



**Taking a Second Look at Christmas**

# OMEGA

Session Two:  
*What can I give him?*

## Omega – Session 2

## What can I give him?

**Aims:** To follow on from last session's general consideration of Christmas preparations to look more closely at our own activities during Advent; review how we spend our time and money; and consider what type and direction of giving seems to resonate best with the first Christmas, and with Jesus' kingdom as a whole.

### Leader's prep

#### In advance:

- **Gather together** everything you need from the list below
- **Read through** the session, the Bible passage, and the Leader's notes provided.

#### Equipment needed:

- Bibles
- Flip chart or large sheet of paper and suitable pens
- Pens and paper for all participants
- Christmas spending facts from session 1
- Several copies of the words to the carol "In the bleak mid winter"
- Enough photocopies of the Individual's follow-up sheet, "The end is just the beginning", so that every participant can take one away at the end of the session.

### 2.1 Re-wrap! (5 mins)

- 2.1.1** Welcome the group and give them two minutes with a partner to jot down a one sentence summary of the key message they took away from the last session.
- 2.1.2** Ask each pair to read their sentence out. Decide as a group what you think is the best one, or create an even better one by merging a couple together, and write this up on a piece of flipchart to display through today's session.

### 2.2 Giving to Jesus (30 mins)

- 2.2.1** Explain that in this session, we will be looking at two different groups of people and their reactions to Jesus' birth. They are the only instances in the Gospels of those who witnessed the events around the Nativity, and how they responded is worth considering!
- 2.2.2** Read Matthew 2:1-12 as a group. Use whichever one of the following methods you prefer:
- a) Read the passage to the group.
  - b) Cast different people in the group to read different parts – narrator; Herod; Magi; Prophet.
- 2.2.3** Divide the group into pairs and invite them to read the passage together and discuss how the Kings must have felt before their journey; on their journey; when they met Jesus; and afterwards.
- 2.2.4** Use the questions below to encourage discussion on the passage and the issues raised. See the Leader's notes at the end of this study, which provide background on the passage and the issues behind these questions:



- a) What would you regard as the key points of this passage?
- b) How do the facts in this account of the journey of the Magi compare with the way it is often depicted in art and on stage?
- c) Read the passage again, this time up to and including v. 16. What does it tell us about the actual journey of the Magi?
- d) Have a closer look at v. 11. Is there one word in particular that stands out?

**2.2.5** Now ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:8-20.

**2.2.6** Use the questions below to encourage discussion on the passage and the issues raised. See the Leader's notes at the end of this study, which provide background on the passage and the issues behind these questions:

- a) The Magi took considerable risks to see the baby Jesus. What risks did the shepherds take?
- b) What were the main similarities, and/or differences, between the reactions of the shepherds and those of the Magi to the news of Jesus' birth?
- c) What lessons might we learn from both groups about our own response to this news?
- d) What did the shepherds do after seeing Jesus? How might that affect our own celebrations on Christmas Day?

**2.2.7** Read out the facts provided in the "Christmas spending in context" box provided below and get people to compare them with the Christmas spending facts in session. Then gather reactions to them:

- a) In light of the experiences of the Magi and the shepherds, what might gift giving to God at Christmas mean for us?
- b) In addition to material gifts, what other kinds of gifts could we give him?

**Christmas spending in context** (*compare with Christmas Spending Facts, session 1*)

- According to various sources, 1 in 10 Christmas gifts may be immediately donated to charity shops. 40% of Christmas toys are broken or thrown away by March.
- According to the CAB, the post-Christmas period sees a significant rise in personal debt and related problems, including depression and divorce
- According to the director of a leading aid charity, we give 2.5% of our total Christmas spending to charitable causes
- As little as 3p may go to charity from the sale of some charity Christmas cards
- In 2013, an extra £1bn was needed by Christmas to provide sufficient emergency aid until just the end of the year for those Syrians displaced by the civil war who were already in UN refugee camps.

**2.3 Giving like a shepherd (10 mins)**

**2.3.1** Read out the Shepherd devotional to the group.

**2.3.2** Afterwards, read out the following questions, giving space between each one for each person to quietly reflect on their personal response.

