



THE YEAR OF THE WORD
ADVENT FAITH SHARING COURSE

2022



INTRODUCTION

Hebrews 1:1-2 (ESV) - The Supremacy of God's Son

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

Advent is a time of preparation. We are preparing for the arrival of the baby Jesus on Christmas morning – which the prophets had foretold and now becomes reality. Our quotation from the Letter to the Hebrews highlights how God speaks throughout history but also in the present tense, and this is at the heart of our *Year of the Word* initiative.

From the beginning of time, God speaks to his people:

God speaks through signs

God speaks through prophets

God speaks through witnesses

God speaks into our lives.

These four aspects of *the God who Speaks*, frame our Advent resource.

In Exodus, we find Israel being asked to make a tent so that God could dwell among his people (Exodus 25:8-9). In the Gospels, Mary becomes the new Ark of the new Covenant as Jesus dwells within her womb (Matthew 1:18-25). The incarnation opens up the whole idea of God coming *into the world* and *dwelling among us*. At his recent canonisation, we were reminded of what John Henry Newman said about how he sought to hear the voice of God and climbed the topmost steeple, but God declared: "Go down again – I dwell among the people."

As Catholics, we believe that Jesus is really present when we gather during the Mass – and when we gather together in twos or threes in his name (Matthew 18:20). In small faith sharing groups, we listen to him speaking to us in the Scriptures and we reflect on what he is saying in the light of the circumstances of our lives. We notice the times where we have encountered God—often in unexpected places and at unexpected times. And then, we respond by acting on what we have heard.

So this Advent, let us focus on preparing ourselves to welcome Christ when we encounter him in our daily lives, in the sacraments and in the people we meet.

Each evening, may we reflect on when God spoke to us that day and give thanks for recalling these precious moments.

Use this resource and our ***Matthew: Day by Day Guide*** to help you reflect more deeply this December. May God speak to you this Advent, and may his Son, Jesus Christ dwell within your hearts this day and every day.

+Peter

Peter M. Brignall, Bishop of Wrexham

FAITH SHARING GUIDELINES (for a 90 minute session)

Leaders

Each group has its own leader who facilitates the process by:

- a) creating a prayerful, reflective environment with an open Bible and candle.
- b) guiding the group through the faith sharing process.
- c) keeping to the times recommended for each part of the session.
- d) gently including more hesitant members where appropriate - ensuring every participant has the opportunity to talk if they want to.
- e) agreeing with the group on the confidential nature of the group conversations and respecting differences of opinion throughout each session.

Beginning (about 30 minutes)

Gathering: In the first session, begin with introductions and, in subsequent sessions, ask one another how you are, what has happened since you last met, and if someone is new to the group, take some time for introduction.

Praying: After the Gathering begin each session with the opening prayer.

Listening to experience: We reflect on our experience of life from the week just gone, of our experience of faith during that time.

Middle (about 45 minutes)

Listening to the Word: This is when we listen to God speaking to us in the Scriptures and where we reflect on what we have heard. This will give us the opportunity to see how our human experience is connected to what God has to say, to each of us and as a group.

One group member is invited to read the text aloud to the group first. Then the text is read again in silence more slowly by each group member.

End (about 15 minutes)

Responding with a call to action: Finally, having reflected and shared, we pray for God's grace to know how to respond.

Images: use the paintings and photos throughout to help your prayer and reflection. Invite God to speak to you through both text and image.

Praying: End each session with the Advent Collect or your own prayers.

Bibles and texts

People are invited to bring their own Bibles/Bible apps and to enjoy sharing different translations when reading the suggested Scriptural passages. We're using English Standard Version texts from the Sunday Gospel Readings of Year A.

Use our **Matthew: Day by Day guide** to help you go deeper with this Gospel.

Scripture Prayers © 1988 International Commission on English in the Liturgy. All rights reserved.

Advent video of Cardinal Vincent Nichols

For the last week you might like to watch the short video of our Cardinal reflecting on a Nativity painting from the National Gallery from our godwhospeaks.uk homepage.

CHRISTMAS PRAYER and NATIVITY PAINTING

We praise you, gracious God,
for the glad tidings of peace,
the good news of salvation:
your Word became flesh,
and we have seen his glory.

Let the radiance of that glory
enlighten the lives
of those who celebrate his birth.

Reveal to all the world
the light no darkness can extinguish,
our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
in the splendour of eternal light,
God for ever and ever.

