

# Conversations with Dad

## An Advent Calendar



Open the door to your heart!

It's a waiting game for sleepy Shepherds, Angels, and Wise Men; all are travelling to Bethlehem. Some are already there, some are searching, and others are told to – “Go and see.”

What's all the fuss about?

You know the story so far but how much more is there for you to discover?

What part are you called to play? The calendar is called, “Conversations with Dad.”

David and his dad uncover some interesting thoughts and questions. However, conversations are two-way, and we would love to hear your thoughts too.

Come and travel with us to Bethlehem through this advent calendar and greet Christmas.

## A Waiting Game

December 1<sup>st</sup>

## Imagination

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## Sleepy Shepherds

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## Putting things right

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## All wrapped up

December 14<sup>th</sup>

## A Starry Night

December 15<sup>th</sup>

## In a Mess

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## Laid on Straw

December 17<sup>th</sup>

## Ox and Ass

December 18<sup>th</sup>

## On-Demand

December 19<sup>th</sup>

## Little Sheep

December 20<sup>th</sup>

## Accelerating

December 21<sup>st</sup>

## Seek & Find

December 22<sup>nd</sup>

## Follow Me

December 23<sup>rd</sup>

## Holy Spirit

December 24<sup>th</sup>

## The Gift

December 25<sup>th</sup>

## A Waiting Game

December 1<sup>st</sup>

David and his dad were in the dentist's waiting room. There was no real panic today, as it was only a check-up and David had been cleaning his teeth every day. It was the beginning of December and David had been hearing the Christmas story (once again) at school. After a long silence, David asked...

*"Why are we still waiting after more than 2,000 years, for Jesus to be born?"*

*"Well, I guess it's because we still have lots to learn; so, we tell the story every year."*

*"But was Jesus really born in December?"*

*"We can't be 100% sure, but what's important is that we remember what happened, and why God became man."*

*"Is there anything God can't do?"*

*"Yes, my boy, he can't break promises and he can't stop loving us."*



Advent is a time of anticipation that something quite amazing is going to happen. That our creator God, would take on the form of a vulnerable baby – and enter our world.

It's quite sad to think that much of this is hidden beneath the busyness of our physical preparations: ordering the turkey, decorations, over-the-top spending – you know the feeling?

Yet the meaning of Christmas seems far off, both in time and distance. Could we again, wait in anticipation, excitement – of something totally amazing that is about to happen? To step out, from under the busyness, enter the story and become part of it.

God promises new life, in a way we can't fully understand till we accept it. But it is finding the true way we were created to live, that provides a sense of fullness and peace of heart – that's what we secretly long for.

We don't always use the word "Incarnation" and it's a difficult word to understand; that when God became man – he was both totally man and totally God.

Luke 1:26-28 The Birth of Jesus Foretold

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

Prayer

Father God, creator of everything seen and unseen. You entered our darkness in the form of a child. May we open our hearts to your love, recognise the simplicity of your word and follow you. Help me to see the child-like qualities in my life and accept you as part of my story. A story, not locked in time, but as real today as it was in the beginning. Amen.

# Imagination

December 2<sup>nd</sup>

David enjoyed a good story, even though he understood it was not real and could never be real in this world of ours. Dad would read stories to him, and in later years David would begin to read for himself. Adventure stories were his favourite books, the more exciting the better. Laying down his book, David asked...

*"Dad – What is imagination, and how do I get it?"*

*"That's a good one, my boy. I think imagination comes pre-loaded when we are born. Some people seem to be able to hold onto it better than others though, such as writers and artists."*

*"Okay, but what is it?"*

*"Well, I guess it is the part of us that needs to figure out what is happening. Sometimes that is difficult, so we must make up something that fits – until we make better sense of it."*

*"So, it is thoughts and ideas that can be turned into something?"*



*"Yes, someone first had to have the idea about flying, before an aeroplane could be made."*

We use our imagination when we meet something we can't understand. The story we create holds us till we can recognise more. Part of growing up is about recognising more than we first imagined and relating our story to the world we are experiencing.

We are using our imagination all the time. It's like we are assessing everything around us "What if this – what if that"? We play out scenarios (stories) in our head to see which one would be best.

Great mysteries are held within stories, for those who can discover them. Christ, who was there at the beginning, knows our thoughts and ways. Jesus taught us through stories (parables) so that we could begin to understand these great mysteries. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, yeast in bread, a precious pearl, a man who scatters seed or a dragnet that is cast into the sea...

Matthew 13:44 The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."*

Prayer

Heavenly Father teach me, through your Son, in a way that I can understand. Reveal the mysteries that will keep me on the right path, recognising Christ in the stranger. I ask this with all my heart, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit – three in one. Amen.

## Teachers & Prophets

December 3<sup>rd</sup>

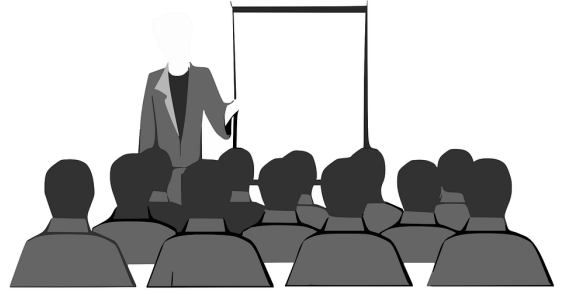
David's school is dominated by an older generation of teachers, who have an unusual way of saying things – compared to the rest of David's world. Not so much in the words they use, but the order in which they place them. David came home from school and told his dad...

