

Feasts & Festivals

All-age services for special occasions

Claire Benton-Evans

kevin
mayhew

**kevin
mayhew**

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Buxhall, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 3BW
Tel: +44 (0) 1449 737978 Fax: +44 (0) 1449 737834
E-mail: info@kevinmayhewltd.com

www.kevinmayhew.com

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About the author

Claire Benton-Evans studied English at Oxford before teaching English and Drama in London, North Devon and Cornwall. Claire's consultancy work includes all-age worship workshops and children's spirituality training for clergy, worship leaders, head teachers and school governors. The creative arts inspire her, exclusion makes her angry and family life keeps her feet on the ground. Claire likes long walks, good food, live theatre and the Greenbelt festival. She lives with her husband – a minister in the Scottish Episcopal Church – and three children in the Scottish Borders.

A full range of all-age services for every Sunday of the year can be found in the *All-sorts Worship* and *One for All* series. Details of Claire's other titles can be found on her website at: www.clairebentonevans.com

Introduction

It is late afternoon on Christmas Eve. There is a crowd of people – a queue! – heading towards the church. Some have been inside for half an hour already: they came early to claim their seats and reserve places for their friends. Buggies and prams jostle each other beside the church steps. Children are jumping around, trying on haloes and crowns. Elderly ladies weave their way carefully through the toddlers, carrying home-made sausage rolls and mince pies for the Christmas party that will follow the service. A young woman in a wheelchair grins as she is given a glow-stick halo. Parishioners introduce their large visiting families while teenagers cluster together in packs, trying hard not to look as if they are excited about Christmas. The service starts late because people are still arriving and there is standing room only at the back and small children are busy climbing happily onto grandparents' laps. The donkey is having his photo taken. Mary's head-cloth won't stay up and someone has sat on the myrrh. Welcome to the annual Crib Service.

In the Church, we are blessed with special occasions like this. We may spend many hours in prayer and in committee meetings, searching for ways to encourage families to worship with us Sunday by Sunday, but at certain times of the year they simply gravitate towards the church. These are our feasts and festivals. They are naturally all-age occasions for all sorts of people, and they are a wonderful opportunity for us to follow Christ's example: our job is to welcome and include everyone, whoever they are.

The all-age services in this book are designed to be welcoming, inclusive and engaging. They tell the stories of our feasts and festivals through interactive drama, visual stimuli, music, tactile objects and even food. They encourage everyone to pray together, using creative prayers that involve symbols, actions and the senses. Originally included in the *All-sorts Worship* and *One for All* series, these services have been tried and tested by churches of different denominations up and

down the country. There is a choice of three different services for each festival, and a collection of one-off services for special occasions, such as Christingle. These have been written in response to particular needs and requests. For example, I felt there was a dearth of worship material for the summer months, so I have provided three services that are ideal for outdoor use at a church holiday club, a beach mission or a parish picnic. There is a Promenade Service, which involves a country or coastal walk, a Picnic Service and a Pets' Service. These services would make good use of a large marquee, and I know of many churches that have been able to borrow such a venue on a summer Sunday morning, after a Saturday night carnival, festival or fair.

The Church's calendar of feasts and festivals leads us all on a pilgrimage through the year; the services in this book offer children and families a chance to join us on the way as we pass some familiar landmarks. Once people have shared part of the journey, they may be encouraged to walk further with us: for example, if your church holds a well-attended all-age Palm Sunday service one year, you might consider an all-age Holy Week in the future. As a child at a local all-age Christmas service said, happily waving her glow-stick, 'If church was always like this, I'd come every week!' I hope you will treat your church and community to these services for feasts, festivals and special occasions: who knows where they might lead?