(A Prayer for Christmas Day).



Nativity - Lorenzo Monaco.1414 www.wikiart.org/en/lorenzo-monaco/nativity-1414

WEEK ONE: God speaks through signs

Meeting God at an hour we do not expect (cf. Matthew 24: 44; 25:13).

Gather

As this is the first session in this Advent faith sharing series, take the time to introduce yourselves and, perhaps say something about why you said yes to participating in this small group.

Opening prayer

My God, you alone can enlighten my darkness.

I don't know if you will;

*but, knowing that you can and that it is my desire
are reason enough for me to ask.*

*If you should grant my desire, I promise with your grace
to embrace the light of truth if I ever come to be certain of it.*

In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

(Adapted from the prayer for the Light of Truth by St John Henry Newman).

Listen to experience

Take a few minutes to read the following silently or aloud.

"I sought to hear the voice of God and climbed the topmost steeple, but God declared: "Go down again - I dwell among the people." *St John Henry Newman.*

God came down to earth from heaven. This is the core message of the seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. God prefers to live with us in spite of the mess of our world, our anger, our violence, and our lack of love for one another. St John Henry Newman reminds us in his Advent meditation written in 1891 that Christ came in the flesh and is invisibly present to us now.

"When Moses came down from the Mount, and the people were dazzled at his countenance, he put a veil over it. That veil is so far removed in the Gospel that we are in a state of preparation for its being altogether removed. We are with Moses in the Mount so far, that we have a sight of God; we are with the people beneath it so far, that Christ does not visibly show Himself. He has put a veil on, and He sits among us silently and secretly. When we approach Him, we know it only by faith; and when He manifests Himself to us, it is without our being able to realise to ourselves that manifestation... Again, when we come to church, then let us say: – The day will be when I shall see Christ surrounded by His Holy Angels."

- What signs of God speak to you in this reflection?
- Where do you hope to find God this week?

Listen to the Gospel of Matthew 24:37-44 (ESV)

³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Read the Gospel again more slowly, asking God to speak to you through this text.

Reflect

Take some time to reflect on the following questions; then, share your reflections.

- Which words or phrases stand out for you from Matthew's Gospel?
- How can you be prepared for Jesus' arrival when we are told that it will be at an hour we do not expect?

Respond

This time of waiting celebrates a historical memory and repeats this memory in our lives and in the service of others.

- Who are you being invited to serve this Advent?
- How are you preparing for the Christ-child to come this Advent?

Closing Prayer

The leader (or another group member) then leads the group in the closing prayer which may include ideas from the earlier discussions:

God of majesty and power,
amid the clamour of our violence
your Word of truth resounds;
upon a world made dark by sin
the Sun of Justice casts his dawning rays.

Keep your household watchful
and aware of the hour in which we live.
Hasten the advent of that day
when the sounds of war will be for ever stilled,
the darkness of evil scattered,
and all your children gathered into one.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain,
whose days draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.
God forever and ever.
Amen.

(Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent, Year A)

WEEK ONE - IMAGES FOR REFLECTION

God speaks through signs

Meeting God at an hour we do not expect (cf. Matthew 24: 44; 25:13).



The Hand of God, Rodin, 1896-1907. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Deborah Frances Sawyer,
San Leonardo in Passina, Italy.

WEEK TWO: God speaks through prophets

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! (cf. Matthew 3: 2).

Gather

Welcome newcomers into the group and ask them to introduce themselves briefly.

Opening prayer

*O Lord, support us all the day long,
until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over, and our work is done.
Then in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging
and a holy rest, and peace at the last.
Amen.*

St John Henry Newman

Listen to experience

Take a few minutes to read the following silently or aloud.

I was neurotic for years. I was anxious and depressed and selfish.
Everyone kept telling me to change.
I resented them and I agreed with them, and I wanted to change,
but simply couldn't, no matter how hard I tried.
Then one day someone said to me,
"Don't change. I love you just as you are."
Those words were music to my ears:
"Don't change, Don't change. Don't change . . . I love you as you are."
I relaxed. I came alive. And suddenly I changed!

Anthony de Mello

*"...Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins."*

Isaiah 11: 5

The Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah and Hosea, have much to say to us in these days of noisy and volatile politics. Justice, loyalty and righteousness are still as important as they were in Bible times. If we are to discern what needs to change and what needs protecting in our lives - both as individuals and as communities, then discerning to whom we listen is key to our spiritual growth. God speaks through prophets in every age, are we ready to hear?