*"The teacher said, if it rains any more, we will be using canoes in the playground."*

*"I think the teacher's prediction of the future is a little exaggerated son."*

*"Prophets warn us about the future, are prophets always old men?"*

*"Not necessarily, anyone can be a prophet when needed. It's when someone speaks what they feel God is saying about a situation."*



John the Baptist was six months older than Christ Jesus, and he was related to him through their mothers. John was born of Elizabeth, cousin to Mary who was with child when she went to support Elizabeth during her pregnancy. John's purpose was to be the forerunner of Jesus, one who would prepare the way, level the playing field, and stir people to turn around from the way they were living.

People could be forgiven for thinking John was crazy, for his appearance and his words were quite different. Yet people went out into the desert and had a real experience of God's forgiveness. Lowering mountains, filling in valleys and straightening crooked roads – simply means, enabling easy access. Coming to God is an effortless process, say "Yes" and in doing so, we turn away from our old ways.

### Matthew 3: 3-6 John the Baptist Prepares the Way

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" John's clothes were made of camel hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

### Prayer

Father God, the way to you is already prepared. Help me each day to take that step closer to you. The birth, death and resurrection of your Son Jesus, the Christ the living proof of your immense love for us. Grant us Lord your forgiveness and restore us to new life in Christ. Amen.

## Paths to follow.

December 4<sup>th</sup>

David had a good sense of direction and knew the paths he would often use when going to the shops, his grandma's, and school of course. Beyond that, thoughts of distant towns and countries were often confusing. Maps look so small and give no idea of distance. It was Sunday evening and David was going on a school trip in the morning. His bag was packed, and his sandwiches were in the fridge.

"Dad, how did the wise men know how long it would take them and if they would get there in time?"

*"I don't think they did really. They must have had an idea and made some plans, but they would set out with hope and trust – in what they felt was a worthy quest."*

*"What kind of maps would they have had?"*

*"They would have charts showing paths that others had used, they also listened to stories from many years ago as to what will happen, and they wanted to see if it was true."*



It's good and necessary to have a plan so that things come together in an effective way. Our plans come out of practice, even when we are children – games help us learn how to plan.

Stories of explorers inspire us into a sense of adventure, to go beyond what is accepted as normal. However, we can choose to remain asleep, unconscious of the promise of new life. We can tell ourselves that the journey is too long, and we do not know the way. If we remain in darkness, how will we see anything?

Evidence is important to help us believe in what has happened and in what is to come. Reading from the prophets of the bible, show us the paths and direction to God. We continue this journey, concerning our own lives today.

Numbers 24: 17 Balaam's message

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.

A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.

He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth.

Prayer

Father God, you must have planned everything from the beginning. Help us to see your plan and our part in it. Enable us to recognise these paths in others too, the work we are each called to and our hope for the future. Amen.

## Angels

December 5<sup>th</sup>

David and his dad were heading towards the front door as they were going down to the local shop. Both jumped suddenly as they saw, through the frosted glass the shape of a large person. Dad opened the door to what could have been the largest postman in the world. The postman apologised for alarming them but said he saw them coming and chose not to ring the bell. The postman handed over a package which Dad left on the porch shelf and the pair continued to the shop. As they walked, David said...

*"We've been learning about Angels. They are messengers sent by God – a bit like a heavenly postman I suppose. Are Angels really scary?"*

*"Well, often the first thing they say is "Fear not." I think I would be a little scared if I met an Angel. We are frequently scared by things we do not yet understand."*

The word Angel simply means messenger and is mentioned twenty-four times in Luke's gospel alone. Today's verse is the Angel Gabriel telling Mary what is about to happen, reassuring her that all will be well.

It is not for us to know the mind of God in all things. However, that is not to say that God does not speak to us today. God's word, the bible, speaks to our hearts clearly in a way that we can understand. Our part is to check it out with others, to confirm and to act upon what we believe to be true.

Ask God to speak to you in a way that you will know it is him.

Speak to God in your heart about your worries and be sure God will answer. God's words in Joshua 1:5 tell us that no one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Luke 1: 35-38 The Angel Gabriel visits Mary.

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

### Prayer

Father God, thank you for revealing yourself through Jesus, the Christ. Thank you that you continue to reveal your mysteries to us, mere children. Lord, may I open my heart to receive your word in my life and act upon it, bringing your peace to those around me. Amen.



## Mary

December 6th

David was helping his father move items in the loft. David loved rummaging through boxes, there was so much to look at. Amongst the Christmas decorations was the Crib box, complete with a star and figures. The figures were plain plaster casts and David commented... *"Were these never painted Dad?"*

*"That's the only way I ever remember them. They belonged to my grandparents, do be careful."*

*"Mary's dress should be blue; we always see Mary in blue – can I paint them?"*

*"Well, I would rather you didn't – I quite like them the way they are."*



It is believed that Mary was between 12 and 14 years old when she gave birth to Jesus the Son of God. Difficult for us to imagine, which may be why she looks much older in Nativity figures and paintings. The blue paint used originates from Lapis, an extremely expensive pigment denoting the importance of Mary and her role.

Mary has been referred to as Our Lady of Sorrows, though there would be joyful times too. Mary was to be with her son, Christ Jesus, through his suffering and to the end at the foot of the cross, feeling the weight of his suffering.

Many Icons and images of Mary show her role as pointing the way towards Jesus, the Christ who is the source of salvation for mankind. The Greek words used are Theotokos (Mother of God) and Hodegetria (She who points the way).

