



Creative ideas for opening up The Nativity in KS3 RE

Setting the scene

The BBC film, *The Nativity*, offers a rich resource for classroom RE. The following lesson ideas take three elements of the film as a basis for three fresh perspectives on the familiar nativity story. Each short unit offers an introductory activity, setting the scene, followed by relevant clips from *The Nativity*, and activities to explore the beliefs and their implications for Christians today. Each short unit has some achievement outcomes set at levels 4 and 5 of the 8 level scale, used by many RE syllabuses in England.

Unit 1: 'Please don't hate me'

Introduction:

The film offers a stark contrast between the living characters of the narrative and the sanitised and often twee depictions found on Christmas cards or in nativity scenes. With a screenplay by Tony Jordan, famed for the grim realism of *Eastenders*, the pace of *Ashes to Ashes*, and the slick sophistication of *Hustle*, it is not surprising that this re-telling of the nativity has a drive and energy that lifts it above the cuteness of a playgroup Christmas play. With an authentic setting, this film presents an imagined view of the human reality behind the simple story lines of Matthew and Luke. These activities are intended to encourage pupils to go behind the Christmas card and consider what the reality might have been, making links with the kinds of moral issues and dilemmas that would not look out of place in an *Eastenders* script.

1. Getting started

- a. Give out A3 paper to groups of pupils. Ask them to do a quick sketch of a nativity scene and label it with the people, objects and events linked with the story. Use this as a revision exercise for some, and a baseline exercise to see what your pupils know and understand already.
- b. Give out sections of the Gospel accounts – six sections, one per group as appropriate. Ask them to read the account out loud to each other.
 - Matthew 1: 18–25 Matthew's account includes the angel appearing to reassure Joseph that he should marry the pregnant Mary.
 - Matthew 2: 1–12 This account skips the birth and gives the visit of the magi/kings, and Herod's interest in their journey. Note the lack of detail as to how many magi.
 - Matthew 2: 13–23 This account includes Herod's violent response to the escape of Jesus. Note the timescale suggests that the wise men did not visit the birthplace at the same time as the shepherds. If Herod killed all boys under the age of two, it suggests that Jesus was already approaching that age when the wise men visited.
 - Luke 1: 26–38 This includes the 'Annunciation' – where Gabriel announces the imminent birth of the Messiah to Mary.
 - Luke 2: 39–56 This describes Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant.
 - Luke 2: 1–20 This gives some of the most familiar parts of the nativity story – the census, the journey to Bethlehem (note: no donkey!); the shepherds and angels.



- c. As you read out the key features from their A3 labelled sketches, get pupils to say if they have any of the key features in their Gospel accounts. Identify any features they have that are not in the Gospel accounts (e.g. donkeys; magi actually in the birthplace), and any parts of the Gospel accounts that are not in their sketches (e.g. Herod killing the infants).

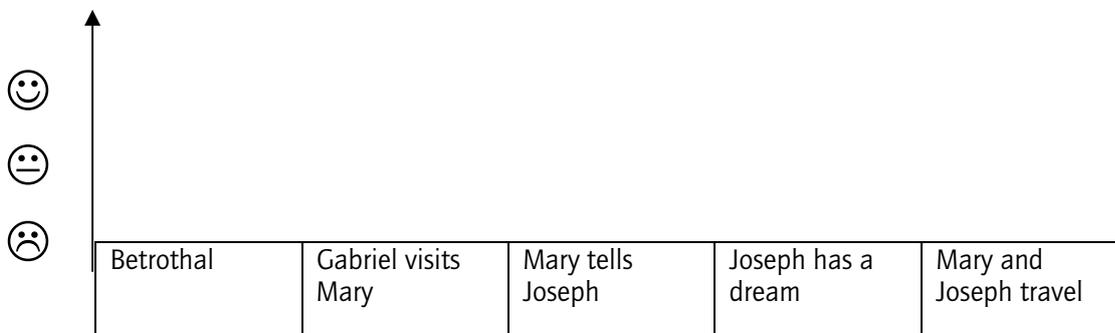
2. Nativity

- a. Show the very opening clip of Episode 1: 00'00 'to 02'00 ', where Mary says 'Please don't hate me.'

Ask pupils to work in groups to come up with three reasons why Mary would say this.

Talk about whether this is unexpected in the nativity story and why.