Feasts and Festivals

Christmas Day

A child is born

Theme The angels' good news

Scripture Luke 2:1-20

Running order Total: 50 minutes

Welcome Lighting all the candles on the Advent wreath
(5 minutes)

Introduction Opening the theme

Music O little town of Bethlehem (5 minutes)

Activity Hunt the picture – a vision of angels (5 minutes)

Storytelling Imagining Luke 2:8-20 (5 minutes)

Music While shepherds watched (5 minutes)

Exploring What message do the angels bring? (10 minutes)

Music It came upon the midnight clear (5 minutes)

Prayer action Holy light – lighting votive candles (5 minutes)

Music O come, all ye faithful (5 minutes)

Conclusion Closing prayer and invitation

Resources

- Advent wreath and matches
- Postcard-sized pieces of a large picture of an angel (*see appendix*)
- Board and sticky tack
- Basic angel costume (white sheet/tunic, tinsel halo)
- Two large cardboard speech bubbles: *Do not be afraid* and *This is Love*
- Music and words
- Large white candle (*already lit*) and as many candlesticks and candelabra as your altar will hold. Next to the altar, place stands for votive candles and on the floor in front of it, lay a piece of board on which tea-lights may safely stand
- Lots of (*unlit*) candles and tea-lights, plus matches and tapers

Leaders

Minimum: 2

- Leader
- *Oriel*

Optimum: 7

- Leader
- Activity Leader
- Storyteller
- Music Leader
- Explorer
- *Oriel*, in a suit and carrying a briefcase
- Prayer Leader

Suggestions for additional music

- Mary had a baby
- Little Jesus, sweetly sleep
- Angels from the realms of glory

Service

Welcome

Light all the candles on the Advent wreath.

Introduction

Happy Christmas! Let's begin this joyful day by singing.

Music

O little town of Bethlehem

Activity

Now I want to get you out of your seats and moving around. Hidden all around the church are pieces of a picture. Here is one of them (*show a piece*): can you find the rest? I wonder whether you can help me fit them together like a jigsaw, so we can see what picture they make?

Invite all volunteers to hunt around the church for the pieces and bring them to the front, where you can assemble them on the board. Encourage general participation in fitting together the jigsaw, perhaps accompanied by the odd Rolf Harris-style comment: 'Can you tell what it is yet?' When it is finished, invite comments:

What is this a picture of? Do you think this is what angels look like?

Storytelling

Today's story is full of angels. Why don't you close your eyes and imagine yourself in the story as I tell it to you? Imagine you are a shepherd, sitting on the rocky hills with your sheep. You are wearing long, rough robes and sheepskins to keep out the cold. It is dark and you are sleepily trying to keep an eye on your flock. The sheep are munching loudly. There are other shepherds around you, and you can hear some of them chatting. Some of the younger boys have dozed off, even though the ground is hard and frosty. It is a cold, still night; the sky is vast and inky-black and the stars twinkle brightly.

Suddenly – whoosh! – an enormous explosion of bright, white light tears open the sky. It looks like the end of the world – as if the sun has exploded. You have never seen anything like it, and the hillside around you erupts in noise and panic: the sheep scatter in every

direction, bleating madly at the sky; the other shepherds yell and the boys run, screaming, to hide in the caves. The explosion becomes a column of fierce brilliance, and rays of light fan out like wings, spanning the sky.

As you stay rooted to the spot in terror, an unearthly voice rings out above all the racket: 'Do not be afraid! I bring good news! Today a Saviour, the Messiah, has been born! You will find him in the city of David: a child wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger.'

Your ears are ringing with the voice when the whole sky becomes filled with light, as if it were the middle of a summer's day. But instead of sun and blue sky, there is a shimmering whiteness from east to west; beams of light spread and dazzle, pulsing like the beating of wings. You stand with your mouth open as the angel-song fills the air: 'Glory to God in the highest! Peace on earth and goodwill to all!'

Music

While shepherds watched

Exploring

Today we will be thinking about the angels in our story and the message that they bring. Now, no Nativity play is complete without angels. Who can tell me what angels wear? (*As people say 'A white sheet!', 'A tinsel halo!' and so on, invite a volunteer to dress up in these items.*) So this is the kind of angel we all recognise – the kind of angel who decorates our Christmas cards. But think about the angels in our story. How did those shepherds feel, surrounded by angels on that cold hillside? How did you feel as I was telling the story? (*Invite responses.*) Who can remember the very first thing the angel said? (*Invite responses.*) It was the first thing that angels in the Bible always say to people: 'DO NOT BE AFRAID!' Our angel here is very beautiful, but I don't think we are frightened of her, do you? Angels are out of this world: they are God's servants and messengers and they give us a glimpse of his almighty power. No wonder they are awe-inspiring!

