

**do —*
not be
afraid**





Rafif's father was tragically killed whilst trying to save others.

* Do not be afraid

What's your favourite Christmas tradition? Perhaps it's sharing gifts, going to a carol service or gathering round the table for Christmas lunch. Or maybe it's sitting down to watch the Christmas TV specials, going for a family walk or playing games.

Across the world, Christians all have their own ways to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Our traditions might be different, but we all share the excitement and anticipation of the festive season.

However, there are many countries where Christians face persecution or conflict. In those places, their excitement is often tempered by fear – fear of rejection, surveillance, fighting or even attack.

This Christmas service sheet retells the Christmas story through the traditions of Christian children in some of these countries, as they share how they celebrate Jesus' birth against the backdrop of conflict and persecution.

Please note: lyrics that are in italics refer to a chorus and should be sung after each verse.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to Thee, O Israel.*

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny
From depths of Hell Thy people save
And give them victory o'er the grave.

O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put
to flight.

O come, Thou key of David, come
And open wide our heav'nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

1. IRAN

Facing accusation

READ Matthew 1:18-19

Because Mary and Joseph were engaged and yet to consummate their marriage, judgemental remarks would inevitably follow news of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph sought to minimise this by quietly divorcing her, until an angel stepped in to halt his plans.

In many countries, following Jesus is deemed a shameful act. Someone who knows this well is Alya, who is just ten years old. "I'm sorry," she says. "I can't show you my face. This would be dangerous for me and my parents." Alya lives in Iran, where being a Christian from a Muslim background is considered a crime.

For Alya's family, this means Christmas must be celebrated in secret – and at a different time of the year. "We wait until January and on my own birthday we celebrate Christmas and Christ's birth, too. In this way we don't raise suspicion and the celebrations don't sound unusual to our neighbours."

Dear God, help our family who are accused of wrongdoing to stand strong in Your love. Amen.

2. IRAQ

“Do not be afraid”

READ Matthew 1:20-24

For Rafif (PICTURED OPPOSITE) in Iraq, Christmas brings excitement and sorrow. Her mother was pregnant with her when Raddif, her father, was tragically killed whilst trying to warn a bus carrying Christian students of a bomb targeted at them. Raddif's heroic actions saved lives – but cost his.

At a Centre of Hope funded with your support, Rafif begins learning about Christmas in November



**Once in Royal
David's City**

**Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her Baby
In a manger for His bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little Child.**

**He came down to earth from heaven,
Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable,
And His cradle was a stall;
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.**

**And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love;
For that child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above,
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone.**

**Not in that poor lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see Him; but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high;
Where like stars His children crowned
All in white shall wait around.**

during Christian education classes. "We help the children to tell the story of Christmas in their own words, or through a little play," shares Mrs Moshriq, the headteacher. "On Christmas Day, they then contribute to the service."

Rafif loves the classes. "The most important thing I have learned in Christian education class is that God is always there for me," she shares.

Heavenly Father, comfort all Christians who have lost loved ones because of their faith in You. May they truly know that You are with them this Christmas. Amen.



3. BETHLEHEM

Prayers for peace

READ Luke 2:4-7

What better place to reflect on Jesus' arrival than the town where He was born – and in the church located in the place where He is believed to have been born!

For many of us, visiting the Church of the Nativity is a prospect we can only imagine. Not so for sisters Maria (10) and Sophie (7), who live near Bethlehem.

In Bethlehem today, Christians are a minority. This is difficult enough, but mostly they suffer from the ongoing conflict in the country. "We pray for peace," the sisters say.

Last Christmas, the pandemic meant the sisters were unable to visit Bethlehem. But this brought into sharp focus the significance of that first Christmas. "We asked Jesus to be born again in our hearts," Maria says. Sophie adds: "Jesus is mighty. Everyone should know about Him!"

Lord Jesus, bring peace to all countries experiencing conflict. Protect Your people and may they shine brightly for You. Amen.

4. LAOS

Dancing for joy

READ Luke 2:8-14

We can be so familiar with the angels' appearance that we lose sight of what this must have felt like for the shepherds, who went to work thinking it would be another ordinary night on the fields. Consequently, we can miss what a joyous scene this really was – and what this deeply conveys.