- Which modern day or Bible prophet can inspire you this week?
- Share an experience of change you have had and who helped you to make the change.

Listen to the Gospel of Matthew 3: 1-12 (ESV)

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”*

⁴Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

⁸Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹“I baptise you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Read the Gospel again more slowly, asking God to speak to you through this text.

John the Baptist dives straight in to warn us that changing is far from easy. He called people to repent as a way of preparing their hearts and lives for the Lord's coming. He is calling us, too, to get ready for something so great that it fills our emptiness with expectation. A smooth road means nothing to God, but a repentant heart means a great deal. As the Church prepares for the coming (*adventus*) of Christ in his incarnation, the liturgy directs us not only towards Christ's birth but also to challenge the modern reluctance to confront and acknowledge our sins. We are invited to renew our faith, review our lives, and journey forth in humility and peace. Our desire to change in readiness for Christ helps us to open wide our arms of welcome, just as he opened wide his arms of forgiveness to the world.

Reflect

Take some time to reflect on the following questions; then, share your reflections.

- Which words or phrases stand out for you from Matthew's Gospel?
- Who needs your arms of welcome this Advent?

Respond

This time of waiting is not only to celebrate a historical memory but to repeat this memory in our lives and in the service of others.

- What change might God be inviting you to make in your life?
- How might this change give you hope during Christmas?

Closing Prayer

The leader (or another group member) then leads the group in the closing prayer which may include ideas from the earlier discussions:

Your kingdom is at hand,
O God of justice and peace;
You made John the Baptist its herald
to announce the coming of your Christ,
who baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Give us a spirit of repentance
to make us worthy of the kingdom.
Let complacency yield to conviction,
that in our day justice will flourish
and conflict give way
to the peace you bestow in Christ.

Grant this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near:
your Son, Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.
Amen.

(Prayer for the Second Sunday of Advent, Year A)

WEEK TWO - IMAGES FOR REFLECTION

God speaks through prophets

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! (cf. Matthew 3: 2).



Unknown artist - [wiki/John_the_Baptist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Baptist)



*Spring in the country – Grant Wood, 1941.
Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Iowa.*

WEEK THREE: God speaks through witnesses

Behold, I send my messenger before your face (cf. Matthew 11: 10a).

Gather

Welcome newcomers into the group and ask them to introduce themselves briefly.

Opening prayer

Dear Jesus,

.... Shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul.

Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus!

Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as You shine, so to shine as to be a light to others; The light, O Jesus will be all from You; none of it will be mine;

It will be you shining on others through me.

Abridged: St John Henry Newman

Listen to experience

Take a few minutes to read the following silently or aloud.

Come from your homes
with Christmas cards unwritten
with family arrangements yet to be finalised
Come share in a celebration
which began with the homeless, the illiterate and the unmarried.

Come from your places of work
with 'To-Do' lists as long as your arm
with in-trays overflowing and phone calls put off yet again
Come share in a celebration
where our work is to worship and our ceremony
is to set us free.

Come from your communities
where talk is of Christmas shopping
and where our children are whipped up by advertising frenzy
come share in a celebration
where we have nothing to peddle but our stories of hope.

Come from your nations
where immigrants are unwelcome
and politicians vie for your vote
Come share in a celebration
where the proud will be scattered and the rich sent away empty.

Come Holy Spirit
Come Father and Mother of new life
Come let us worship
Come let us turn our lives upside down.

*Edward Cox, An Advent Call to Worship, from 'Seeing Christ in Others'.
Ed. Geoffrey Duncan, Canterbury Press. 2002*

- Which ideas speak to you in this reflection?
- Where will you witness to God this week?

Listen to the Gospel of Matthew 11: 2-11 (ESV)

² Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "*Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.*"

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Read the Gospel again more slowly, asking God to speak to you through this text.

John the Baptist described Jesus as the one greater than he. Was Jesus very different from what John thought he would be? In today's Gospel, he seems to have had doubted his own judgement and he sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come or do we look for another?" Jesus' reply forces John to judge for himself. John knows enough Scripture to recognise the references to the prophecies of Isaiah and that the Messiah is right here - the one he had announced.

Reflect

Take some time to reflect on the following questions; then, share your reflections.

