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Foreword

Children can't wait for Christmas to come. Their mounting excitement is fuelled by a world bursting with adverts, Christmas music and festive lights. Getting ready for Christmas becomes a whirl of parties, productions and presents. In school, teachers strive to channel children's enthusiasm and maximize the learning opportunities, giving them experiences to remember in the future and tools to use to delve into the mystery of Christmas itself. But when energy is low at the end of a long term, a teacher's spirit can be willing but the creative batteries nearly flat.

Meg Harper's book is a gift. Christmas cannot be kept in neat subject area compartments. It spills out into every area of school life and she has provided some great ideas to help that to happen.

Christmas sums up God's gift to everyone. The tiny baby, born to a young mother away from home in a back room in Bethlehem, was the result of all the 'getting ready' that Mary had done. She had begun with her own 'yes' to God despite her fear, and then faced the challenge of living with mounting uncertainty and journeys she must have wished to avoid, finally accepting the most basic accommodation available for giving birth. In all her getting ready, she must have constantly thought, 'I wonder what is really going to happen to this child.' Yet think how the world has changed because she got ready. It changed beyond her

wildest dreams. Christians believe that God became present in the world in human form: vulnerable, suffering, inclusive and loving. An amazing gift!

The very beginnings of getting ready for Christmas in school start with someone's idea—a possibility, a conversation, a train of thought. 'Do you believe in angels?' is the title of the thought-provoking nativity play in this book—but do you? Could they be sitting in the staff room with you, or in your classroom, throwing out ideas to help your children get ready for Christmas? Watch out, they may have some stunning ideas that will make preparations for Christmas change the world in your school! How do the patterns of mathematics affect how your children view the world? How could a Dutch approach to the tradition of St Nicholas transform priorities at Christmas? What is Christmas really all about?

In all the busyness of the weeks before Christmas—the weeks the church calls Advent (getting ready for the coming of Jesus)—make a little time each day to ask the question in your class, 'What could we think about today to help us get ready for Christmas?' Listen out for the answers; you may be surprised!

Margaret Dean

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from 1985 to 2007*

Introduction

If the build-up to Christmas in school fills you with that sinking ‘Oh no, not again!’ feeling, then my hope is that this book will invigorate you. It’s designed to give you a host of fresh ideas to help you and your pupils meaningfully through the last few weeks of the Christmas term, the period celebrated by Christians as Advent. However, if you want to use the Nativity play, (of which there are two versions, to suit different cast sizes and needs), you’ll probably want to start work considerably earlier.

All the activities are especially suitable for Years 5 and 6, but there is much that could be enjoyed by younger KS2 pupils, being a mix of practical and more literary and academic tasks, all linked to the National

Curriculum. I have included three structured literacy hours, based around a specially written story, ‘The Last Customers’, but, like all the activities in the book, the tasks can be used in ‘pick and mix’ fashion, if you prefer.

I hope that you and your pupils have great fun using the book as well as being encouraged to think about an old story in new ways. I especially hope that you’ll have a ball trying out the drama sections, my own particular passion—and I’d just love to see the play!

Have a very happy Advent and I wish you a very peaceful and joyful Christmas at the end of it, complete with a celebratory piece of Speculaas (see page 18).

Assemblies

These ideas would be suitable for an Advent assembly or possibly as part of a carol or end-of-term service.

The Christmas stocking

Aim

To convey the message that the gift of Jesus is available to anyone who is open to receive him.

Equipment



You will need:

- * A variety of footwear, such as a football sock, a thick woollen sock, an exotic lady's stocking and a child's school sock. Include a purpose-made Christmas stocking. Seal up the end of one of these items.
- * Several small 'presents' which you think would be suitable for the person who might own each item: for example, football boots, a compass, perfume, a cuddly toy and so on.
- * Something to put in each stocking to symbolize Jesus, such as a cut-out cardboard cross or a star.
- * A pair of scissors.

Bible link



A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler. His names will be Wonderful Adviser and Mighty God,

Eternal Father and Prince of Peace. His power will never end; peace will last for ever. He will rule David's kingdom and make it grow strong. He will always rule with honesty and justice. The Lord All-Powerful will make certain that all of this is done.