Luke 1:46-55 Mary's Song

And Mary said:

*"My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,  
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.*

*From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.*

*His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.*

*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.*

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted the humble.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."*

Prayer

Holy Mary Mother of God, thank you for pointing the way to Christ our Saviour. In reflecting upon your joys and sorrows, may we be drawn closer in faith and penitence. Amen



## Are we there yet?

December 7<sup>th</sup>

David had been learning at school about Mary and Joseph and he wanted to tell his dad all about it, just as if it were current news. But then he began to think about the practical stuff. On reaching home and finding Dad, he said... *"Dad, how far is it to Bethlehem?"*

*"Well Son, it depends where you start from!"*

*"No, I mean for Joseph and Mary. They started from Nazareth."*

*"Ha-ha, I guessed that. About ninety miles, it would have taken them just over a week. Remember, it was winter and even in those parts the nights were very cold, and the path was hard. Their only transport was a donkey. But they had to go! Even though Mary was going to have a baby!"*



A journey is simply a process of getting from A to B. It can also be a simple task to be completed or a large assignment. Mary and Joseph *had* to go to Bethlehem, to register their names as part of Joseph's family line. Life itself of course is a journey...

The journey or task may be just a short distance and we often set out without a thought as to how long we are going to be. Realisation only occurs after the event! We may say to ourselves, "Well, what took you so long?" and "I didn't bargain on that." You know the feeling; things could have gone better, too many distractions, should I have embarked on this at all?

So, should we plan every journey or task and stick rigidly to it?

Well, the issue is in how we feel about the task. If we can change the way we feel about the process; be more at peace, trust in our strengths and see it more as a joy, then we will improve in how we see things, creating enriched future journeys or tasks.

Recognise your starting points and put on the right attitude towards the things to be undertaken. Joseph would not have known what his life journey was going to be – but he trusted in God. We can take encouragement in Joseph's trust, the oil that lubricates the process is prayer (acknowledging and spending time in God's company).

### Luke 2: 4-5 Journey to Bethlehem

So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

### Prayer

Heavenly Father – keep us safe on our journey, no matter how far or from wherever we may start. Be my travelling companion in all I do. May we go forward in the grace and forgiveness of God. Amen.

## Joseph

December 8<sup>th</sup>

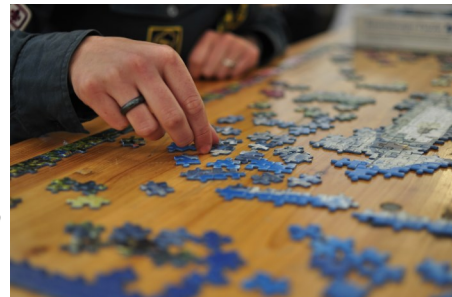
David loved doing Jigsaws. A pastime which had begun with his granddad. David would hide the last piece so he could be the one to complete the picture. It was a great pastime when the weather outside was bleak. This day, David and his dad were piecing together a picture of a sweet shop, with many coloured jars of sweets and bars of chocolate...

*"Dad, now the outside is done, shall I do the chocolate bars?"*

*"That sounds like a good plan son."*

*"If the pieces were numbered on the back, it would be much easier."*

*"But not so much fun, the process of putting it together is both challenging and fun – think of how you feel when the job is done?"*



With a Jigsaw there is just a vision of how it will look. Our work is to assemble the pieces, often we do the outside first – but there are no set instructions on how it must be done.

Joseph was about to do something about his situation with Mary when he received a vision in the form of an angel. The angel gave Joseph a picture of how things were to be; Joseph then needed to decide what he would do. Joseph honoured Mary and stood by her, trusting in what God had told him through the angel. That's a big ask when you consider the times they lived in – even today, to stand your ground in what you believe to be true can be risky. Would we take an easier option to stay safe?

Do we still hear from God today? I believe we do in many ways, but we just don't expect it – so we tend not to see or hear it. My feeling here about Joseph is that he was not passive in his encounter with the angel, and he turned away from his thoughts to send Mary away.

In hearing/ encountering God, our initial response should be to say sorry for our mistakes.

Psalm 51: 1-2

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.  
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

Prayer

Lord, may I hear your voice, guide me in your ways. Show me in a way that I will recognise you.  
Forgive my mistakes and renew my spirit oh Lord. Amen.

## Family History

December 9<sup>th</sup>

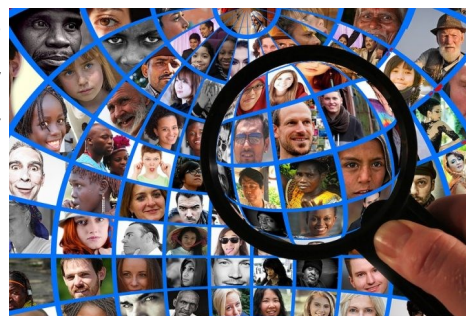
David's uncle and aunt were visiting, they were enjoying tea together and catching up on their news. There was a lot of talk about, who they remembered when they were young – grandparents, great uncles, and aunts. While Uncle Jim was helping himself to another slice of cake, David spoke up and Dad was quick to answer.

*"I know what a census is, but why does everyone have to be counted?"*

*"Here in England, a census is taken every ten years. The government needs to know how many people there are, where they have come from and their ages – so they can make sure there is enough space, houses, and food for the people around them. It also had to do with paying taxes."*

*"But Mary and Joseph went to another town to register?"*

*"Yes, because that was their original family home. Families have always been important, no matter what the difficulties."*



We begin to know more about who we are when we listen to stories of our family and where we come from. There are strong similarities between us, that create a sense of belonging – like putting on an old pair of slippers, they just fit right.