Angel holds up a speech bubble saying, 'Do not be afraid'.

Here is another kind of angel. He is the Archangel Oriel and he and his diary were imagined by the writer, Robert Harrison. Oriel is an important manager in heaven: he organises things for God, and in particular makes the arrangements for Jesus' birth. In his diary, Oriel confesses that he cannot understand why almighty God should want to become a human being at all. This is what he says:

Oriel And now, the One who held every atom in his grasp is no more than a clutch of watery cells in the midst of a teenage girl, in an obscure village, in a defeated nation, on one of the smaller planets that orbit an ordinary star, in an uneventful galaxy that turns on its little axis in that gassy cloud that is the Universe, which the Son himself made.

Such smallness I can barely begin to imagine. This is Love.¹

Oriel holds up a speech bubble saying, 'This is Love'.

Explorer Instead of remaining in power and glory with all his angels, God made himself human in the form of his Son, Jesus, and he came to live among us. This is the message of the angels: the baby lying in the manger is Love – God's love for each and every one of us.

Music It came upon the midnight clear

Prayer action *Arrange for two volunteers to light all the candles on the altar and turn off the lights in church as you introduce this prayer.*

In the beginning, God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. On that first Christmas Day, there was the light of a new star and the promise that Jesus had come to be a light for all people – a light which would shine in the world's darkness and never be extinguished. Today we will each light a candle as a prayer in the darkness and a sign of our faith.

1. Robert Harrison, *Oriel's Diary*, Scripture Union, 2002, p.11.

Pause until all the altar candles are lit.

Each person comes up and lights a candle to add to the lights around the altar.

You are invited to join in the words of a very ancient song of praise by saying simply, 'Holy, holy, holy Lord'. Let us pray together with the words of the angels:

Holy, holy, holy Lord,

The whole earth is full of your glory,²
the world blazes with your light.

Holy, holy, holy Lord.

Amen.

Music

O come, all ye faithful

Conclusion

Living Lord,
may the good news which the angels brought
be shared by us today,
and may your love live in our hearts and homes
this Christmas.

Amen.

Give notices, announce the next all-age service and invite everyone to the feast.

2. From Isaiah 6:3.

Christmas Day

God's glory

Theme The Word made flesh

Scripture John 1:1-14

Running order Total: 50 minutes

Welcome Lighting all the candles on the Advent wreath
(5 minutes)

Introduction Opening the theme

Music Once in royal David's city (5 minutes)

Activity Addressing the envelopes – spelling out our place in
creation (10 minutes)

Music Ding dong, merrily on high! (5 minutes)

Exploring How does God show us his glory? – brainstorm and
opening the envelopes (5 minutes)

Storytelling Reading John 1:1-14 (2 minutes)

Music Joy to the world (5 minutes)

Prayer action 'The light of all people' – interactive supplication
(8 minutes)

Music O come, all ye faithful (5 minutes)

Conclusion Closing prayer and invitation

Resources

- Advent wreath, matches and tapers
- Hand-held votive candles, given to each person as they arrive
- Felt pens for every pew or row of seats
- A selection of stickers: gold and silver stars, moons and planets if possible
- A sealed envelope under every seat, (including the Leaders') containing the printed Christmas card (*see appendix*)
- Whiteboard or flip chart and pens
- Music and words

Leaders

Minimum: 1

- Leader

Optimum: 6

- Leader (*Introduction and Conclusion*)
- Activity Leader
- Explorer
- Storyteller
- Music Leader
- Prayer Leader

Suggestions for additional music

- The Virgin Mary had a baby boy
- Infant holy, infant lowly

Service

Welcome

Light all the candles on the Advent wreath.