ISAIAH 9:6-7

What to do

Take each sock or stocking, one by one, and ask the children or audience what sort of person might own it. Accept all the answers, but aim to stress the variety of people who hang up Christmas stockings. Ask for some suggestions for presents that might go in the stockings. Explain that you have a few presents with you, and ask for some volunteers to come up and put the right presents in the right stockings. One volunteer will have the sealed stocking and won't be able to put the present(s) in. Comment on this, jovially if you like. It's no good having a stocking that isn't open: we can't put any presents in!

While you have the volunteers with you, explain that God gave us a very special present at the very first Christmas. This present is for anybody—it doesn't matter what sort of person they are. Ask what that present is. Supply the answer if necessary (Jesus) and give the volunteers one of the crosses or stars to put in each of the stockings. Point out that, just as with the other presents, it's no good having a stocking that isn't open. Cut the sealed stocking open so that the gifts can be put in. Explain that if we want to receive God's present of Jesus, we need to have open hearts and open minds to receive him. Expand on this idea if you like.

You may want to finish with a short Bible reading, in which case Isaiah 9:6-7 would be suitable.

An undeserved gift

Aim

To convey the message that God sent Jesus to show how much he loves us.

Equipment



You will need:

- * A volunteer, preferably of quite a high status with the children, such as a senior teacher, a local community or faith leader, the chair of the governors or the community policeman
- * A small, beautifully wrapped present

Bible link



God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die.

JOHN 3:16

What to do

For this idea, your volunteer must be willing to share a story about an occasion when they did a wrong thing. They must be able to tell the story engagingly—hamming it up is fine! They should also be sorry for what they did.

Explain to your volunteer that the present is for them so long as they agree that they are sorry for their 'crime' when you ask them. Prime them to ask if they can open the present when you produce it.

Introduce your guest and explain that they are going to tell a true story. When the story has been told, say how sorry you are to hear that Mrs Chair of the Governors (or whoever it is) has behaved so badly and that you think perhaps she should be punished. Collect some punishment suggestions from the children or audience: you could have a vote. Then explain that, rather than punishing your volunteer, you are going to give them a present. (Produce the wrapped gift.) You can explain that it is Christmas or that you think they're very brave to tell their story—it doesn't matter what your excuse is.

Your primed volunteer should now ask if they can open the present. Ask them if they are sorry for what they did. They should say 'Yes', so let them open the gift.

Explain that this is an illustration of what we are celebrating at Christmas. Although we have all done wrong things, God loves us very much and sent his Son, Jesus, as a gift for us. It is because of Jesus' life that we have his teaching about how to live our lives, and it is because of his death and resurrection that we have the promise of eternal life with God. (Use language that you feel is appropriate and that you are comfortable with.) We do, however, need to be sorry for the wrong things we've done.

An interview with Joseph

Aim

To help the children understand that the Christmas story doesn't end with the birth of a baby.

Equipment



You will need:

- * Another member of staff or helpful adult, dressed simply as Joseph

Bible link



This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David's family. But before they were married, she learnt that she was going to have a baby by God's Holy Spirit. Joseph was a good man and did not want to embarrass Mary in front of everyone. So he decided to call off the wedding quietly. While Joseph was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, 'Joseph, the baby that Mary will have is from the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and marry her. Then after her baby is born, name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.' So the Lord's promise came true, just as the prophet had said, 'A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel,' which means 'God is with us'. After Joseph woke up, he and Mary were soon married, just as the Lord's angel had told him to do. But they did not sleep together before her baby was born. Then Joseph named him Jesus.

MATTHEW 1:18-25

What to do

Explain to the children or audience that they are very privileged this morning as you have with you, by an extraordinary new technological process (Dr Who, eat your heart out!), all the way from 2000 years ago, Mary's husband, Joseph! Explain that he has agreed to answer a few questions, and suggest a round of applause.

Bring Joseph in and introduce him. Take him through the following questions. It is all right for you, as interviewer, to hold a script. Your volunteer doesn't have to stick strictly to his script. As long as he gets the main points over, that's fine, but make sure he is well prepared.

Question: Joseph, these days a lot of people know about Jesus being born in the stable and being visited by shepherds and wise men, but that's about all they know. Can you tell us what happened next, please?

