

## Introduction

For Christians, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has always been a very special person indeed. In the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel, her relative Elizabeth says, 'God has blessed you more than any other woman' (Luke 1:42, CEV). Christians believe that Jesus was God on earth for us, so that means that Mary is the human mother of God. In many Christian traditions, including the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, Mary is highly regarded and believers ask her help in taking their prayers to God.

It is often thought that Mary's only appearance in the Bible is as part of the nativity narrative in Matthew and Luke's Gospels; however, Mary is also mentioned elsewhere. We meet her as the anxious mum looking for her lost twelve-year-old boy in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-51); as a concerned parent when her son is being mobbed by the crowds because he's so popular (Luke 8:19-21); and finally as the grieving mother at the foot of the cross when she sees her own son die (John 19:25-27).

On this last occasion, Jesus asked his disciple John to look after his mother and treat her as his own. Tradition suggests that John did just that until Mary's own death, which again is regarded in some Christian churches as a very special moment. The last mention of Mary in the Bible is of her being present in the Upper Room after the resurrection, awaiting the promise of the Holy Spirit along with the other believers (Acts 1:14).

The following outline gives some ideas for an RE lesson focusing on Mary the Mother of Jesus.

## Development

1. Most people know about Mary from the Christmas story, told in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel in particular. There we are introduced to a young girl (who may have been only a teenager) promised to Joseph in marriage. It is to this girl that the angel Gabriel comes with the message of the baby she is to have for God.

Christians believe that God stepped into the world as a baby. This is a massive idea that raises all sorts of questions!

Ask the class to imagine how they might go about 'rescuing the world', if they were God.

Suggestions could include: doing a huge global miracle to rid the world of all that is bad in one go; arriving with massive angel armies to sort everything out; sending another flood; speaking in a powerful voice from on high.

Now focus on the story as the Bible records it. Ask the children to list all the very good reasons why choosing to come as a baby to a poor teenager in a tiny village does not seem like a good idea!

Suggestions might include: the huge risk it was; Mary wasn't anybody special; people wouldn't listen; Mary comes only from Galilee, which was the poor part of Israel; Mary wasn't even married;

Mary was far too young.

I wonder what Mary herself thought about all this. Look at some of the words that she says in the story. Are there any clues here that God had not made a mistake after all?

There are of course many famous pieces of art that depict the angel's visit to Mary, called *The Annunciation*. Look up some of these on the Internet and ask the children to decide in groups which they like best and why.

2. Mary is now in great danger. She is pregnant outside of marriage. The Jewish laws of the day condemned such a person to death. So Mary has to go and 'hide' with her relative Elizabeth in the south.

Their meeting is celebrated in art as *The Visitation*. Look up some of the artwork of this scene on the Internet and compare and contrast how the artists have tried to depict the scene. What special symbols, colours and effects have they used?

On this occasion, Mary burst into song. This poem - known from the Latin of its first words as 'The Magnificat' - is still a regular part of traditional worship in churches of many denominations today.

Read this song together in different Bible versions (go to [Biblegateway](http://Biblegateway))

- Mary is amazed by a number of things in her song. What are they?
- What does the song tell us about the character of God?
- What does the song say about the sort of person Mary is?

Listen to this song in various versions. You can also find these on the Internet and they should include a traditional chanted version as well as those from a modern hymn such as 'Tell out my soul'.

Invite the children to work out some words of their own for Mary's song, perhaps in a simple rhyming version as below.

- What musical accompaniment do they suggest?
- What sounds might express surprise, delight and the age-old promises that Mary sings about?

Here is a simple rhyming version you could work with:

With all my heart, to God I sing.  
He's chosen me; He's my everything.  
The world will say that I'm the one  
God wants as mother to his Son.  
God is great and God is good;  
He's given us what he said he would.  
He cares for people, just like me;  
The ones who think they're secondary.



The big names, he has just by-passed  
The rich are not the ones he asked.  
The poor he helps - the forgotten ones;  
Abram said they'd be God's sons.  
With all my heart, to God I sing.  
He's chosen me; he's my everything.

3. It can't have been easy convincing Joseph to marry her after all his. You can read what happened in Matthew 1:18-25. And then, as if it wasn't hard enough already, the Romans decided to hold a census, forcing everyone to go back to the town of their birth. In Joseph's case this meant Bethlehem.

Use some of last year's Christmas cards, including those that have depictions of the traditional Bethlehem story. Talk about which ones the class like and why. Then read the story in Luke 2:1-7.

- Are these cards accurate?
- What is missing or what has been added?
- Does it matter?
- Are the children surprised?
- Why do they think these extra traditional items have been added to the story, such as the donkey, the cow, angels around the manger, young children and so on?

The Bible Christmas story ends by telling us that Mary thought long and hard about all that had happened and that she kept it to herself.

In groups, talk about what Mary might have thought about... the strange visitors? The strange star? The strange presents she received? Do the children think Mary could make sense of all that happened to her in less than a year?

Shortly after this, when she went to the temple with Joseph to give thanks for the new baby (Luke 2:22-35), an old man named Simeon made some very strange predictions about Jesus.

I wonder what Simeon meant. I wonder what Mary made of the strange prediction.

4. Like most mothers, Mary was probably always worrying about what her child was up to and perhaps no more so than when he went missing once in Jerusalem. (Luke 2: 41-52).

Ask the class to become directors now and choose people and props to recreate the Temple scene in the middle of the classroom. Add in some movement and then some dialogue.

Develop the whole exercise further by adding in children behind the actors who say what each person is thinking and then perhaps extend it again by the recreating the scenes before and after this one.

What new things can the class learn about Mary from the story in this way?

5. The story of the miracle at the wedding from John 2 could be acted out by the whole class in a series of freeze-frames. These could be: eating and drinking at the wedding; a worried steward approaches the host about the shortage of wine; Mary talks quietly with Jesus; Jesus talks with the servants near the water jars; the surprised steward react.

Take some digital photographs of each freeze-frame and then create a storyboard adding in speech bubbles and captions to tell this story.

What new things can the class learn about Mary from this incident?

Christians have noted that the only recorded words of Mary outside the nativity stories occur at this wedding and are 'Do whatever Jesus tells you to do' (John 2:5, CEV). Why might Christians find this important?

6. As Jesus spends more and more time away from home, it must have been hard for Mary. Invite the class to compose some letters from Mary to her son, letting him know what is happening back in Nazareth and expressing her concerns for him as she has heard that there are some people plotting to get rid of him.
7. Seeing your own child die must be a parent's worst nightmare. Mary experienced this and indeed it was a very cruel death on a cross.

A famous and much painted or sculptured part of this story is called *The Pieta*, which depicts the moment when Mary holds Jesus in her arms after he has been taken down from the cross.

Search the Internet for some examples of *The Pieta* and use this picture as a stimulus for a reflection on the life of Mary.

Ask the children the following:

- Which part of Mary's story did they like the best?
- Which part of Mary's story did they think was the most important?
- Which part of Mary's story was like something that they, too, have experienced?
- Is there any part of Mary's story that they would like to leave out?
- Finally, if the children were trying to tell the story of Mary to someone who did not know it, using only pictures, symbols and objects, what would they choose?

They could choose for example: a blue headdress; a manger; stars; strange gifts; jars of water/wine; a sword; a cross.

Use these pictures to create a class mosaic of the life of Mary the mother.