, pens, and paints would be helpful at these times. So too would a guiding hand from an adult.

Broadcast Masses



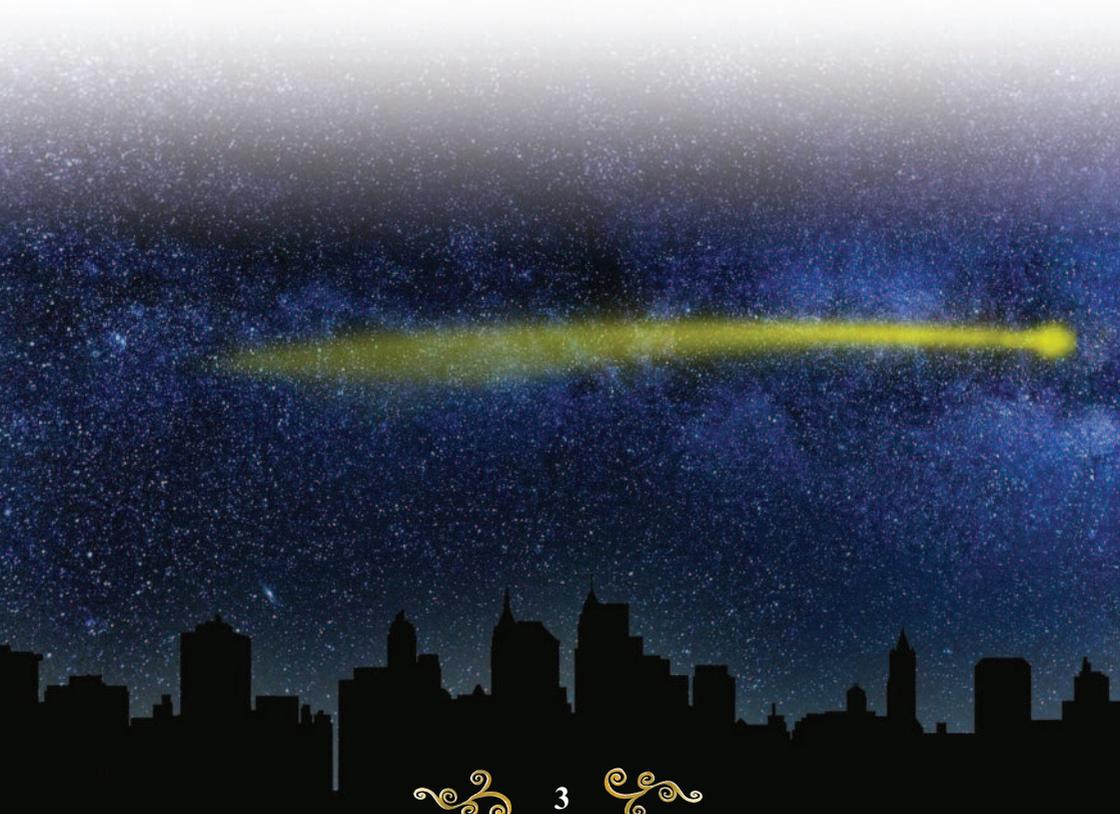
While nothing can substitute for gathering in person, we are blessed to live in an age where the celebration of the Eucharist can be broadcast on radio or television or by means of the internet. This guide is also designed to help deepen your participation in those broadcasts and to assist you in getting the most out of them spiritually.

Call to Action

Followers of Jesus are called to be people of action. During each of our days of prayer there will be a call to action. To do something different or significant that puts the message of that particular day into practice.

Safety

This guide is designed for use by a single household. All health and safety advice should be adhered to. When using candles, please do so safely.



Christmas Day

25th December 2020



Today we contemplate the significance of what happened the night before. In the Child of Bethlehem, God himself has reached out of his mystery towards this world of ours. In the person of Jesus Christ, God's eternal Word has entered time and come to live with us. We no longer walk alone. God now walks with us: a light in the darkness and a guide for life's journey. His presence turns hearts to thoughts of good rather than bad, love instead of hatred, peace rather than war. "Sing, choirs of angels, Sing in exultation; Sing, all ye citizens of heav'n above! Glory to God, Glory in the highest."

A Prayer Ritual at Home

Gather around the crib and place an unlit candle before or beside it. Pause to still your life and become aware of God's presence with you.

As we begin ...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

Let us pray (pause)

Oh, come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant! Oh, come ye, oh come ye to Bethlehem. Come and behold him, born the King of angels; Oh Come let us adore him, Oh Come let us adore him, Christ the Lord. **Amen**

Let us listen to God's Word ...

