



# CHRISTMAS

May the God who came to us as a baby,  
bless you with peace and hope.



A gift for you from the United Reformed Church

# Contents

- 3** But what is Christmas?
- 4** What's the story?
- 5** Politics and bureaucracy
- 6** Laid in a manger
- 7** Sheep farmers visit
- 8** To the Temple
- 8** Two old people
- 9** What, no three kings?
- 9** So, what does it mean?
- 10** What does Christmas mean to you?
- 11** Can I celebrate all this at home?
- 12** What if I came to church?
- 13** 'I wish it could be Christmas every day'
- 14** What is the United Reformed Church?

[www.urb.org.uk](http://www.urb.org.uk)



© The United Reformed Church 2019

Written by the Revd Dr Susan Durber, a Minister of the United Reformed Church (URC).

Produced by the URC Communications Team.

Designed by Justyn Hall



# So this is Christmas...

John Lennon

## But what is Christmas?

We live in the Northern part of the world,  
and when the days are short and the nights long,  
when our spirits are low and it's cold,  
there is a deep need to find hope for a new year  
and for life itself.

So, we light the lights, we set the table and fill our glasses,  
and celebrate with friends and family,  
in defiance of pain and darkness, because we are alive,  
and love and joy are real.

The church chose this time to celebrate the birth of Jesus  
and the story that's passed down to us  
through the years continues to echo with our stories  
and our hope today.

A child was born in difficult times  
when the world was ruled by mighty powers  
not hearing the protests of the poor.  
And, this child was, according to Christian faith:

**God with us, the light of the world.**



# What's the story?

There are four Gospels in the Bible – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Only Luke and Matthew have a version of the Christmas story and they are different from each other. It's complicated, but interesting!

Luke tells us that he has written

**'AN ORDERLY ACCOUNT.'** Luke 1: 3

So this is his version:

A young woman called Mary becomes pregnant and a messenger tells her that the baby will be a holy one. She decides to go with it, to have the baby, and to trust in God.

**'..LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.'** Luke 1: 38

She's a strong girl with a revolutionary spirit. She sings about a God who will:  
bring down the powerful,  
lift up the lowborn,  
feed the hungry  
and send the rich away.



# Politics and bureaucracy

While Mary is still pregnant, she has to travel to Bethlehem, because the government has ordered that everyone should be registered. Then, as now, bureaucracy interrupts lives.

Luke takes a lot of trouble to date this registration, saying which Emperor was ruling and who was governing Syria.

No-one can find the census in history, but we know that this is how powerful empires do control vulnerable people; ID cards, stop and search, checkpoints and barrier walls. It all sounds very familiar...



# Laid in a manger

All the guest rooms in the houses in Bethlehem are full (only sofa surfing left) and so Mary has her baby in the part of a house where the animal feed is kept.

## MARY 'LAID HIM IN A MANGER' Luke 2: 7



*Away in manger,  
No room for a bed,  
The little Lord Jesus  
Laid down his sweet head*

Luke tells us several times that Jesus was born 'in a manger' – so it must mean something... but what?

It tells us that Jesus was born into poverty, like any baby who has a shoe box for a cot.

It could also mean that he is somehow 'food for the world', the one who can feed our hungry souls. When Christians worship they say we 'feed on him in our hearts'. The idea of the baby in the manger has moved many a stony heart.



# Sheep farmers visit

The first ones to know about this birth were the shepherds on the night shift, out in the fields, guarding sheep from rustlers and thieves. It was low status work, but this night they got ahead of the rest.



*While shepherds watched their flocks by night,  
all seated on the ground,  
the angel of the Lord came down  
and glory shone around.*

You may know some alternative words, but did you know there are lots of alternative tunes? There are pubs in Sheffield where people gather every Christmas to sing this to many different folk tunes, and all washed down with local ale...

The story of Jesus is one for the inn and the pub – it fits there, and belongs to us all.

**‘THE SHEPHERDS RETURNED, GLORIFYING  
AND PRAISING GOD...’ Luke 2: 20**



# To the Temple



The next bit of the story, according to Luke, is Jesus' circumcision (he was Jewish) and then his presentation in the Temple.

Joseph and Mary love Jesus and do for him what any parent might do for their child. They take him and present him 'to the Lord'.

This child, presented to God in the Temple, was God born among us, God with us. Every child is holy, but this one really was the holy presence of God become a human being. This tiny human form was, it turned out, the most holy temple of all.



*Let earth and heaven combine,  
and joyfully agree,  
to praise in songs divine  
the incarnate Deity.'*

*Charles Wesley (1707-88)*

## Two old people...

We think about children at Christmas, but a part of the story that doesn't make it into the Nativity plays is the bit about the two very old people who welcome the baby to the Temple.

Simeon and Anna both spend a lot of their time praising God. They are both long in years and in their old folks' wisdom, they recognise what God is doing. They 'have seen salvation', seen the light that is in Jesus, and the glory of God all around.