- b. Play three short clips: Note that these are pretty direct about the views of Mary as an adulteress – she is called 'whore' several times. You will need to decide if they are appropriate for your pupils.
- Episode 1: 11'45" – 13'06" After their betrothal, Mary and Joseph promise faithfulness
 - Episode 2: 26'45"–27'54" Mary faces Joseph with the evidence of her pregnancy
 - Episode 3: 08'17"–10'00" Mary and her mother are attacked in the market place
- c. Explore these clips. Talk about the emotional turmoil for all of the characters in the story.
- d. Use a feelings graph 'to go a little deeper. Ask pupils to mark the appropriate point on the graph for Mary and Joseph, using a different colour for each. Choose two emotional words to add to each point that you mark, representing the feelings of Mary and Joseph at each point. You might ask them to expand this beneath the graph with a short explanation of the highest point and the lowest point for Mary and for Joseph.



3. Implications

- a. ***The Nativity*** is written by Tony Jordan, famed for his writing on *Eastenders*. Ask pupils to compare the story line from the clips they have watched with a typical week of *Eastenders*. Ask them to identify three similarities and two differences.
- b. Go back to the pupils' A3 sketches of the nativity. Get them to highlight and annotate in a different colour, the elements of the story that are suitable for a children's nativity and the elements that are much more gritty and dark. Some of these elements may not be suited to a children's nativity play, but they do show that the story contains contemporary themes, such as love, betrayal, suspicion, anger, prejudice, disappointment etc. Ask pupils to identify these contemporary themes.



- c. Ask pupils to consider what is lost when the nativity story is sanitised for sweet Christmas card scenes. They could complete some of the following sentence starters:
- The traditional nativity scene is helpful for Christians because...
 - The traditional nativity misses out...
 - When you realise the range of emotions behind the Gospel account it makes you... because...
 - Removing the gritty, controversial elements from the story means that...
 - The Gospel accounts might change someone's response to the traditional nativity because...
 - Some Christians might say that the Gospel accounts are relevant to today because...
 - They might argue that it is important to grasp the harsh reality of the Gospel accounts because...
 - Some might disagree because...
 - My response to this part of the Gospel story is...
- d. A Christian understanding of human nature includes the idea that humans are fallen 'and sinful. That is, whilst they are capable of greatness and goodness, being made in the image of God, they have a fatal tendency to do what they want rather than loving others and pleasing God. Taking the scenes from *The Nativity* film, ask pupils to describe how things *should* be and how they *actually are* in the story (e.g. should be understanding between characters; there is actually mistrust). Note that for Christians, the bigger story of the Bible is about how God is acting to repair the damage done by sin.
- e. Using the 'real story' behind the words in the Gospels, what might a Christmas card look like? Ask pupils to design a suitably uncensored expression of the Christmas story.

Outcomes

Level 4

- I can explain the differences between the Gospel accounts of the nativity and the way it is depicted in Christmas cards.
- I can refer to the Gospel accounts to show that I understand how Christmas is an important celebration for Christians and my own response to it.

Level 5

- I can suggest two reasons why the nativity story might have an impact on Christians today and on people without a religious faith.
- I can express my own views about the issues raised by the nativity story and how they reflect what happens in the world today.



Unit 2: The Father would intervene

Introduction:

For many Christians, belief in Jesus as God in the flesh is central to their faith. It is a bold claim and the reactions to it range from total assent through bafflement to outright hostility. The film offers some explanations for the birth of Jesus, linking the belief with the wider story of the Christian Bible.

These activities begin to get pupils to consider the question 'Was Jesus God on earth?'; a central question for Christians and one that is often explored in RE classrooms. This will not give you all that you need for addressing this question, but it offers some resources to help.

1. Getting started

- a. Set up a 'human bar chart' activity. Put numbers 1–6 on A4 paper and place them in a straight line on the floor or wall of the classroom. Give pupils the following five statements on a sheet of paper and ask them to circle the number closest to their view. When they have responded to all five statements, ask them to fold over the page twice and pass it around the group so that they have exchanged papers at least five times. Read out each statement. The pupils should line up in front of the number circled for that statement on the sheet they are holding. Ask pupils why someone might have circled the number they are standing by. Why might someone agree or disagree with the statement? Since the number on their sheet does not necessarily reflect their own views, there is a level of anonymity about their own views and also a need for empathy to try and understand someone else's views.

Totally agree			Totally disagree		
Jesus was no one special – just a character in a fictional story.					
1	2	3	4	5	6
Jesus was a great moral teacher who set a good example for people to follow.					
1	2	3	4	5	6
Jesus was a man who believed he was the Messiah. He convinced a number of followers who were amazed by his actions and claimed he had risen from death.					
1	2	3	4	5	6
Jesus was a prophet of God, sent to bring people back to the right path through his words and his actions.					
1	2	3	4	5	6
Jesus was the incarnation of God – God in human form. He lived, died and rose again to heal the split between God and humans, between heaven and earth, caused by sin and disobedience.					
1	2	3	4	5	6

- b. Make a note of any key comments made in this discussion. Are there any other viewpoints you could hold about Jesus?