Joseph and Mary were both from the house and lineage of David, and Mary's parents were Joachim and Anne; already we feel we know this young couple. Even today, we use such words as – "Well, you must be Tom and Bette's son?" We find it helpful to place people within a group we can relate to.

When we associate ourselves with the family of God, we find it difficult to imagine we are made in God's image. A mirror will not reflect the God-image we are looking for, so we focus on the physical ("Isn't he like his dad").

Genesis 5:1 Adam's line

This is the written account of Adam's family line. When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God.

Prayer

Creator God, you dwell in a relationship with the Son and Holy Spirit. Our deepest call is to be in a relationship with you and all your creation. We pray for our families, those who are close, and those who are distant. Heal our divisions and differences and enable us to focus on our similarities. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

## The Inn Keeper

December 10<sup>th</sup>

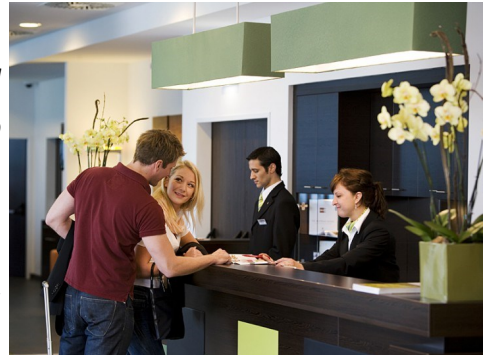
David finally had a part in the school nativity play. He was to be the Innkeeper, not always the part asked for or gratefully received. Perhaps it was better than playing a sheep or a goat. The words were simple too; “No room” and “Round the back!” Dad had to coax out of him, the story of how he was chosen...

*“So Dad, what did an innkeeper wear in those days?”*

*“Normal clothes I guess, nothing special. An Innkeeper would be a welcoming person and one who would have tried hard to please visitors, even when stressed at busy times.”*

*“No one special then?”*

*“In the story, the Innkeeper plays an important part, offering what little space he has with the animals.”*



Was there ever an Innkeeper? Well, it's not clear; in the original story, an Innkeeper is not mentioned. It is much more likely that Joseph and Mary would have stayed with family, arriving before her time was due. The original Bible word in Greek (kataluma) is better translated as “guest room.” As the guest rooms in this family home were full, Joseph and Mary found space on the ground floor, a room shared with the animals and a manger.

We can be too preoccupied with detail and miss the whole story. The innkeeper's part is the part we should play, welcoming the Christ child into the space where we live our everyday life – animals and all.

Luke 2:6-7

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Prayer

Father God, I believe your greatest desire is for each one of us to know you, through your Son Jesus the Christ. I pray that my heart may be open to receive you within the ordinary parts of my life and the parts I play each day. Amen.

## Herodes Magnus

December 11<sup>th</sup>

David was learning to play chess. He knew the object of the game was to put the opposing king in a position where the player would have to lay down his king and give in. David and his dad would play a game or two, often on a quiet Sunday afternoon. It was one such day when David asked... *“Was Jesus higher than King Herod?”*

*“I have two answers: yes and no. As a child and growing into a man, Jesus would never be a King to challenge Herod. However, as God, he was and always will be, King of all Kings.”*

*“Is that why Herod wanted to kill Jesus?”*

*“Yes, he was afraid he would lose everything he had fought hard to keep.”*



Herod had a lot to lose. He had been married ten times and had fourteen children. There was much intrigue and deception in the family and Herod had even murdered his second wife Mariamne, their two sons and many of Mariamne's family. A jealous man, Herod knew fear and ruled his kingdom by fear.

Jesus, the Christ entered our world as king of all kings. He comes with ultimate power but chooses not to use it. God's plan always is to invade our hearts with love – LOVE is only love when it is returned.

The kingdom Christ speaks of is the kingdom hereafter. However, this kingdom begins here and now when we accept God's love and forgiveness. God's kingdom is a dimension we rarely see or experience; for most of the time, we are oblivious to it. We are blinded by the dominant experiences of this world. We need to be as vulnerable as the Christ child – not armed and ready for battle. The greater strength is LOVE.

Micah 5: 2 & 4 – A promised ruler from Bethlehem

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”*

*“He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”*

Prayer

Father God, you reign together as one. Help me to lay down my readiness for battle. Heal the wound that swells my anger within. Increase my capacity to love you, my God. May I find that love overflowing to those around me. I ask this prayer from my deepest need, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Sleepy Shepherds

December 12<sup>th</sup>

The day had ended, and David felt everything was settled, with heavy eyes he climbed into bed. Dad entered the room to tuck him in when David sat bolt upright and said...

*"Dad, did the angel appear to the shepherds because they were the only ones awake?"*

*"Well, they would certainly be awake – watching the sheep."*

*"So, when would the shepherds get some sleep?"*

*"I would guess they would work as part of a group and take it in turns to sleep. The sight of an angel would certainly make them sit up! Now, snuggle down and close your eyes. Night-night God bless – see you in the morning."*



So much is left out of stories; often it's assumed we know things, and the parts left out, are perceived as not necessary to the story. Shepherds in those days would be regarded as some of the lowest in society. This was work for single men, young boys or older men who could no longer do heavy work.

There is a long history of shepherds in the bible. Abraham, Jacob, the boy David who became king and the prophet Amos. Jesus also referred to himself as the good shepherd.