The activity that perhaps gives greatest expression to joy is dance – and that's exactly how a group of Christians celebrate Christmas in Laos. "We celebrate Christmas by dancing," says Deng (12), as she

O Little Town of Bethlehem

**Oh little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.**

**O morning stars, together Proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God the King
And peace to men on earth.
For Christ is born of Mary,
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.**

**O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray!
Cast out our sin and enter in,
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel!**

rehearses for a Christmas service. "To show glory to God, sing songs, and worship God with the adults."



This desire to celebrate the birth of Jesus is even more inspiring, given that in Laos, Christian activities are heavily monitored by the Communist authorities, with many believers at risk of severe persecution.

Lord Jesus, may the joy and wonder of the first Christmas dawn afresh on each of our persecuted brothers and sisters during this festive season. May it give them renewed hope, peace and strength. Amen.

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

**Hark! The herald angels sing:
Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies.
With the angelic host proclaim:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."**

*Hark! The herald angels sing:
Glory to the newborn King.*

**Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb:
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity.
Pleased as man with man to dwell:
Jesus, our Emmanuel.**

**Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.**

become Christians may attend church more regularly at Christmas, putting them at increased risk of exposure and persecution.

Hawi's family also face heightened risk. Her father ministers to believers from a Muslim background. The Christmas period may bring an increase in threats and pressure from the Muslim community.

The risks do not deter Hawi and her family. "We celebrate Christmas by lighting our candles and bringing them to church," she shares. "It is the day the people who walked in the darkness received light. It is the day God has shown His love for His people."

Lord Jesus, watch over and protect our family who gather to worship You at great risk. Amen.

O Come, All Ye Faithful

**O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant!
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold Him
Born the king of angels.**

*O come, let us adore Him, (x3)
Christ the Lord.*

**God of God, Light of Light,
Lo, He abhors not the virgin's womb;
True God, begotten, not created.**

**Sing, choirs of angels, sing in
exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God, glory in the highest.**

**Yea, Lord, we greet Thee,
born this happy morning;
Jesus, to Thee be glory given!
Word of the Father, now in flesh
appearing!**



5. ETHIOPIA

Dangerous faith

READ Matthew 2:13-15

Despite the good news of Jesus' arrival, the occasion was not without its dangers. It's the same for many of our persecuted family. Nine-year-old Hawi lives in a region in Ethiopia where most people are Muslims. Those who've

★ Will you help bring joy to your persecuted family this Christmas?



Without your generosity and prayers, many children like those featured in this service sheet wouldn't be able to celebrate Christmas at all.

In Nigeria, Christmas for 13-year-old Sele (ABOVE) is a bittersweet celebration. "Sele never knew his dad, Solomon," explains Cecilia, Sele's mum. He was tragically killed when militants stormed their town to attack Christians. Sele was two years old.

Cecilia has managed to carry on her husband's farming business with the help of Sele and his siblings.

For some children in Nigeria, the field surrounding their house is as far as their future will go, simply because there's no extra money for school. But thanks to your support, Sele can go to a school where he can study and dream of making an impact on people's lives. He wants to be a doctor.

"My best thing about Christmas is the dramas we watch in church and the songs we sing, and how they share Christmas gifts," he says. Last year, you added joy to Sele's celebrations by giving him new clothes and an illustrated Bible. "The joy and surprise he displayed was priceless," shares an Open Doors local partner.

As we enjoy our favourite Christmas traditions this year, please continue to remember children like Sele and Rafif – and many more of our persecuted brothers and sisters – whose celebrations of the festive season come with a sharp reminder of how costly it can be to follow Jesus.

- **Every £20 could pay for four months of basic schooling for a child of a Christian pastor who was killed for their faith**
- **Every £9 could give a persecuted child a Bible to help them grow in their faith.**



To give a Christmas gift, please scan the QR code or go to opendoorsuk.org/christmas

★ About Open Doors

Open Doors supports millions of persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries across the world. Our global, underground networks work in partnership with the local church to provide food and medicine, smuggled Bibles and literature, spiritual care, vocational training and legal advice – whatever persecuted Christians need and for as long as they need it. You can bring hope to persecuted Christians and sign up to receive stories of courageous faith at opendoorsuk.org.



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