- a) How does the story make you feel, physically and emotionally?
- b) What does it tell us about the meaning of the Nativity?
- c) What do we learn about the sacrifices made by the shepherds in their quest to see Jesus?
- d) How might this affect what we do this Christmas?

***Shepherd devotional***

I'll never forget that night. It was clear and bright. And freezing! The stars were shining and there was one in particular that Shem – who reckons he's a right expert on the night sky – was saying he'd never seen before. I don't know about anything like that, but it was certainly low and incredibly bright.

But that was nothing compared to the light that burst the sky just moments later. Light that's made any other light I've seen since dull and dark in comparison. Brighter than dawn, or that blinding sensation you get when you come out of a hillside cave you've been sheltering in. And so pure.

It was like a dream. A normal conversation between a few of the lads ribbing each other. Then a flood of light. And then – them.

I was flat on my face before I could even think "what's happening?" It was just so bright. Too bright. Pure. Holy... glorious.

Of course now I realise they were angels, but at the time I was just terrified. This holy beauty was like nothing a poor shepherd had ever seen – come to think of it, it was probably more than even the richest kings from the east would have seen. So to me – it was breathtaking.

What happened next was insane. They spoke. There was a baby born in Bethlehem. *The* baby. The *Christ*? The Christ! The one people like Shem and me had been waiting for all our lives – someone to save us; deliver us; provide for us; lead us – change this hard life into something worth living.

They were singing glory and praise and peace and the sound was incredible but I didn't stay – I couldn't stay. I was running before I even knew it. Desperate to see this baby and to have seen this change that must now come.

I don't know how long it took me to think of it, but I was already out of breath by the time I paused. What could I give? What could I take to honour the child? I had pretty much nothing – I didn't really have anything – just a few sheep that were my everything.

But surely, I didn't need them in the same way now the Christ had come? I could risk giving everything to him couldn't I?

When I got there and saw his mother, there was so much I wanted to say and yet I was no poet or statesman with impressive words. I wanted to welcome the Christ; to say thank you; to pledge allegiance; to promise to follow. But I

just laid down a single lamb at the foot of the manger he was lying in and hoped somehow they'd know how much it was worth to me – and how much that meant he – this baby king – was worth to me.

I don't know if he ever understood how much that sacrifice cost me – though I'd do it again and again. But I like to think perhaps he did because one day, more than thirty years later, I was on a hill in Jerusalem when I heard him say that he was a shepherd, and those who followed him knew him by the sound of his voice.

"Master, I hear you," I wanted to cry out, "and I'm still following".

And I did cry out on that dark day when he offered up his life on another hill. It was then I knew that my sacrifice had been too small, and I wished I'd have brought every sheep I had to honour this King.

## 2.4 Rich as I am (10 mins)

**2.4.1** Distribute the copies of *In the bleak mid winter* that you have brought with you.

**2.4.2** Put the group into twos or threes and ask them to look at the last verse of this famous carol. Ask them to answer the following questions together:

- a) How big a gift might a lamb have been for a shepherd living at the time of Christ?
- b) What might the wise men "doing their part" actually involve?
- c) What do we have that we can give?
- d) What kind of giving from us would match the wise men and the shepherds?
- e) If we really do give him our hearts, what does this mean? Does it mean we don't need to give anything else that we have?

**2.4.3** Bring the group back together to feed back their responses.

**2.4.4** Put them in their pairs once more to write an alternative last verse to the carol starting with the line, "What can I give him, rich as I am?..."

**2.4.5** Close in prayer, perhaps saying the one provided below in unison, and give each person a copy of the Individual Participant's follow-up sheet, *The end is just the beginning* to take away and complete over the coming weeks.

**Eternal God**, you brought the world into being and gave it life. Then you gave it yourself, on the cross of human suffering. Show us a different kind of world, a different cost of living, where the pain will be eased not by the money we spend on ourselves but by the way we spend ourselves for others, and the way we value life. **Amen.**

(Source: Iona Abbey Worship Book, Wild Goose publications [2005], p. 156. Used by kind permission.)