2. Investigation

- a. Set the pupils the question, 'Was Jesus God on earth?' Tell them that you are going to give them five pieces of evidence for them to examine in small groups. They are going to try and see if they can understand why Christians might say yes to the question. Of course, Christians do not necessarily approach this question as a statement to be proven – they believe for many reasons. So, even if pupils do not find the evidence compelling, that does not mean that Christians are unintelligent and haven't looked at the evidence properly.



- b. Five pieces of evidence. For each one:
- Interpret and explain what the evidence is saying. Are there different ways of understanding this evidence?
 - Make links with the other pieces of evidence – are there any similarities and differences?
- I. The Bible has a big story: here is one view of that big story that fits in with the views of many Christians. A good world is created by a good God, with humans in harmony with each other and with God. This world is disrupted through humans turning their back on God. God works with a chosen people to try and repair the disruption – he wants the chosen people to draw all people back to a relationship with him. But the people of Israel also choose to turn their back on God, and they are sent into exile in Babylon. Even after their return to Jerusalem, for hundreds of years it seems as if God has abandoned them. Some hope for a rescuer from God – a Messiah. And some claim to have met him – Jesus of Nazareth, who draws people back to God through his life, teaching, death and resurrection – healing the split between God and humanity, and opening a way to God for those who wish to take it.
 - II. Watch the clip from *The Nativity*. Episode 2: 20'51" – 23'12" Melchior explains to Balthazar about the reason why God might intervene again in human history – as a Father might show concern when a child goes astray.
 - III. Watch a second clip from *The Nativity*. Episode 3: 16'38"–20'03" Melchior goes a stage further and suggests that the coming Messiah might be more than a man – but God in human form.
 - IV. John 3: 16 A famous verse used by many Christians to sum up the 'good news', the Gospel: *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.* (CEV)
 - V. Philippians 2: 5–11 An early Christian hymn, showing their understanding of who Jesus was and what he had done:
 - 6 Christ was truly God.
But he did not try to remain
equal with God.
 - 7 Instead he gave up everything
and became a slave,
when he became
like one of us.
 - 8 Christ was humble.
He obeyed God and even died
on a cross.
 - 9 Then God gave Christ
the highest place
and honoured his name
above all others.
 - 10 So at the name of Jesus
everyone will bow down,
those in heaven, on earth,
and under the earth.



11 And to the glory
of God the Father
everyone will openly agree,
'Jesus Christ is Lord!'
(CEV)

3. Evaluation

- a. Ask pupils to work in pairs. Give them the five statements from Activity 1 (human bar chart) and ask them to come up with three good reasons why people might believe each of these statements. They should make use of the evidence explored above where possible.
- b. Ask pupils to choose three of the statements that would have most impact on how someone lived his or her everyday life. What impact would they have and why?
- c. Individually, pupils should explain what difference it would make in their own lives if these statements were true. For each one, they should write between 50 and 100 words explaining how such a belief might have an impact on their lives and why.

Outcomes:

Level 4

I can describe two different responses to the idea that Jesus is God and make links between them.

I can refer to Christian ideas and beliefs in giving my own response to the question of whether Jesus is God.

Level 5

I can explain three different ways in which people (including Christians) view Jesus, and how these beliefs might have an impact on how people live.

I can express my own views about the possible impact on my own life if some of these views of Jesus are true.



Unit 3: Expectations of the Messiah

Introduction:

The Jewish people had been expecting a Messiah from God for hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. Their expectations had changed over the intervening years until there was a variety of ideas as to what the Messiah would be like. This film shows something of the expectations, exemplified through the interest of the Magi but especially through the very human story of Thomas, the shepherd. Facing the difficulties of making a living in the face of the oppressive taxes levied by Herod and the Romans, Thomas is moved to strike out against the occupying forces. It seems a futile gesture, but it shows why many people – some of whom were Zealots – wished for a Messiah to come and bring about justice, which included defeating the Romans.

This short unit presents some activities exploring the different groups around at the time of Jesus, not all depicted in the film, and some ideas about why a small group identified Jesus as the Messiah, though not the one they were expecting.