But it was to these lowly shepherds that an angel of God first announced the birth of Christ. Glory be to God in the highest and on earth peace to men.

A connection had been made between heaven and earth. The message had been given to men who were about their normal work.

No matter what we may think of ourselves, there will have been times when we felt worthless and lower than any of the creatures. Jesus, the Christ, connected heaven and earth for people such as us – that we may feel his peace and discover new life in him.

Luke 2: 8-9 Shepherds watching.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

### Prayer

Father God, we thank you for announcing the birth of your Son, Jesus, the Christ. Who existed, with you and the Holy Spirit, before all creation. Thank you for revealing the promise of a new creation that is not dependent on our strength or position but is free to all who will receive it. Help me Lord, not to leave things out of my story but to consider all things through your grace. Amen.



## Putting things right

December 13<sup>th</sup>

David and his dad had been to the movies and were on their way home in the car. The movie of course had a hero, evil was conquered, and everyone lived happily ever after. David was still trying to fit the Christmas story into his world – and asked... *“If God wanted to put things right, why did he send a baby when he could have sent an army?”*

*“There are many ways to win a conflict young man. The first thing is to know the root of the problem. Imagine if all the money in the world spent on weapons was used to feed the hungry – mankind would be satisfied with no need for conflict.”*

*“Isn’t greed more than just food?”*

*“It is. Greed is all about what we think we need and how we satisfy that need concerning others.”*



As an army, a small group of angels would be enough, but what would that achieve? God is not a dictator and intends never to rule with force.

What is it to understand God and his ways? God is not a science that we can master. Our God-given purpose is only to control what we have, the world and that which is rightfully given to us.

We are God’s creation, and we can choose to go with his purpose – or follow the greed around us.

There would be no need for any army if Nations and neighbours were satisfied with what they had! Our needs include being valued, appreciated, and loved. When these are not met in our day-to-day lives, conflict rises inside.

Habakkuk 1:2-4 Habakkuk’s complaint

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?

Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

Therefore, the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

Prayer

Lord God be my king – that I might serve through love. Settle the conflict in my heart, that it may not be played out in my relationships. Help me recognise that my purpose is to be a peacemaker in all situations.

Meet my needs, Lord – that peace will reign and overcome my conflicts. For this is the battleground that conquers the world, in your name. Amen.

## **All wrapped up.**

December 14<sup>th</sup>

As we draw close to Christmas on every child's mind are the presents they are going to receive. David was no exception; his list had been prepared for quite some time. The hardest part was deciding when it was complete and when to send it – what if something new came into the shops? Keeping his list hidden, David asked... *"Dad, would one big present and six smaller ones be okay to ask for?"*

*"I don't think it's about what or how much we ask for; at this stage It's more about preparing to be content with what we receive."*

*"I feel sad that my giving list is much smaller because I don't have much to give."*

*"Don't worry my boy, that's because you have not yet realised just how much you really have to give to others."*



We know the story of Christmas; all we want are presents and we just can't wait till Christmas morning. Waking long before daybreak and trying to be quiet, though inside we are ready to burst. Is it all that I asked for, as the wrapping paper is discarded in seconds?

Do we imagine we have everything wrapped up? That all is ready and in place – a common greeting at this time of year is *"Are you all ready for Christmas then?"*

Jesus, the perfect gift cannot be wrapped, though we need to unpack the full meaning of his coming – be prepared, for this process of unpacking may take many years. This true gift is priceless, yet freely given out of God's intention that we may be one.

We feel there is a need to repay a gift for a gift, even to the point of keeping some gifts with no labels – just in case the Smith family give us a gift! God's pure gift cannot be earned, deserved, or paid back. We should also not presume we already have it!

John 1: 9-13 To become children of God.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Prayer

Father God, thank you for sending your Son Jesus, the Christ. So that we may begin to unwrap the mystery of your love, bringing to all who receive – light and new life. A gift that comes to life in living and giving to others. Amen.



## A Starry Night

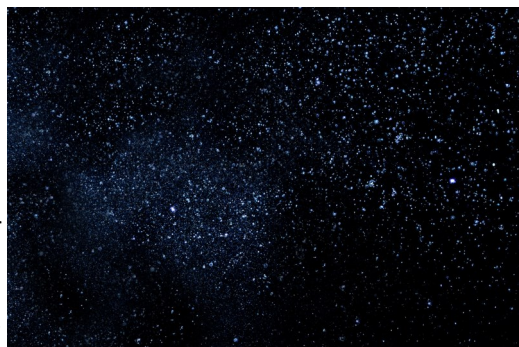
December 15<sup>th</sup>

From being a small boy, David was always fascinated by the stars. On a clear night, he would sit with his dad who would tell stories about the constellations and planets, explaining their movement and how we navigate using the stars as a reference point. It was a starry night and David left his bedroom curtains open as his dad began to tuck him in... *"Dad, were the stars over Bethlehem the same as we see here today?"*

*"That's an interesting question for this time of night."*

*"Yes but did Joseph and the shepherds see what we see now."*

*"First off, they were in a different part of our world, so looking from a different angle. The stars were the same but in slightly different positions. Also, over time, the whole universe of stars and planets are moving in relation to us. Then there was a new star, a comet that the wise men knew about and followed – it was moving in a different direction to the stars."*



How we see things depends very much on where we are standing, our point of view and our learned beliefs which are based on our experiences. We believe that God made all things visible and invisible. Jesus Christ was with God in the beginning and flung stars into space, he set them in motion.

