

THEME 4: ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS | LESSON 1

Zechariah and Elizabeth

ABOUT ADVENT

One of the most precious things we have in our lives is the gift of time. Advent is a special time in the Church calendar. It marks the beginning of the Liturgical Year and the four-week countdown to the feast of the Nativity, 25 December, when we remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Advent is the time when we prepare for and look forward to reliving this great event. It is a time of prayer and hope, as we wait to welcome Christ once again into our hearts and into our lives. During Advent we remember, too, how Mary waited for the birth of her Son, Jesus, and how Elizabeth and Zechariah also waited for God's plan to unfold.

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH RECEIVE GOOD NEWS

During the season of Advent we recall the elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who waited patiently and hopefully for God's plan to unfold. Zechariah was a priest in the Temple and Elizabeth was Mary's cousin. They had no children. One day while Zechariah was burning incense at the altar, an angel appeared to him. Here is the story:

The Birth of John the Baptist is Announced (Luke 1:8, 11, 13-25)

One day Zechariah was doing his work as a priest in the Temple, taking his turn in the daily service... An angel of the Lord appeared to him... When Zechariah saw him, he was alarmed and felt afraid. But the angel said to him, 'Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You are to name him John. How glad and happy you will be, and how happy many others will be when he is born! John will be great in the Lord's sight... From his very birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He will go ahead of the Lord, strong and mighty like the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; he will turn disobedient people back to the way of thinking of the righteous; he will get the Lord's people ready for him.'

Zechariah said to the angel, 'How shall I know if this is so? I am an old man, and my wife is old also.'

THIS WEEK IN SCHOOL

You are invited to think about:

- The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth
- Mary's response to Angel Gabriel
- An imaginary conversation between Zechariah and Mary
- Giving thanks to God for the gift of times of joy and good news

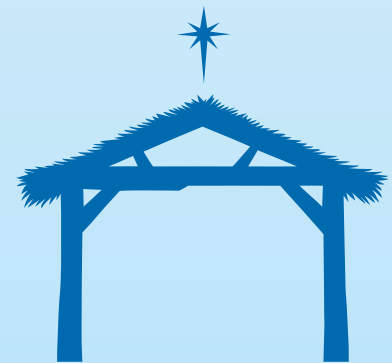
KEY WORDS

Liturgy: The public prayer of the Church.

Liturgical Year: Name for the cycle of seasons celebrated in the Church calendar.

Advent: The first season in the Liturgical Year. The word 'Advent' means 'coming'. The season of Advent marks the countdown of four weeks leading to the coming or birth of Jesus Christ.

Servant: A person who puts himself or herself at the service of another. In the Bible, a servant of God is someone who is totally committed to doing God's will by living a life of selfless love.





FOR MEMORISATION

'There is nothing that God cannot do.' (Luke 1:37)

'I am Gabriel,' the angel answered. 'I stand in the presence of God, who sent me to speak to you and tell you this good news. But you have not believed my message, which will come true at the right time. Because you have not believed, you will be unable to speak; you will remain silent until the day my promise to you comes true.'

In the meantime the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondered why he was spending such a long time in the Temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them, and so they knew that he had seen a vision in the Temple. Unable to say a word, he made signs to them with his hands ...

Some time later [Elizabeth] became pregnant...



DISCUSS

- How do you think Zechariah would have communicated with Elizabeth when he went home that day?
- Six months later the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. What message did Angel Gabriel give to Mary?

ACTIVITY

The angel told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant. So Mary went to visit Elizabeth.

- Imagine the conversation that might have taken place between Mary and Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah. With a partner, act out the conversation.

THIS WEEK

The children have been talking about Advent, the season when we prepare to remember the birth of Jesus and to celebrate his coming once again into our hearts. It is a time when we also look forward to the second coming of Christ at the end of time. The children have heard the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the elderly couple who prayed to the Lord that they would have a baby, and God answered their prayer. They have also recalled how Mary responded to God's call to be the mother of Jesus. Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zechariah waited patiently for their sons to be born. These stories from Sacred Scripture remind us that God's will is only accomplished in God's time, and sometimes we, too, must wait!

Read the poem 'Christmas Eve' together.

Christmas Eve

On Christmas Eve my mother read
The story once again
Of how the little child was born
And of the Three Wise Men.

And how by following the Star
They found Him where He lay,
And brought Him gifts; and that is why
We keep our Christmas Day.

And when she read it all, I went
And looked across the snow
And thought of Jesus coming
As He did long ago.

I looked into the East, and saw
A great star blazing bright;
There were three men upon the road
All black against the light.

I thought I heard the angels sing
Away upon the hill...
I held my breath ... it seemed as if
The whole great world were still.

It seemed to me the little Child
Was being born again ...
And very near ... and THEN somehow
Was NOW ... or NOW was THEN.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are two Zechariahs in the Bible: Zechariah the husband of Elizabeth, and the Old Testament prophet called Zechariah.