## Leader's notes

Only two of the Gospels make any mention at all of the birth of Christ. The first one, Matthew, does so almost in passing. Matthew does not describe the nativity itself in any detail. Interestingly, for a Gospel writer whose target audience was probably predominantly Jewish, he concentrates instead on the fact that the Star of Bethlehem manifested itself to the Gentiles as well.

There are many theories about the Magi. They may not have been kings at all, but rather astrologers. To such people, the appearance of the Star of Bethlehem would have had even more significance than to other contemporary observers. It is also quite possible that they led a nomadic existence, and were travelling in a caravan or convoy. This could mean that, contrary to the usual depictions, there were considerably more than three of them

– a likely safety precaution when entering foreign territory – and that they were actually travelling with their accumulated wealth as a means of trading and of securing their own supplies.

It is uncertain how long the journey of the Magi actually took. Our only clue is in Matthew 2:16, when Herod sent his soldiers to kill all male babies under the age of two “based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance”. At any rate, it does seem likely that the journey took a long time: denoted by the Church’s observation of the Feast of the Epiphany, a symbolic 12 days after the actual birth of Christ is celebrated. The main purpose of Epiphany, notably that of celebrating the manifestation of Jesus to Gentiles, is often overlooked. Moreover, it is almost never celebrated as the culmination of the Christmas season, but rather as its conclusion. In view of our belief that Jesus came to bring Good News to the whole world, perhaps it might be appropriate to give Epiphany more prominence in our churches?

It is also evident that the gifts of the Magi to Jesus were extremely valuable both in real and in symbolic terms. Gold was symbolic of royalty, incense of priesthood, and myrrh was a costly spice used for the preparation for burial of the bodies of those whose status was thought to merit it (most bodies would have been buried with little or no preparation whatsoever).

Most notable in this passage from our point of view is verse 11, in which it is clear that the Magi – whoever and however many they were – were presenting those gifts to God incarnate, not to each other. They were moreover gifts that would have made substantial inroads into their life savings.

By contrast with Matthew’s account, Luke gives a much more detailed description of the events leading up to the nativity. The shepherds in Luke 2, coming as they evidently did from somewhere in the vicinity of Bethlehem, were – unlike the Magi – almost certainly Jews. And unlike the Magi, they did not specifically see a star, but rather “an angel of the Lord”, around whom shone “the glory of the Lord” (Luke 2:9). But this light had a no less dramatic effect on the shepherds than the star had on the Magi. It caused them to drop everything and rush to see the reason for it.

The fact that the shepherds were out in their fields at night may possibly indicate that Jesus’ birth occurred at some point during the warmer months of the year, rather than in mid-winter. There is some astronomical evidence that the Star of Bethlehem may have appeared during those months. The selection of 25<sup>th</sup> December as the date on which the western Church celebrates Christmas originated from the desire of the early Church fathers to supplant two pagan festivals, the Roman Saturnalia and the druidical winter solstice, with a Christian one. It has little to do with historical accuracy. Thus from its earliest times, Christmas evolved around a tradition of exchanging gifts with others: a tradition directly attributable to the Saturnalia and certainly not one that originated in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth. While the Magi brought gifts to Bethlehem, we have already noted that they presented them to the baby, and not to each other. And there is no scriptural evidence that the shepherds brought any gifts at all. If, as in the story here, one of the shepherds did bring a lamb, that would have been a huge sacrifice from someone who lived, literally, “on the edge”, the margins of society, and whose only wealth was in the form of a few sheep.

However, even if there is no evidence that the shepherds brought any gifts, there is no doubt that they risked their entire livelihoods in going to Bethlehem that first Christmas night. Typically, their job was to guard their sheep against both human thieves and animal predators. According to Luke, they dropped everything in their haste to reach their destination. There is no indication that they appointed one of their number to stay behind and watch their collective flocks. They all went together. Their potential sacrifice to see their infant Lord was far greater than this account appears to indicate.

Nor was that the end of their story. After they had seen Jesus, they did not go directly home to their own families and their own dinners. They “told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child” (v. 17) and then went back, “glorifying and praising God” (v. 20). How does this compare with the way we spend Christmas Day after we ourselves have worshipped at the manger?