Answer: Well, yes, that was really only the start of the story. After the wise men left, I was warned by God in a dream that King Herod was after us, so I took Mary and Jesus into hiding in Egypt.

Question: That must have been very frightening.

Answer: Yes, it was—especially when we heard what had happened. King Herod had had all the baby boys in Bethlehem killed! Mary couldn't stop crying when she heard about it, thinking of all those poor families. But we got out just in time, thank the Lord.

Question: Have you any idea why King Herod did such a terrible thing?

Answer: Well, we think he thought that baby Jesus was a rival to his throne. He thought Jesus was going to grow up and become king instead of him.

Question: Where had he got that idea from?

Answer: From his advisers, we think. But he'd got the wrong idea completely.

Question: So Jesus didn't try to be king when he was grown up?

Answer: Of course not. Jesus grew up to be a carpenter, just like me—well, until he was about 30, that is.

Question: Why? What happened then?

Answer: That's when Jesus 'went on the road', if

you like, telling people about God and what they must do to be part of God's kingdom.

Question: God's kingdom? Where's that?

Answer: God's kingdom isn't an actual place. We ourselves are God's kingdom when we live as if God is our king—doing what he wants us to do. In fact, Jesus taught us to pray for God's kingdom in his special prayer: 'Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' I think you call his prayer The Lord's Prayer.

Question: Yes, we do! So did people think that Jesus was king of God's kingdom?

Answer: Some people called him the king of the Jews. They wanted him to lead a rebellion against the Romans, who were in charge of our nation at the time. But that wasn't his intention at all! Jesus knew that God was his heavenly Father—even as a young lad he was aware of that—and many of the Jewish leaders found that so threatening that they wanted to kill him.

Question: Kill him? What? How do you feel about that?

Answer: When they arrested him—it all happened so quickly—it was truly terrible, but there is an amazing ending. You see, God brought Jesus back to life. That's what Easter is all about.

Question: So the story of Jesus doesn't end at Christmas?

Answer: Certainly not. Christmas is just the beginning of the story.

Question: How very exciting! Well, it's been so good to meet you, Joseph, and I guess we must look forward to Easter to find out more about the happy ending.

Answer: That's right. Maybe I'll see you again then. Goodbye.

Question: (*Encourage the children or audience to join in*) Goodbye, Joseph. Thank you!

You could follow up the 'interview' by asking the children how much they know about what happened to Jesus later in his life, and what they know of the Easter story—making sure to finish on a positive note.

A special Christmas box

Aim

To demonstrate that we can all give gifts such as kindness, generosity, peace and love to those who care for us this Christmas—and it will cost us nothing.

Equipment



You will need:

A shoebox, a bag of sweets, a washing-up brush or tea towel, an alarm clock, a small game, a thank you card (you can make a very simple one), glitter, gold stars or merit stickers, wrapping paper, scissors and sticky tape

Bible link



Always use the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to thank God the Father for everything.

EPHESIANS 5:20

What to do

If your school has taken part in creating Christmas boxes for children in deprived parts of the world, remind the pupils of it. If not, explain that people who do take part are asked to wrap a shoebox in Christmas paper and fill it with a mixture of small useful and fun presents. Then the completed boxes are taken to a collecting depot, and a charity called Samaritan's Purse ensures their delivery.

Explain that what you are going to do this morning is slightly different. You're going to fill a box with things that the people who care for us might like to receive on Christmas morning.

Ask for suggestions. When you've heard a few, explain that you think the grown-ups who care for us might like a bit of peace and quiet! They'd probably think it was really nice if no one disturbed them on Christmas morning until, say, 8 o'clock—so you're going to put an alarm clock in the box to remind everyone of that.

Then work through the other items, talking about the significance of each one as you put it in the box. For example, the small game might symbolize friendliness and kindness, no squabbling, and playing together pleasantly. A bag of sweets (share a few out if you think

that would help) might demonstrate the gift of generosity and sharing, with no feelings that 'his or her present is better than mine'. A washing-up brush or tea towel might symbolize helpfulness and show a willingness to share in some of the chores of the day. A thank you card would show our gratitude, reminding us to say 'thank you' and remember those who are not so fortunate. Finally, glitter (sprinkle some on top of everything else) reminds us of joy and happiness and helps us to remember to be cheerful, even if we don't get quite what we wanted.