John 1:1-18

What has come into being in him was life, life that was the light of men; and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it. The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone; he was coming into the world. [...] The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory.

Let us reflect ...

In these winter months with their short days, we find ourselves waking up in darkness and returning home from work or school in darkness too. It seems that darkness is almost overpowering us. We dream of and long for the brighter evenings, the warmer days, where there is more light than darkness, more warmth than cold. We look forward to spring where new life begins to grow. Seeds come to life and bare branches sprout green shoots.

In the Gospel of John, light and darkness become powerful symbols. Light points to goodness while darkness conjures up images of all that is bad. From the beginning, Christians have been adamant that in Jesus, God had sent a ray of goodness into the world that darkness could never overpower. God himself had come to live among us to begin a revolution of love, a time of renewal and transformation of our entire world. This is the invitation that each year the celebration of Christmas holds out to us – the real possibility of change and renewal for ourselves and our world. Change where we allow the dark areas of our lives to be lit by the light of Jesus' wisdom. Change where we bring that wisdom, gained to enlighten the darkened areas of our families, our communities and our world. (*Aileen Cawley, 2020*)

Pause for a few moments of silent reflection.

Children's Activity

Draw a picture of your favourite character from the nativity scene – use a thought or speech bubble to record what they might be thinking or saying.

Ritual Action

Light the candle before the crib and pray or sing:

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus, laid down his sweet head. The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay. The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. The cattle are lowing. The Baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes. I love you, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky and stay by my side until morning is nigh. Be near me, Lord Jesus. I ask you to stay close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children, in your tender care and fit us for heaven to live with you there. *(William J. Kirkpatrick)*

Intercessions

We take a moment to bring before God our needs and the needs of the world on this special day.

We pray for Christians throughout the world who hold these days sacred. We remember especially those who are persecuted because of their faith. (pause)

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

We pray for our families – those who are here with us, those who cannot be with us and those who have gone home to God. (pause)

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

We pray for an increase in faith – that God has truly reached out to us in Jesus and that he walks with us in the good and bad times of life's journey. (pause)

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

Add your own intercessions here. (pause)

Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

Our Father ...

Prayer (pause)

Hail and blessed be the hour and moment in which the Son of God was born of the most pure Virgin Mary, at midnight, in Bethlehem, in the piercing cold. In that hour vouchsafe, I beseech Thee, O my God, to hear my prayer and grant my desires, through the merits of Our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of His blessed Mother. **Amen**

Blessing

The Lord bless us and keep us; The Lord make his face shine upon us and be gracious to us; The Lord turn his face toward us and give us his peace both now and forever. **Amen**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

Call to Action

Make a point this day of praying before and after Christmas dinner. Call or text someone whom you have not been in contact with for a while, to wish them a happy Christmas.

For the Christmas Season a Prayer at Mealtime

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the gift of family and friends.

We give you thanks for gathering us around this table today.

Bless our time together. We remember those who are absent from our company: those who cannot be with us* and those who now feast at your table in heaven.*

We pray for the lonely and the sad, the homeless and the hungry.

Give us a loving heart and a generous spirit to make our world a better place.

For those who prepared this food and for what we are about to receive, we give you thanks, O loving Father, through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

*here you may wish to wish them a Happy Christmas



Online Celebration of the Eucharist

Before the broadcast begins:

- Gather with other members of your household, if you can.
- Light all the candles on your Advent wreath including the white one or light a candle before your crib.

During the broadcast look out for the following:

- The priest will wear **white or gold vestments this evening, a symbol of celebration.**
- The **white candle is lit on the Advent wreath** symbolising that Advent is now over and the Christmas season has begun.
- The **First Reading** from the Prophet Isaiah speaks of the coming of one who brings good news, heralds peace, brings happiness and proclaims salvation. The **Psalm** proclaims “All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” In the **Second Reading**, the letter to the Hebrews states the early Christian belief that God has spoken to us through his son – the Son who is the “radiant light of God’s glory.” The **Gospel** from the Prologue of John, recounts the early belief that Jesus was indeed God who had come to live among us as a light in the darkness – a light that darkness cannot overpower.
- At communion time, make an Act of **Spiritual Communion**. Place yourself before the crib – wonder at how in this Child the eternal God has entered time. Bow down before his presence.

Take away ...

What does it really mean to me that God has reached out to us in Jesus Christ? What is my response to be?



Prepared by the Dioceses of Clonfert and Elphin
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