If we are to see things from the right perspective, we should look from God's point of view and follow his lead. The nature of the star of Bethlehem gives rise to several theories, was it a comet, a double star, or a heavenly light? This star was moving contrary to the rest of the stars and as a result more noticeable. It had been expected by those who studied astronomy and they believed the significance was to announce the arrival of a king. If we don't look for the unexpected, we will miss it. If we are not in the right place, we will miss it too. Be open to noticing God moving in our lives and the lives of others. Begin to feel the prompting of that movement and go with it. Find like-minded believers and share your discoveries.

Matthew 2:9-11 The Magi visit the Messiah.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Prayer

Heavenly Father creator of all things, may we notice the presence of your kingdom here on earth. Enable us to follow the leading of your Son, Jesus, the Christ.

Create in us a clean heart oh Lord and renew a right spirit within us, that we are in that place you want us to be, in full sight of you Lord. Amen.

## In a Mess

December 16<sup>th</sup>

David's room was rarely tidy with many games on the floor at one time. Losing parts and spending time searching for them could be a full-time pursuit. At school things were different, there were fewer things in David's bag; only the things he needed for that day. Dad was in the shed as David returned from school...  
*"Hi Dad, today we learned about the solar eclipse – Why is your pencil behind your ear?"*

*"Ha, that's so I know where it is. I use it a lot when I am making things, marking out the parts I need to cut."*

*"It's when the moon comes between us and the sun, casting a big shadow over us – when's the next one?"*

*"I'm not sure, we can find out – then it will depend on the weather as to what we might see."*



For Joseph and Mary, life was a mess. Things were not the way they should be by their cultural standards. The order in which things should have happened was messy.

There are orders that we cannot avoid, such as a solar eclipse – it's a constant cycle, an enormous clock constantly ticking.

Our lives are complicated and messy, but we try as best we can within the order of things. Just think how messy it can be to host family and friends for Christmas celebrations. Also, within our thoughts, we know that things could be much better.

Then, God steps into our mess through the incarnation of the Christ child. He offers to clean up our mess and to set us free to walk a clearer path. What will be our response?

Romans 8:1-4

Life Through the Spirit

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Prayer

Father God, you coexist with the Word and the Spirit before all time. Thank you for sending your Word in the form of Jesus, the Christ. You became messy to take away my mess. I pray that each day I am reminded that I am not part of the mess but part of your Spirit. Amen.

## Laid on Straw.

December 17<sup>th</sup>

David had been busy at school creating a nativity scene with cardboard and paint. This was only a small classroom model, but it was missing one particularly important item. David wanted to be the one to provide that part and came rushing home to ask Dad... *"Dad, where will I find some straw?"*

*"I have no idea, son. The fields will be clear at this time of year."*

*"But Dad, I have to find some for the manger, to keep baby Jesus warm and comfy."*

*"Well, straw is used as bedding for animals – if we are quick, we might catch the pet shop before it closes."*

*"Oh great, thanks, Dad!"*



Our idea of the Christ child in a nativity scene can be one of warmth, comfort, and safety. This is far from the truth. Some were expecting the birth of a Messiah and were out to kill him. Yet here he was, laid in a manger which was laid at the feet of the Ox and the Ass.

Straw may be fitting for animals, but not for a newborn baby. The spikes would be so sharp and hard, even though Jesus was wrapped in swathing bands (swaddling clothes), bound fast with his arms by his side and unable to move.

Jesus was born into suffering from the start. The family would not stay long at Bethlehem as an Angel would warn Joseph to flee to safety in Egypt, where it is thought they spent three years. Joseph received another message from an Angel to tell him it was safe to return to Palestine, for Herod was dead. The holy family knew what it was to live the life of a refugee.

Luke 2:10-12

And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I announce to you, glad tidings of great joy, which shall be to all the people; for today, a Saviour has been born to you in David's city, who is Christ the Lord.

And this is the sign to you: you shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Prayer

Father God, creator of all things, through your Son Jesus, the Christ you experienced the fullness of our suffering, becoming weak and vulnerable, bound tightly in swaddling clothes. Through your suffering, death, and resurrection, you released us from our bondage. Your promise is eternal life hereafter and new life now.

May I not bring you straw nor gifts of Frankincense or Myrrh – may I find a way to offer myself to you in the knowledge of your love. Amen.

## Ox and Ass

December 18<sup>th</sup>

David was arranging the crib figures; he had already put the Child Jesus safely to one side, and he could only arrive on Christmas morning. The wise men too, traditionally arrive 6<sup>th</sup> of January – though in David's house, it's more like December 30<sup>th</sup>. The meaning of a story is the most important part, so David asked...

*"Dad, I know Jesus was born in a manger and there were animals there but why an Ox and a Donkey?"*

*"I guess that's just what they had. Jesus came for all of creation and that would include the animals."*

*"The donkey comes in useful when they have to escape to Egypt."*

*"Well yes, good thinking son."*



Perhaps both Ox and Ass were present at the birth of Christ, they are pictured in art forms and carvings dated back many years. The symbolism behind this part of the nativity story is around the understanding of the beasts themselves. The Ox was regarded as a pure animal and the Ass as impure. They symbolised clean and unclean, Jews and Gentiles – and Christ between them.

The Fathers of the Church saw in this a prophesy, which pointed ahead to a new people of God, The Church, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles.

In the whole of the nativity scene, we see symbolism in Light and Darkness, Life and Death, the Shepherd and the Lamb of God, and the Bread of Life laid in a manger. We see the Ox and the Ass, whose eyes were opened at the birth of their Master, laid in a crib. What wonder to behold on this and every night.