When you have put everything in the box, say that to make this present extra special, it really needs to be wrapped up in love. Wrap the box in the paper, saying that if we really do give the people who care for us all those things in the box—peace and quiet, friendliness and kindness, generosity, helpfulness and gratitude, all with a sprinkling of joy and happiness—we will have given them a very special present, all wrapped up in love.

Finish by asking who can remember what is in the box and what each item stands for. Give out gold stars as rewards for correct answers and encourage the children to give a present like this one on Christmas Day (making sure they understand that you don't mean it literally).

Art and Design

A class Advent calendar

This craft activity will need to be completed before the beginning of December so that it can be in use from the beginning of Advent.



Curriculum link

This activity will contribute to National Curriculum KS2 Art and Design: Investigating and making art, craft and design, 2a, 2b, Knowledge and understanding, 4b, Breadth of study, 5c.

Equipment



You will need:

- * A minimum of 24 identical small containers, one for every member of your class. These could be matchboxes or film canisters or something similar. Baker Ross (www.bakerross.co.uk) has some lovely star-shaped craft boxes and various other tiny boxes including matchboxes. (If you have fewer than 24 in your class, you could ask especially quick pupils to work with more than one box.)
- * A good supply of collage and other art materials.

What to do

Each child should plan a design for decorating their box and then implement the plan. The completed boxes should be arranged on a tray. Fruit trays from supermarkets would work well and would look very festive if decorated with some tinsel.

To use an ordinary Advent calendar, one window is opened on each day of Advent. With this class Advent calendar, the children take it in turns to open the box they decorated, to reveal a small treat. You can fill the boxes yourself or ask the children to bring in one treat each, which you place randomly in the boxes. Depending on the nature of your class, it may be best to fill each box on the day that it will be opened!

One box should be opened (by its decorator) on each school day during Advent, but on Mondays and Fridays two should be opened. Unless the term finishes on Christmas Eve, the remaining boxes should be opened on the last school day. If you have more boxes than children, the extra boxes can be taken to other members of the school community, such as the head teacher, receptionists, caretakers, dinner supervisors and others. If you have more than 24 children, have some spaces where there are two boxes to open.

Design and Technology

Candles

Candles have long been associated with festivals of light for both practical and symbolic reasons. In modern times, they have been used by Christians to represent both the light of truth that they believe is invested in Christ's teaching and his conquering of the darkness of death and evil through his resurrection.

Curriculum link

Candle craft contributes to National Curriculum KS2 Design and Technology: Developing, planning and communicating ideas, 1a,1c, 2a, and to Art and Design KS2: Investigating and making art, craft and design, 2b.

What to do

You may like briefly to explore the history of candles. The simplest form was the rushlight, made by drawing common rushes (*Juncus effusus*), of about 45 cm in length, through shallow trays of meat fat and then leaving them to dry on shaped logs. If you have access to rushes (best collected in late summer), you could conduct a class experiment to see if you can make rushlights. Lard would be a suitable fat to use.

Although rushlights were very cheap to make, they only burnt for about 15–20 minutes and their manufacture was dependent on a source of rushes and animal fat. Therefore, many people had to buy candles from the local chandler, who made them from tallow, obtained by melting down beef and sheep fat from the local slaughterhouse. Wealthy people and churches used beeswax candles, which were more expensive but burnt with a far clearer flame and smelt much better. In the early 18th century, whale oil began to be used; then, in the 19th century, paraffin became the main ingredient.

Various candle-making kits and resources are available for use with children. It would certainly be possible to make hand-rolled or pressed candles safely in the classroom. Materials are available from Baker Ross (www.bakerross.co.uk) and suppliers of beeswax candles. Dipped candles, which involve deep tubs of hot wax, would be too dangerous, except in small groups under very close supervision.

