

*Luke 1:26-38 and 2:1-38; Matthew 1:18-25*

## Aim of Lesson

To learn of the unique birth of Jesus, God's only son.

## Background study

Exodus 13:2; Leviticus 12:6-8; 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Isaiah 7:14-16; 9:6-7; Micah 5:2.

## Suggested outline of lesson

The details of Jesus' birth will be well known to most children. In the narration of the lesson allow each child to tell part of the story, gradually building up the full account and supplying missing information where necessary. In this way the children will learn from each other, errors will be brought to light, which can be corrected, and you will be able to stress aspects of the story which need emphasis.

It is important not to embroider the scriptural account beyond what is necessary to convey its reality. The birth of Jesus is often romanticised to the extent that the poverty of his origin and the bare simplicity of his birth is lost.

Ask the children how they think the story of Jesus began. The perfect answer would be with the prophecy of his birth. However, the most likely answer will be that an angel visited Mary. Show that Mary must have been a very special person to have been chosen by God to be the mother of his son, although she considered herself to be just an ordinary girl. Imagine, then, her fear and amazement at the sudden appearance of God's angel, Gabriel, in her humble home in Nazareth. The dialogue between the two lends itself to dramatisation, thus giving emphasis to Gabriel's words. Be sure the children understand that God was at work here. Mary's inspired and joyful words, when she began to understand the implications of the angel's message, show the wisdom of God's choice.

Introduce Joseph at this point and clarify the relationship between Mary and Joseph. It was similar to the engagement of a young couple today, though their promise to each other in those days would be considered more binding than in our society. Joseph was shocked when he learned that Mary was to have a child before they were married. Thinking that Mary had done wrong, Joseph decided that he couldn't marry her. Then Joseph himself had a message from the angel of the Lord, and he remembered the words of Isaiah, the prophet. Now that Joseph understood that God had caused Mary to conceive, he was at first relieved and then overjoyed. Now he felt honoured that Mary, whom he loved so much, was to be his wife. It would be a privilege to care for her and God's son.

While describing the distance and nature of the journey to Bethlehem brief reference to a map will be helpful, particularly if you can relate this to the children's own experience, e.g. a holiday journey, or visit to relatives in a remote area. Stress, however, that Joseph and Mary's journey was covered on foot, over very rough roads. Explain again how prophecy was being fulfilled (Micah 5:2). It is sad that there was no one to welcome the weary travellers on their arrival in Bethlehem. Tradition has it that they were unable to find anywhere to stay in Bethlehem, and pictures are painted of the couple wandering the streets trying to find lodging. Luke 2:6 however - 'while they were there' - suggests that they were staying in the inn until the birth of Jesus, and since there was nowhere in the public inn for Mary to give birth, Jesus was born outside, where the animals' feeding trough was. In passing, there is no mention in scripture of a stable, though no doubt Mary and Joseph would have sought what privacy they could find. Though well known, the details of Jesus' birth are so different from the circumstances in which babies are born in our country today that a little time should be taken to recreate the scene and to contrast it with modern clinical conditions. There is also the marked contrast between the simple occasion of the birth of this prince and the preparation usually associated with the birth of a royal child.

Ask the children who were the first people to hear the news of the birth. We would expect the great news of the birth of the Messiah to be widely proclaimed and to be known to the leaders of Israel, perhaps even to Herod himself. However, an insignificant group of shepherds on a dark hillside outside Bethlehem were the ones God chose to receive the news. They received special guidance and encouragement to find Jesus, and became the first witnesses (preachers) as they "made known" what the angels had revealed to them about Jesus.

Up to this point, the children will have been able to contribute to the narrative but in describing the incident in the temple, you will possibly be telling the children something new. It is a delightful incident, with several important lessons. When Jesus was six weeks old the family travelled a few more miles to Jerusalem in order to obey God's law - that of presenting a sacrifice at the temple after the birth of a firstborn son. This was a significant day in the life of the family and was further enhanced by their meeting with Simeon, and his blessing of them. Describe this very old and faithful man, his joy at seeing prophecy fulfilled, and his own solemn prophetic words. These words were taken up by Anna, the prophetess who, in turn, spread the news amongst the devout worshippers.

Gradually Mary and Joseph were becoming aware of the magnitude of their responsibilities and of their involvement in the working out of God's plan for the world.

## Relevance to the children's lives

We think about this story at a particular time of year. Do people celebrate this anniversary in the right way? Instead of remembering the unique birth of Jesus, what sort of things are people busy doing? God intervened in the natural course of events in order to perform the miracle of sending his only son into the world. Isn't this event so important that we should remember it all the year round?

## Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

## Prayer

Dear Lord God, thank you for sending you own dear son, Jesus, and for the story of his miraculous birth. Help us always to keep Jesus in our minds. Amen.

## **Memory verse**

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).