- Which words or phrases stand out for you from Matthew's Gospel?
- How does John the Baptist help you to witness to Jesus in your own life?

Respond

This time of waiting is not only to celebrate a historical memory but to repeat this memory in our lives and in the service of others.

- Where can you share the Good News this week?
- Is there someone you know who needs your merciful tenderness?

Closing Prayer

The leader (or another group member) then leads the group in the closing prayer which may include ideas from the earlier discussions.

God of glory and compassion,
at your touch the wilderness blossoms,
broken lives are made whole,
and fearful hearts grow strong in faith.

Open our eyes to your presence
and awaken our hearts to sing your praise.
To all who long for your Son's return
Grant perseverance and patience,
that we may announce in word and deed
the good news of the kingdom.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.
Amen.

(Prayer for the Third Sunday of Advent, Year A)

WEEK THREE: IMAGES FOR REFLECTION

God speaks through witnesses

Behold, I send my messenger before your face (cf. Matthew 11: 10a).



You Tube animation.



Jesus healing the sick. Artist unknown.

WEEK FOUR: God speaks into our lives

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way (cf. Matthew 1: 18a).

Gather

Welcome newcomers into the group and ask them to introduce themselves briefly.

Opening prayer

O Mother of Jesus, and my Mother,
let me dwell with you, cling to you and love you with ever-increasing love.
I promise the honour, love and trust of a child.
Give me a mother's protection, for I need your watchful care.
You know better than any other the thoughts and desires of the Sacred Heart.
Keep constantly before my mind the same thoughts, the same desires, that my heart
may be filled with zeal for the interests of the Sacred Heart of your Divine Son.
Instill in me a love of all that is noble, that I may no longer be easily turned to
selfishness. *Abridged from a Marian Prayer of Saint John Henry Newman.*

Listen to experience

Take a few minutes to read the following hymn silently, or sing it together if you feel comfortable and know the melody.

Listen to this superb recording of it as part of your reflection and meditation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2MwVZyHJdo>

Mortal Flesh. Arranged – Christian Forshaw, Sanctuary. With Aimee Green and the Choir of King's College, London.

Let all Mortal Flesh keep Silence

1. Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly-minded,
For with blessing in His hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.
2. King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth He stood,
Lord of lords, in human vesture,
In the body and the blood;
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heav'nly food.
3. Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day,
That the pow'rs of hell may vanish
As the darkness clears away.
4. At His feet the six-winged seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry:
"Alleluia, Alleluia,
Alleluia, Lord Most High!"

This hymn is based on the words from Habakkuk 2:20 "But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him."

It was originally composed in Greek and dates from at least AD 275.

- What words or phrases are you drawn to in this hymn?
- How can you make time for silence in front of Jesus this Christmas?

Listen to the Gospel of Matthew 1:18-24 (ESV)

The Birth of Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ *"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"*

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife...

Read the Gospel again more slowly, asking God to speak to you through this text.

In this Gospel reading, we hear about Mary and we hear about an angel speaking to Joseph in a dream, but it is Joseph who is central to this passage. He was betrothed to Mary. They were not living together yet but they were committed to each other. And now comes a sudden, unexpected turn. Mary was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. The Gospel tells us that Joseph let his heart be silent and listened to God. Joseph heard God speak through the Scriptures, that he had come to know as God's voice, God's direction for his life. And, as he listened, he came to believe that Mary was the chosen one whom the prophet Isaiah had spoken about so long ago and Joseph allowed his own plans to be set aside. He obeyed God and took Mary to be his wife.

Like Mary, Joseph was chosen by God; neither were extraordinary people in their families or villages. They were ordinary people who believed in the Lord and trusted the Lord when they faced a way and a future that was not their own. Joseph teaches us that as we travel life's journey, if we listen to God speaking to us in prayer, in the Scriptures and even in our dreams, we will find Christ waiting for us in love.

Reflect

Take some time to reflect on the following questions; then, share your reflections.

- Which words or phrases stand out for you from Matthew's Gospel?
- How do Mary and Joseph help you to trust in God in your own life?

Respond

This time of waiting is not only to celebrate a historical memory but to repeat this memory in our lives and in the service of others.

- Where are you being invited to trust in God this Advent?
- Spend some time this week praying for those whose journeys have taken an unexpected turn and consider doing something for those people in your community and afar.

Closing Prayer

The leader (or another group member) then leads the group in the closing prayer which may include ideas from the earlier discussions.