TIME TOGETHER**Chat Together**

About the possibility of having an Advent wreath in your home during the Advent season.

Share

Share your happy memories of your child's birth or of a recent birth in your family. Imagine the excitement Elizabeth and Zechariah must have felt when they were told that they were going to have a baby. We remember the time Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary when we pray the *Angelus*. Imagine how Mary felt about giving birth to Jesus, the Son of God.

Invitation to Pray

Pray the *Angelus* together.

Be Still

When you hear the *Angelus* bell, allow happiness to fill your heart.



THIS WEEK IN SCHOOL

You are invited to think about:

- All the stories in the Bible that tell of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus
- Giving thanks to God for the gifts of joy and wisdom
- Ways in which you can be welcoming and of service to others

KEY WORDS

The Epiphany: This feast day is celebrated on the last day of the season of Christmas, 6 January. On this day we remember the visit of the wise men to the stable in Bethlehem.

Holy Days of Obligation: In Ireland, there are five Holy Days of Obligation:

- The Nativity of the Lord (25 December)
- St Patrick's Day (17 March)
- The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (15 August)
- All Saints' Day (1 November)
- The Immaculate Conception (8 December)

The Catholic Church asks its members to go to Mass on Holy Days of Obligation.

Martyr: Someone who is put to death for their faith.

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The Epiphany

ABOUT THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

Throughout the dark days of winter we wait in hope for the light that Christ gives us at Christmas. Our candle-flames burn brightly on the Advent wreath, the shiny tinsel and decorations sparkle on the Christmas trees, and we remember the stunning light of the star that guided the wise men to Bethlehem. There they experienced the pure light of the love of God in the birth of his Son, Jesus.

Many people down the ages have sought to bring the light of Christ into the lives of others. One such person was St Lucy.

The Story of St Lucy

St Lucy (also known as St Lucia) (c. 283-304) was born in Syracuse in Sicily, an island off the southern coast of Italy. That was in the time of the Roman Empire, when life was difficult and dangerous for Christians. Roman soldiers patrolled the streets ready to torture, arrest or kill anyone suspected of being a Christian.

Lucy was a devout Christian and she got great courage from her faith. She was seen bringing bread to the hungry Christians who had come to worship God in secret underground caves, called catacombs. Lucy came to the attention of the authorities, but she refused to deny her Christian beliefs, and so she was put to death – martyred for her faith.

However, this brave woman was not forgotten. Some time after her death Lucy was named a saint. Many people in



different countries around the world still remember St Lucy as a symbol of Christ's light in a time of fear and darkness. She is the patron saint of eyes, the body's source of light. People with eye problems often ask St Lucy to help them.

St Lucy by Artemisia Gentileschi (c. 1642-4)

ABOUT THE EPIPHANY

The Church remembers the visit of the three wise men to the newborn baby Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem on the feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrate on 6 January. The three men had followed a star which led them to the stable. They recognised that Jesus was the Son of God and they worshipped him. Here is the story from the Gospel according to Matthew:

Visitors from the East (Matthew 2:1-12)

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterward, some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the baby born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.'

When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, 'Where will the Messiah be born?'

'In the town of Bethlehem in Judea,' they answered. 'For this is what the prophet wrote:

"Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
you are by no means the least of
the leading cities of Judah;
for from you will come a leader
who will guide my people Israel."'

So Herod called the visitors from the East to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: 'Go and make a careful search for the child; and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him.'

And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the East. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and presented them to him.

Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.



FOR MEMORISATION

... when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him. (Matthew 2:11)

DID YOU KNOW?

The word 'January' comes from a Latin word meaning 'doorway'. It is an old custom to bless doorways at the time of the Epiphany (6 January) – as a reminder to welcome new people and guests during the year ahead. Some people also write the date and the letters CMB above their door. These are the first letters of the traditional names for the three wise men: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar.

TIME TOGETHER

Chat Together

About the feast of the Epiphany and the tradition of Nollaig na mBan. Share your favourite Christmas stories from the Bible.

Remember

That Mary and Joseph were strangers in Bethlehem. They were far away from their home town of Nazareth. Talk about the importance of welcoming new people and guests into our homes and into our country.

Invitation to Pray

Loving God, fill us with the same happiness and joy that the three wise men felt when they recognised the baby Jesus as the Son of God. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Be of Service

Be willing to allow your child to be of service to you on Nollaig na mBan.

THIS WEEK

The children heard the story of the Three Wise Men and how they followed the star that led them to the place where Jesus was born. The men recognised Jesus as the Son of God and they knelt down before him and worshipped him.

The children also heard the story of St Lucy, who brought the light of Christ into people's lives through her acts of love and generosity. Today, Jesus helps us, too, to bring the light of his love into the world.

Pray this reflection together:

Loving God, fill our hearts with kindness. Teach us to give a joyful welcome to everyone. Fill us with true wisdom so that we may always seek to follow the light of Christ and be like Jesus – today, tomorrow and throughout the New Year ahead. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

