

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



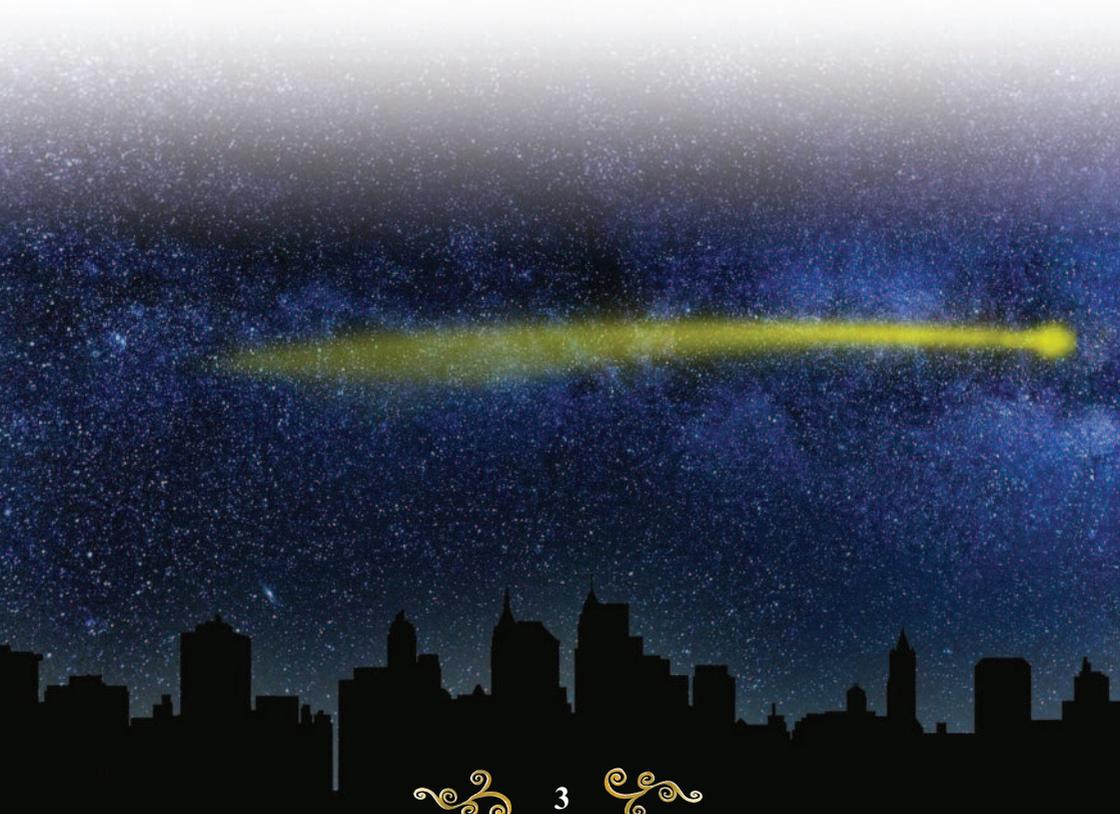
While nothing can substitute for gathering in person, we are blessed to live in an age where the celebration of the Eucharist can be broadcast on radio or television or by means of the internet. This guide is also designed to help deepen your participation in those broadcasts and to assist you in getting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

24th December 2020



In many places, Christmas Eve is a day of fasting in preparation for the celebration of the great feast that marks the birth of Jesus. Traditionally, Christians have gathered deep in the night to celebrate the Mass of Midnight. There, the story of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and the particular circumstances of the birth of Jesus are retold and relived so as to enrich our present. This is indeed a holy night!

O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
'Til He appears and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn
Fall on your knees; O hear the Angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born
O night divine, O night, O night divine!

A Prayer Ritual at Home

Wrap the figure of Jesus and place it underneath your Christmas tree or with your other gifts. Place an unlit candle before or beside the crib. Have some Holy Water to hand to bless the crib. 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)

Father, you make this holy night radiant with the splendour of Jesus Christ, our light. We welcome him as Lord, the true light of the world. Bring us to eternal joy in the kingdom of heaven where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

Let us listen to God's Word ...