Eternal God,
in the psalms of David,
in the words of the prophets,
in the dream of Joseph
your promise is spoken.
At last, in the womb of the Virgin Mary your Word takes flesh.

Teach us to welcome Jesus, the promised Emmanuel, and to preach the good news
of his coming,
that every age may know him
as the source of redemption and grace.

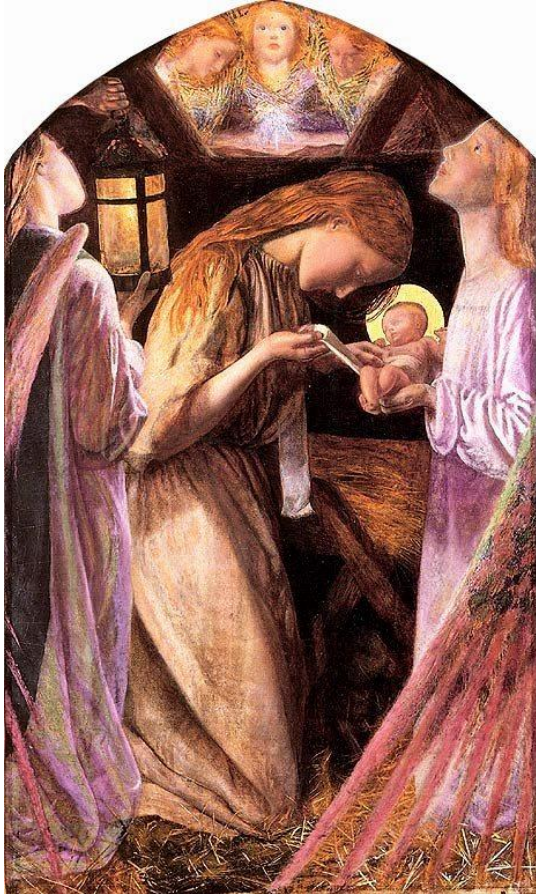
Grant this through him whose coming is certain,
whose day draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever.
Amen

(Prayer for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A)

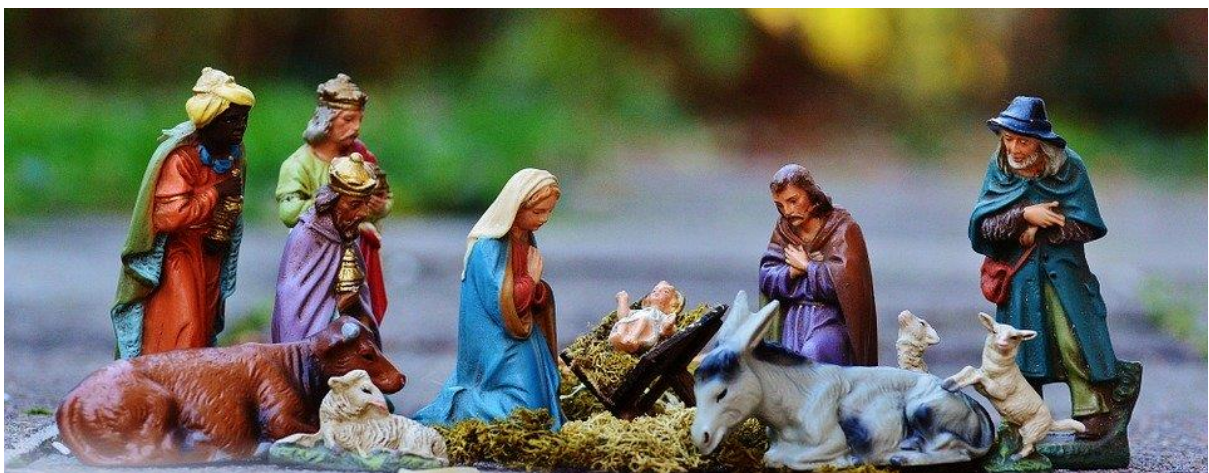
WEEK FOUR: IMAGES FOR REFLECTION

God speaks into our lives

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way (cf. Matthew 1: 18a).



The Nativity, Arthur Hughes. 1857-58. Birmingham Museums Trust.



<https://pixabay.com/photos/christmas-crib-figures-christmas-1060026/>



**Christ is born in us today
in order that he may appear
to the whole world through us.**

Thomas Merton