Isaiah 1:3

The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, and my people do not understand.

Prayer

Father God creator of all things, you sent your Son to lie between division; to reconcile our differences. May we begin to know that our part in the peace that Christ brings to creation is to live out that peace. Amen.

## On-Demand

December 19<sup>th</sup>

David had been waiting all day for the post to arrive. He was expecting the latest Lemony Snicket book, and his excitement was fit to burst. It was agreed David could have a copy on the day of release, rather than wait for his birthday.

*"Dad, why is the postman late today and not any other day?"*

*"I am sure there is a good reason, but they also say a watched kettle never boils."*

*"But the kettle will boil, I don't think this postman will come at all."*

*"Everything comes to he who waits son."*

*"Oh, Dad!"*



Do we have time, can we wait, will we miss something? Our life is geared around having everything at our fingertips. We are living in a time when everything is on demand; we are in danger of information overload, and we begin to wonder what is real.

Catch-up TV is an obvious example. I suspect we rarely watch live TV and often put the device on hold while dealing with interruptions. It's a luxury to fast forward, rewind and play our entertainment, social media, and Internet knowledge base. How quickly though, this feature becomes adopted into the rest of our lives. We are no longer part of the moment; we often choose to replay an event or conversation as an observer, rather than a full participant.

Christ Jesus entered our world and calls us to be in that moment with him, throughout the whole of our lives. Living in the moment and being fully aware of our presence is extremely special. You recognise those moments when you have experienced something deeply and held your breath... (something beyond description).

John 14:25-27

My peace I give you.

*"These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."*

Prayer

Father God draw us into your peace through the birth of your son Jesus the Christ. May we share in that unique moment, that your peace may dwell within us forevermore. Amen.

## Lost Sheep

December 20<sup>th</sup>

While walking in the country with Dad, David came upon a young sheep that had been separated from the flock. The sheep seemed quite content until David tried to steer it back through the gap in the hedge. David wished he had just left the sheep but knew it would be safer with the flock. Dad stood and laughed...

*“Don’t rush at him David, he has to be gently persuaded to go.”*

*“He just seems to want to go anywhere but where I want him to.”*

*“Let’s try together, you stand to the left and I’ll go to the right. Just little steps now – there he goes. Now let’s put some branches in that gap.”*



Often gentle coaching is most effective in tricky situations. Having a sense of calm, so as not to alarm the sheep. However, sheep are not as stupid as we would believe, stubborn perhaps!

Sheep and lambs are mentioned many times in the bible. They are spoken about as being sacrificial, lost and people of God. These are creatures who have no natural defence system – they need a protector, a Shepherd. Sheep in those days were a large source of income, yet a shepherd was one of the lowest occupations.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd, I know my own and my own know me.” And again, “My sheep follow me because they know my voice.”

Psalm 23

A psalm of David.

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths  
for his name’s sake.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for sending your Son to be our shepherd, to call us into safety and guide us to clean waters. Thank you that the Lamb of God lays down his life in sacrifice for our atonement. Help us Lord, to hear your guiding voice, Amen.



## Accelerating

December 21<sup>st</sup>

David was being introduced to school timetables and homework deadlines. All this would prepare him for secondary school. It was time to take responsibility for what would happen next and move away from everything being done for him. David was beginning to see that we all have parts to play if things are going to run smoothly. David was getting ready for school and buzzing around his bedroom – he shouted downstairs...

*“Dad, have you seen my school bag and maths book?”*

*“It will be where you left it son.”*

*“I’m going to be late and if I don’t have the right books I’ll be in trouble.”*

*“Less haste – more speed, try the dining room, you were in there last night.”*

*“Oh! Why does everything have to be all at once.”*



Time itself seems to pick up speed as we get closer to an event, we think that we will not be ready in time. Christmas is a good example. Cards to send presents to buy, food to prepare – there really is so little time to do all we feel we need to. We create grand expectations and are disappointed with the outcomes. We hear ourselves saying, “Christmas is not what it used to be.”

Resigning ourselves to the fact that we are not going to be ready, alleviates our disappointment on the day. No matter how hard we try to organise things, stuff just keeps getting in the way.

If our hearts and minds are changed through Christ Jesus, we will dwell in right living – where all things lose their perceived need and realistic expectations are fulfilled. Of course, we find this hard due to early life programming around tasks and the need to earn approval. We cannot earn anything from God, but we need to learn that his love is free, and all that comes with it.

### 1 Peter 1:13 A Call to Holy Living

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed.

### Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for your presence here among us. Be our reason to live and the breath within our daily haste. Help us to shift our priorities towards you Lord, knowing that in accepting your love, we will be blessed. Amen.

## Seek & Find

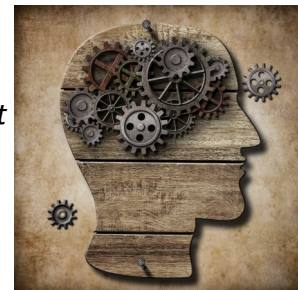
December 22<sup>nd</sup>

David would often spend time with his dad playing cards. One of his favourite games was Memory. All the cards would be spread out and face down, the object was to find matching pairs. Taking turns, each would uncover two cards, then turn them back if they were not a pair. David was sharp, remembering where the cards were...