Luke 2:1-14

In the countryside close by there were shepherds out in the fields keeping guard over their sheep during the watches of the night. An angel of the Lord stood over them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Look, 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.'

Let us reflect ...

What joy the news of a new-born baby brings for families, relatives and friends. The lowly and humble shepherds spent day after day tending to their flock – caring and protecting their sheep. These committed carers were the first to receive the news of the nearby birth of a baby. Unknown to themselves, they were invited to be part of that first Christmas story. They were to be caught up in the single most important event in the history of humanity. For in that baby “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger”, God himself had come to visit. Not in the power of his deity but rather in the meekness of a tiny child and in the poverty of a stable in a far off corner of the world.

It seemed God was a carer too. In that new-born baby, he was to reveal that he cared for each and every human person. His loving gaze fell most of all upon those who found themselves lost or on the margins of life.

There, in that place, began a new and definitive stage of the story of God's loving outreach to this world of ours. This divine outreach has within it the power to change everyone and everything for the best. This Christmas night 2020, after the year we have had, let us like the shepherds journey in our hearts to that stable. Let us wonder before the new-born baby. Let us become part of the story which, although it began those many years ago, continues today. A story which has the power, now as it did then, to change and transform our lives for the better. Let us go and see! (Aileen Cawley, 2020)

Pause for a few moments of silent reflection

Children's Activity

Make a birthday card for Jesus – include your own birthday message to him.

Ritual Action

Take the wrapped figure of Jesus from under the tree and open it. If there are children present, have one of them place the baby Jesus in the crib. Sing together:

*Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
'Round yon virgin Mother and Child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace
Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight!
Glories stream from heaven afar;
Heavenly hosts sing Al-le-lu-ia!
Christ the Saviour is born!
Christ the Saviour is born!*

Blessing of the Crib

God of every nation and people, from the very beginning of creation you have made manifest your love: when our need for a Saviour was great, you sent your Son to be born of the Virgin Mary. To our lives he brings joy and peace, justice, mercy and love. Lord, bless all who look upon this manger; may it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus, and raise up our thoughts to him, who is God-with-us and Saviour of all, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. **Amen**

The crib may be sprinkled with some Holy Water

Intercessions

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

Lord Jesus, help us create a manger in our hearts this Christmas, where you and your message may find a true home. (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 those who are homeless or hungry, sick or sad, in poverty or at war this night. May we be generous and supportive in our response to others need. (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)

“What can I give him, Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him - Give my heart.” (Christina Rosetti)

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

Write a blessing for Santa and put it with his treat. Spend some time in prayer before the crib – take each character and try to see the scene through their eyes.

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.
Place the figure of the Baby Jesus in your crib and light a candle near it.

During the broadcast look out for the following:

- While this Mass was traditionally celebrated **at midnight**, it is now celebrated in many places once the sun has set.
- The priest will wear **white or gold vestments this evening, a symbol of celebration.**
- Normally at the beginning of the service, the **figure of the Baby Jesus is placed in the crib** and the crib is blessed.
- The **white candle is lit on the advent wreath** symbolising that Advent is now over and the Christmas season has begun.
- The **Readings** focus on the arrival in Jesus of the Messiah longed for by the people of Israel. In the **First Reading**, the Prophet Isaiah speaks of a time when a child is born for us, a son given to us who will be called “Wonder-Counsellor, Mighty-God, Eternal-Father, Prince-of-Peace.” The **Psalm** proclaims “Today a saviour has been born to us; he is Christ the Lord.” In the **Second Reading**, from the Letter to Titus, we hear that God’s grace has been revealed and has made salvation possible for all of humanity. In the **Gospel** – the familiar story is told of how Jesus came to be born at Bethlehem in Judea at the time of Cesar Augustus.
- The Eucharist will be celebrated as normal. At communion time make an Act of **Spiritual Communion**. Place yourself among the shepherds before the crib – look upon the scene and savour the presence of the Christ Child.

Take away ...

What does living out Christmas mean for a Christian? Is Jesus just some famous person from the past or is he really God come among us to make a difference to our lives?



Prepared by the Dioceses of Clonfert and Elphin
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