Introduction

Merry Christmas! Who has opened some presents already today?

Invite responses. If the church is bristling with children carrying new toys, you may like to invite some to show the congregation what they have received.

Now we begin our celebration today by singing.

Music

Once in royal David's city

Activity

Christmas is a time for thinking big – and I don't just mean presents and turkey. In our familiar Christmas carols, we sing 'Joy to the world' and 'Unto us a boy is born! King of all creation', but do we ever stop to think about what huge things we are describing? Joy to the world: all 6.8 billion people and 197 million square miles of it. And what about 'King of all creation'? How big is *creation*? Today's Bible reading describes it as 'all things that have come into being' – in other words, 'life, the universe and everything'.

Our activity today is going to help us think big. Under your seats you will find an envelope. It is yours to keep, but don't open it yet – it is waiting for an address. Your address. Start right at the top and write your address on the envelope.

Allow time for people to do this, and fill in your own envelope, using your church's address.

You have probably finished your address with your county or postcode – but now let's see how long you can make your address. Which country do you live in? Which continent? Which hemisphere? Which planet? Which part of the solar system? Use all your knowledge of geography and space to address your letter so that it could reach you from the other end of the universe! You may need to carry on writing on the back of the

envelope. When you have finished the address, you may like to decorate the envelope with stars and planets for its journey through space.

Allow plenty of time for people to complete their envelopes. Complete your own address (see Exploring, below).

Music

Ding dong, merrily on high!

Exploring

Let's hear some of your universal addresses. Don't read out the first bit – start from the country and go on from there.

Hear some addresses and then read out your own example:

(Your name),
 (Your church),
 (Your town),
 (Your county),
 (Your country),
 (Your continent),
 Planet Earth,
 3rd Planet in the Solar System,
 Orion Arm,
 The Milky Way Galaxy,
 The Local Group,
 The Local Supercluster,
 The Known Universe,
 The Unknown Universe.

There's a lot of universe out there! A science fiction writer summed it up like this: 'Space is big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist's, but that's just peanuts to space.'³ And all of this – the known and unknown reaches of space – are part of God's creation, just as we are part of it, too.

Now here's a big question for you. Imagine you were God, the Creator of EVERYTHING. You don't want to stay in the background: you want to reach out to the

3. Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

individual people on earth. You want to say to them, 'I am your God!' and show them your glory and power. What would you do? Would you send them each a letter, like this? (*Show your envelope.*) Would you do something big with weather, such as making a rainbow? Would you show them a miracle? If you were God, what would you do to show people that you loved them?

Invite suggestions, valuing all contributions by writing them on the whiteboard or flip chart.

Let's see what God actually did to show us who he is and to let us know that he loves us. Your envelopes are addressed to you: open them and see what's inside.

Everyone opens their envelopes, including you.

This is what God did to show that he loves us (*read the words on the card*): 'God became a human being and lived among us.' Although he created the whole universe, he didn't terrify us with some earth-shattering display of power, or dazzle us with his glory. He was born as the little baby, Jesus, so that we might know him and could say, 'We have seen his glory.' That is what our carols, cards and presents are all about, and that is why we celebrate Christmas. Although we are a tiny part of his creation, God gave himself to us today. Joy to the world!

Storytelling

Read John 1:1-14.

Music

Joy to the world

Prayer action

Turn out the lights.

Today's Gospel says this about Jesus: 'In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.' For our prayers today, we wait in the dark and remember all those known to us who need the light of life, especially in this Christmas season.

Pause. Light your own votive candle from the central candle of the Advent wreath.

In Jesus was life, and the life was the light of all people.

Pass the light among the people. When all the candles are lit, say the closing words.

Jesus, Light of the world,
shine among us this Christmas Day
and for evermore.

Amen.

Music

O come, all ye faithful

Conclusion

Heavenly Father,
We thank you for the gift of your Son.
In him we have seen your glory.
As we celebrate his birth,
may our hearts be open to receive him.

Amen.

Give notices, announce the next all-age service and invite everyone to the feast.