1. Great Expectations

- a. Give pupils the following list of features of the expected Messiah. Get them to read Matthew 1:18–2:12 and highlight any evidence that Jesus meets the expectations of the Messiah:
The Jewish people had varied expectations of the Messiah, including that the Messiah would be:
 - A special person sent by God, a prophet like Elijah
 - Someone to make Israel a great nation and bring peace to the world
 - A king for Israel to bring the country back to God
 - A military leader to fight and defeat the enemy – the Romans
 - Someone descended from King David
 - A great leader like David
 - Someone born in Bethlehem
- b. Ask pupils to consider why the birth of Jesus was so low-key. What might they have expected at the birth of the chosen one from God?

2. Religion and politics

- a. Read the information below on some of the different groups around when Jesus was born, and their expectations of the Messiah.

Pharisees

A group of devout Jews who worked hard to keep the religion alive among ordinary people because of their enthusiasm for obeying God. Their name means the 'separated ones' – kept apart from those who disobeyed God's rules. They expected the Messiah to be a descendant of King David, and to set Israel free from foreign rulers, setting up the Kingdom of God.

Sadducees

These were an elite group who ran the Temple in Jerusalem and made up the wealthy, aristocratic members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council. They did not believe in the Messiah, and are accused of compromise by some, as they seem to have wanted to maintain their power base, and so kept in with the Romans.



Essenes

This small group lived near the Dead Sea, away from everybody else, so that they could concentrate on living pure, holy lives, sharing their property, and keeping God's Law strictly. For example, they were against the idea of laughing too much. They prepared themselves for the coming of the Messiah in the wilderness.

Zealots

This group hated the Romans. They wanted freedom from Roman rule and were prepared to fight for it, often carrying out terrorist attacks against the Romans and starting several uprisings against Roman rule. These uprisings were crushed by the Romans. The Zealots expected the Messiah to be a great warrior who would overthrow the Romans.

- b. Ask pupils to imagine they are Roman secret agents. The Emperor wants to get inside information about the religious groups in Israel. They have to infiltrate each group and work out what they're like and how they feel about Rome. The Emperor is looking for people who might support him, or who might be dangerous for Rome. Ask pupils to produce their short report of up to 40 words for each (or imagine that your spy has to tweet 'his/her report via Twitter, and so only has 140 characters per group).
- c. Watch some short clips from *The Nativity*, showing the story of Thomas driven to hostile action against a Roman. Ask pupils to consider
 - what is pushing him to his brave but doomed action
 - which group would he be most drawn to and why
 - what were his hopes for the Messiah.
 - Episode 1: 18'22" – 22'35" Introducing Thomas, his ill wife, and his inability to pay his taxes.
 - Episode 2: 05'56" – 08'03" Thomas cannot pay taxes, which are taken in livestock.
 - Episode 3: 07'10" – 08'16" Thomas is more desperate and doubts the likelihood of God stepping to help him or anyone else
 - Episode 4: 08'20" – 09'31" Thomas attacks a soldier for the tax money
- d. Ask pupils to give a personal response to the story of Thomas presented here. How do they react to his plight? What is their view of his reaction to injustice? What similarities and differences do they identify between his time and our own? What should be done about injustice today?

3. Hopes and fears

- a. The hope of the Jewish people was for God to step in and sort things out. Many Christians believe that God did this in Jesus, although the enemy he defeated was sin rather than the Romans. They say Jesus opened up a way to restore humanity to a right relationship with God – this has started through Jesus, but it is not fully brought to fulfilment.

Many religious traditions have stories about someone sent by God to help humanity. Ask pupils to reflect on the challenges faced by human beings today, from personal to economic to social to environmental challenges. Get them to argue a case for and against the need for a divine figure to rescue humanity – what would this person need to do and what would they need to be like?

- b. Many people believe there is no god, so humanity has to rely on its own resources to sort things out. Ask pupils to list 10 suggested ways in which humans can overcome the challenges we face.



- c. Ask pupils to reflect on their own hopes and fears for the future. They could design a piece of art with the title: Hope for the World, and be entered into the Spirited Arts competition 2012.
<http://www.natre.org.uk/spiritedarts/2012.php>

Outcomes:

Level 4

I can describe the differences between the Messiah who was expected and the Messiah Jesus seemed to be.

I can make links between the experiences of ordinary people at the time of Jesus and the experience of people in the world today, giving my own response to examples of injustice.

Level 5

I can explain the impact of the different Jewish expectations of a Messiah on some of the religious and political groups in Jesus' time.

I can relate the idea of people hoping for someone to come and sort out the world to my own hopes and fears.

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About Stephen Pett

Stephen taught RE for 14 years before joining RE Today as an adviser. He writes for and edits RE Today's secondary curriculum series, *Questions in RE*, and works with primary and secondary teachers in the UK and overseas. His book of creative ways of teaching the Bible – *The Bible: The Big Story* – was published in 2011.