*"Did you play this when you were small Dad?"*

*"Oh yes, we loved this game, all four of us would play – I was better at it then."*

*"You can still do it now Dad, you just need to concentrate more – I win!"*



It is often said that the best place to hide something is in full view of everybody. We really do not notice the things that are not on our interest level. I couldn't tell you what position in the league our local football team is. We are all so busy with our interests and concerns, that taking on more thoughts and ideas is not on our agenda.

If we are honest, we know it's us that hides the things we don't want to see; if we can't see it, then it doesn't exist.

Yet Christ is the most amazing discovery we will ever make. He fills the emptiness within us bringing all the pieces together from His original design. Jesus said, "If you seek me, you will find me." It is also said, "To seek him with all of your heart and all of your soul."

Acts 17:24-28

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him, reach out for him, and find him, though he is close to all of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

Prayer

Heavenly Father and creator God, you formed us out of nothing, and we chose to fall into darkness. Thank you that through the light of your Son, the full measure of your design for us is revealed. May the Christ Jesus be always in my sight and my heart. Amen.



## Follow Me

December 23<sup>rd</sup>

David had found a new game in the playground – follow the leader. There had been lots of fun as the leaders discovered the limitations of the followers and used this to their advantage. Try as they may, many of the followers could not keep up. Inevitably, some dropped out quickly and some challenged the leaders for their position. Fun games turned to discontent.

*“Dad, who makes the rules?”*

*“That’s a good question son. Lots of people for lots of reasons. Why, what you been doing?”*

*“Oh, I’m not in trouble Dad, just that the game we were playing didn’t seem fair, so it didn’t last long.”*

*“Well, sometimes it’s not the rules that are wrong, just the way they are used. Often it helps to get things clear at the start – especially with games.”*



Often, we will follow someone if we feel they have a clear view of where to go, or we’re prepared to follow someone’s directions. The wise men followed a star which was predicted in their charts. They would have set out long before the Christ child’s birth. The shepherds followed the directions of an angel to meet the one who would redeem all things, fulfil the law, and set a new order.

We have heard the call and been given the directions to follow the Master. We hesitate – reasoning gets in the way, and doubt emerges, what if?

Our rule so often is if I doubt then don’t do it. We think there must be a catch, nothing is for free, and if there is no cost then it can’t be of value. Our rules are so upside down!

John 8:12 Jesus’ Testimony

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

Prayer

Jesus my Lord, you entered my darkness and called me to follow you. Guide me and guard me, teach me your ways. May I meet with you and receive your gift of love, a love that carries forgiveness and healing. Amen

## Holy Spirit

December 24<sup>th</sup>

David was looking out of his bedroom window; he could see by the trees it was a windy day. The leaves at the bottom of the garden were swirling around, creating circles. David was warm and cosy reading his book though he could tell it was cold outside. Although David could not see the wind, he knew it was there by the effect it was having on the leaves and trees. David went downstairs for some fizzy pop and a biscuit... *"Dad, how do the bubbles get into the lemonade?"*

*"The bubbles are carbon dioxide gas, which is made from baking soda and acid (lemon juice)."*

*"But you can't see the bubbles till you open the bottle."*

*"That's right, the pressure of the gas holds the bubbles in the lemon juice until the lid comes off and pressure is released."*

*"Wow, can I have some more please?"*



God in three persons blessed trinity, this is not something we can explain through any of our human reasoning, our purpose is to respond as we see and feel the effects.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of God, moving spiritually in our lives from the beginning of creation to this very day. He is spoken about in the context of fire, all-consuming, a fire that purifies and burns within our hearts. These are descriptive words and not destructive. However, we cannot ignore the sense of power.

We can choose to keep the lid on and go about our daily lives and I am sure all will be well. Or we can become immersed in the effervescent Love of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, the comforter. As it says in (John 14: 16-17) –I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Luke 3: 15-16 John the Baptist prepares the way.

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, fill me with your Love, cleanse me with your fire. Renew a right spirit within me and guide me on my way.

## The Gift

December 25<sup>th</sup>

It was early summer; David's Uncle, Auntie and cousins were staying over for a few days. David had been brought up well and taught to share his belongings (toys and sweets). This day though was not about toys or sweets. Dad had been getting things out of the shed for the children to play with. Soon there was lots of laughter as David's cousins were jumping around Dad and being swung around by him. David called out...

*"Dad, can we play inside?"*

*"No, come and join in, it's fun."*

*"It's okay, I'm going in to read my book now."*

David was struggling with the thought that his dad could give so much attention to his cousins who David didn't really know. David and his dad were close but chasing around the garden was never something he had ever done with his dad.

Concerning all other gifts, we might imagine that the Christmas gift of Christ the Saviour has a finite measure. The fact is, God's Love in Christ is infinite and is not something anyone can take a larger portion of. We can each take what we need. An interesting concept, as everything in our natural world seems to have to fight for supremacy.

The Gift is for everyone; family, friends, and those in our world that we would never associate with, irrespective of what our colour, language or belief may be.

At the heart of the gift is LOVE, which brings forgiveness and healing. The effect of this gift depends on the way we receive it. If we allow God's Love to change our hearts, then we will become who we are created to be.

However, the full meaning of this gift is still being unwrapped.

John 4:10 Samaritan woman at the well

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Prayer

Father God, giver of all life, forgive us our unbelief in your living water. Ignite in our hearts a desire to unwrap more of your gift, change our hearts Lord and renew us from within. May we see with new eyes, our neighbour and ourselves – with Christ Jesus at our centre. Amen.

Thank you for travelling with us. Now it's up to you what happens next!



Front cover image is John, and his dad Tom.

Find out more about the writer: John Pearson

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