We are sometimes fearful of getting older today, but churches are places where all are appreciated and no longer alone.

# No three kings?

No, that part of the story is in the story *Matthew* tells, and it doesn't actually say even there that there were three kings, just three gifts.

In Luke's version there are just the shepherds, common people, an ordinary young woman and some old people in the Temple, the Roman empire counting its subject people, and some messengers from God.

Most of all there's the promise that this child, born of a young couple from an unfashionable town in the north, will mean revolution; food for the hungry, light for the fearful, fulfilment of all the good things prophets have ever foretold.

And it's not just for Jesus' or Luke's, own people, but for *everyone*.



## So, what does it mean?

It might be hard to believe now Christmas is so big, but for centuries the Church paid little attention to the stories of Jesus' birth. There was more focus on his death and his rising from the dead, or on how he was one person of the Holy Trinity.

There were some who liked the stories about the 'three kings' because they thought it made kings sound more important, with some kind of divine authority.

It was Saint Francis who turned our attention to the Christmas story again – and particularly to Luke's story. He wanted to show ordinary people that God had come to be with us.

One Christmas he just set up a scene in a cave with animals, people, and a manger – and led the congregation out of church after the service to see it. He did not need words to say: 'This is how God comes to you.'

# What does Christmas mean to you?

Christmas is...

family and fairy lights,  
parcels and presents,  
cake and crackers,  
Santa and stuffing...

All those things are magical, delightful and joyful.

And behind all that lies a:

message of hope,  
mother and baby,  
manger,  
and God who comes to be with us  
in Jesus.



*Come, come, come to the manger,  
Children, come to the children's King;  
Sing, sing, chorus of angels,  
Star of morning, o'er Bethlehem sing.*

Traditional



# Can I celebrate all this at home?

Of course! Christmas above all is a festival for the home...  
and we are celebrating God making a home among us in Jesus.

Why not say this prayer just before your Christmas dinner:

**O God, who once made a home with Mary,  
come and be with us today  
to bless our celebration and our feasting.  
May we know a joy that inspires love,  
an abundance that creates generosity,  
and hope that shapes a better world,  
today and always, Amen.**





# What if I came to a United Reformed Church?

**You will be warmly welcomed!**

Churches are very prepared for visitors at Christmas and will be really glad to see you.

You don't have to dress up – come as you are.

You might find:

**a carol service** – readings and songs that tell the story of Christmas.

**a communion service** – where bread and wine is shared in the 'feast' at the heart of Christian worship, a reminder that the baby who was laid in a manger is truly present with us still.

**an informal service on Christmas day** – with lots of laughter and celebration.

If you haven't been to church for a while, you might be surprised. You will meet some people who follow Jesus and who are still working out what all this means.



# 'I wish it could be Christmas every day'

Wizzard

**But** Christmas only tells part of the story of Jesus.

When he had grown up, he had some amazing things to say and he did things that shook the world.

Jesus was a controversial figure:

challenging some religious and political leaders,  
blessing the poor,  
treating women as equals,  
welcoming migrants,  
respecting children,  
forgiving people...

Jesus was executed by the state, mourned by his followers and then rose from the dead

But that's why we have **Good Friday and Easter.**

[www.urchurch.org.uk/easter](http://www.urchurch.org.uk/easter)



# What is the United Reformed Church?

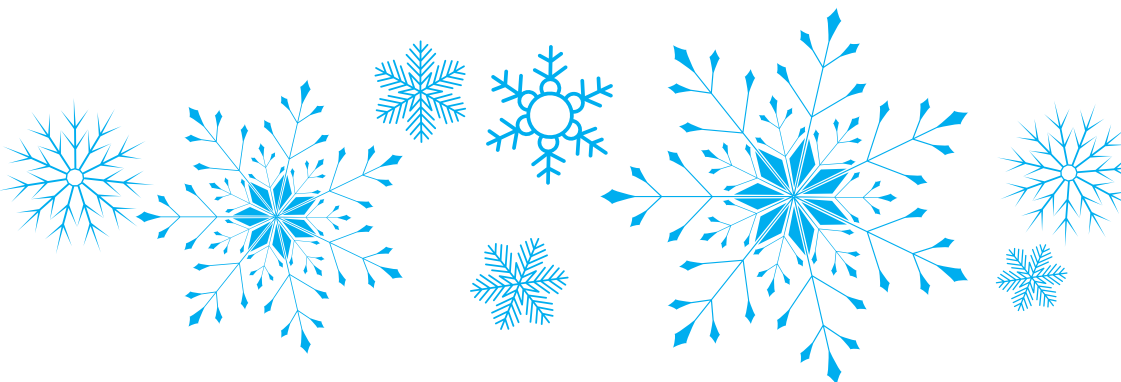
The URC strives to be a hospitable and inclusive church where all, regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation or social background are warmly welcome. The URC supports movements and charities working for justice and peace. People in the URC worship God, pray, read the Bible, and try to make a difference in their community. We are trying to follow Jesus. We work very closely with other churches, bringing congregations together where we can.