Decorating candles with glass paints or even special candle pens is another possibility. Small glass tealight holders are also readily available and fun to decorate. In both cases, in accordance with National Curriculum guidance, make sure the children:

- ❖ Plan and draw a 'rough' of their design.
- ❖ Consider how the design may be transferred to the candle or holder. (For example, will freehand suffice? Can it be 'pricked through' by laying the design on the candle and using a pin? Can it be traced?)

Candle making can be seen in action at the Cheshire Workshops (telephone 01829 770401 for opening times and visitor details) and the Cheddar Gorge Cheese Company (telephone 01935 742810 for opening times and visitor details).

Advent candles

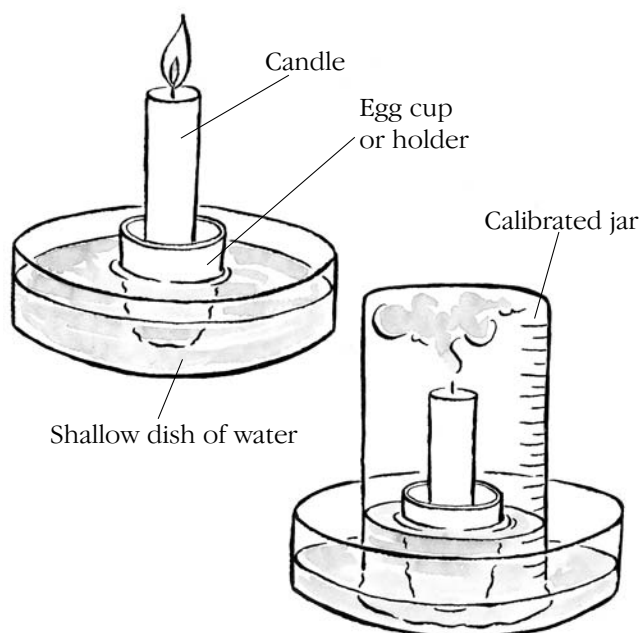
Long candles may be subdivided into 24 sections quite easily with glass paints or candle pens. One section is then burnt on each day of Advent. Commercially produced versions have the dates marked, but they would be very fiddly to reproduce. An alternative is to mark off the candle in different coloured bands.

A large church candle can be used to make an Advent candle for the classroom or for assemblies.

Mayow's experiment

During the 17th and 18th centuries, scientists conducted many experiments to study the different gases that go together to make up air. They discovered that the same gas—called oxygen—is used up when animals breathe and when flames burn. The experiment described below shows that oxygen makes up one-fifth of the air. John Mayow carried out this experiment late in the 17th century, but his findings were ignored at the time. It wasn't until the 1770s that his ideas were taken seriously.

Mayow's experiment



Curriculum link

This activity contributes to National Curriculum KS2 Science Sc1 Scientific Enquiry: Ideas and evidence in science, 1b; Sc2 Investigative skills: Planning, 2a, 2c, Obtaining and presenting evidence, 2f, 2g, Considering evidence and evaluating, 2j, 2k; Sc3 Materials and their properties: Changing materials, 2g.

Equipment



You will need:

- * A large calibrated jar (if necessary, you could mark it yourself with an OHP pen)
- * A candle
- * Matches
- * An egg cup or small tealight holder
- * A shallow dish of water
- * Photocopies of Worksheet 1 on page 52 (one per child)

What to do

Set up the candle, fixed with melted wax to the bottom of the egg cup or holder, in the dish of water. The dish should be about three-quarters full and the candle should be well clear of the water. Light the candle.

Tell the children to draw and label a diagram of the candle, holder and dish on their worksheet. Allow the candle to burn while the children are working. Then ask them what they think will happen if you cover the candle with the large jar. If none of the children can answer, introduce the idea that a flame needs oxygen to burn. Place the jar over the candle carefully, allowing any water bubbles caused by this action to disperse. Let the children draw in the jar and the first water level on their diagrams. Watch as the candle burns. (This would be a good time to talk about the history of the experiment.)

When the flame goes out, ask the children what they think has happened. Note the water level now and let the children mark this second level on their diagrams. It should have risen by about a fifth. Ask the children why they think the water level has risen. (*Because the water is filling the gap left by the oxygen that has been used up.*) Ensure that they have the relevant information to complete the worksheet. Provide whiteboard notes for visual support. If possible, run the experiment again to confirm your result.