## Is the United Reformed Church part of any other church?

The URC believes that we are all part of the one church and we are praying and working to make that oneness much more visible. But, for now, we have a separate identity too.



[www.urc.org.uk](http://www.urc.org.uk)



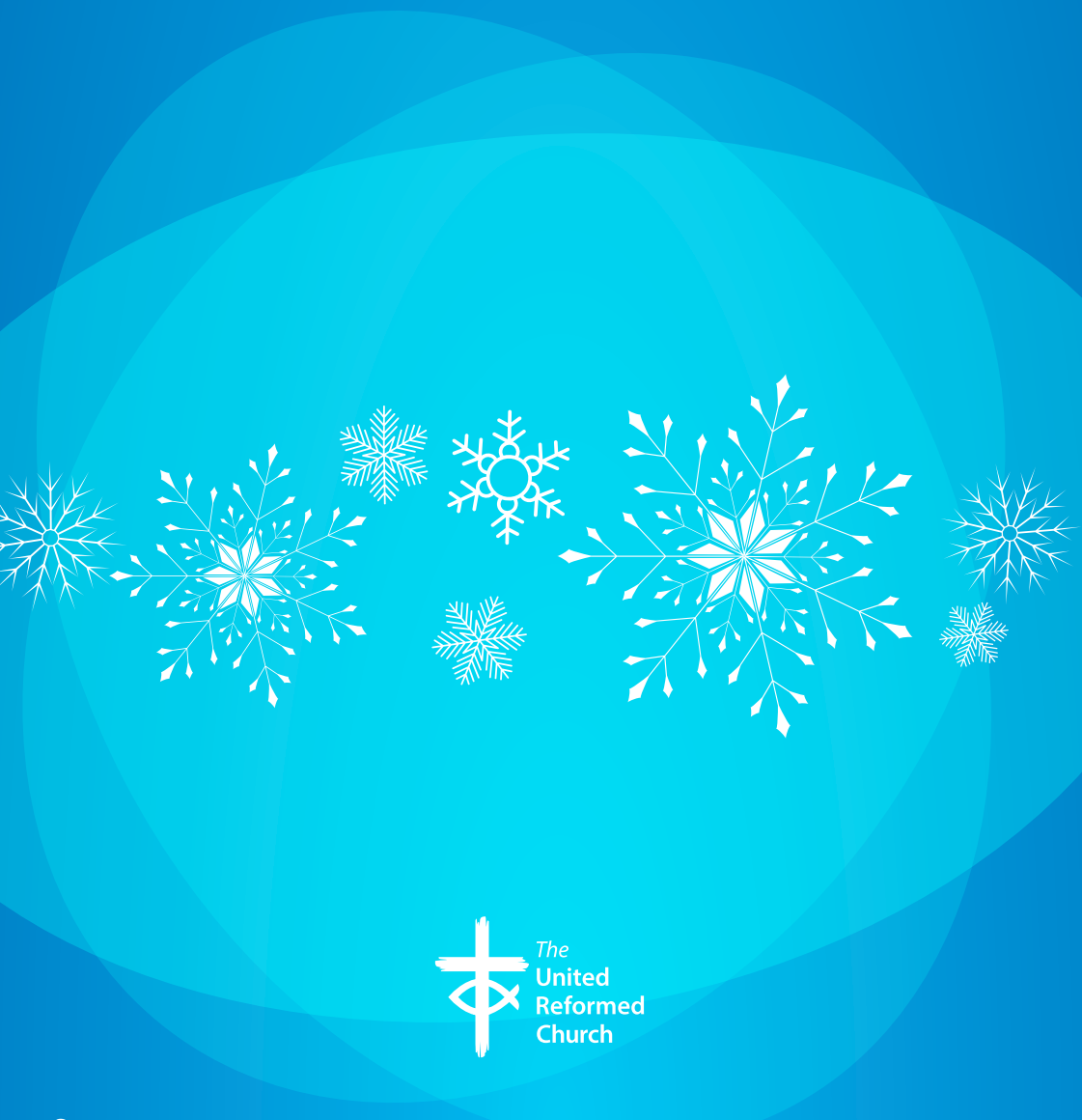
# If you would like to go to church this Christmas...

**Visit [www.urch.org.uk](http://www.urch.org.uk) to find your local United Reformed Church.**

As well as church services, there are loads of activities each and every week including Scouts, Guides, community groups, foodbanks, associations, youth clubs, drama groups, craft groups, Bible Study, Messy Church, Godly Play, cafés, meeting places, choirs, lunch clubs, sports clubs, hobby groups and much more.

We have more churches than M&S has branches, so there's a URC near you!





URC-CH5-1019

[www.urch.org.uk](http://www.urch.org.uk)

