This (evening) we’re going to spend some time considering our own life journeys using a series of reflections based on the characters in the Nativity. We’re going to work our way around the room together so each time we begin a new character we’ll all face a new wall, a new visual representation of the character in the reflection.

You should each have a Life Journey sheet...

Let’s begin by writing the year of your birth on the left hand side of the line then roughly split the rest into decades.

**An opening prayer:**

Lord, as we begin this series of reflections, we ask you to be present with us in these moments. Help us to pay attention to you, to notice what you’ve done. We are open to you. We are who we are and we are safe knowing you are who you are. Here and now let us listen and be changed by the experiences of the people of the nativity, the experiences of each other, the experiences of ourselves and most of all by the ever present experience of you. Amen.
Reflection 1: SHEPHERDS

When I was young I was told that the shepherds in the nativity were a representation of the poor. That when they visited baby Jesus it was a symbol that God had not just sent his son for the rich or powerful or privileged but for everyone including the lowest of the low. As I grew older people began to mention the class divide and that the shepherds represented the working classes, people who did the same sort of thing day in day out to bring in enough money to feed and clothe their families. A couple of years ago, it was pointed out to me that the shepherds in the nativity have far more significance and carry a much greater weight in their representation. If we look at the Old Testament we find example after example of shepherds and who are they? God’s people, the Israelites. The shepherds in the nativity story are not just an illustration of the poor, they are a picture of God’s chosen people… When the shepherd’s went into Bethlehem it was all about God showing his people that the messiah had come, something they had been waiting for, for 400 years.

The Angels came and told the shepherds that their saviour had been born – it’s no wonder they went to find him, it was the fulfilment of all the prophesies they would have heard as they sat around a fire night after night. The shepherds found their messiah laying in a food trough in Bethlehem...

Where did you find him?

If you have a particular memory of when you asked Jesus into your life, write it on your life journey sheet. Perhaps there is not a certain day or month or year when you made a decision – that’s just fine too... why don’t you put a mark on the line when you remember thinking about God or shade a section that shows a time period when you know God was on your case.

When the heavenly hosts visited the shepherds on the hill that night they interrupted the ordinary... they brought news of Jesus’ birth during the everyday activity of the shepherds.

{personal anecdote of a time God spoke to you} ... I understood at that point that there was something more, something else I should be doing...

Let’s spend a few moments thinking about times in our lives when God has interrupted the ordinary. You might like to write some examples above the line on your life journey sheet.

MUSIC?

Lord, we thank you for the times when you have interrupted our lives, to give guidance, love and support as we try to follow a righteous path. Please help us to recognise when you are speaking to us. Amen
Reflection 2 – THE MAGI

Kings, Magi, Astrologers, wise men – whatever you want to call them these are important characters in the nativity story. A group of men, who took a risk, followed a star for thousands of miles and gave strange gifts to Mary and Joseph. These were not people who travelled alone, they were companions.

Spend a few moments thinking of people that have travelled with you during your life journey. It may have been for a short time or you may know people who have been alongside you for many years. You can either write when you met them on your life journey sheet or perhaps you’d like to mark the year’s particular people were involved in your journey.

The Magi spent a long time travelling, they entered the unknown to pursue the sign they had been sent. Are there times in your life when you have had to journey into the unknown? Let’s think about these times and add them to our life journey sheets.

MUSIC?

Lord, we thank you for providing people to travel alongside us, we ask that you would continue to provide such people to care for and encourage us. We thank you that you never ask us to do anything or go anywhere that we can’t manage with your strength, please help us to recognise that taking risks is part of our faith journey.
Reflection 3 – HEROD

In a moment we’re going to consider when God has asked us to give him our ‘Yes’ as Mary had to do, but sometimes there are barriers in our lives – hurt and pain that stops us from recognising God in our lives. We’re going to spend some time reflecting on what Herod might represent for us today.

Herod did not give honest help as his guests might have expected. He said he wanted to worship the Messiah but he had much darker thoughts to keep him on the throne. He betrayed the magi and went on to slaughter hundreds of innocent children. Sometimes people lie or hurt us and it feels like we’ve been betrayed – Sometimes it is in small ways because we all make mistakes but sometimes it is in painfully large ways.

We’re not going to write down anything on our sheets in this section because I want you to be able to take them away as a reminder of all the positive things that have happened during your life. Instead, I’m going to play a piece of music to allow us time to think about the barriers we may have between us and God. Sometimes I find it useful to have a visual representation when I pray and ask God for healing. While the music plays, please feel free to come up and put one of these tablets into the water and watch as God takes your hurt and pain away…

MUSIC

Lord, we’re sorry if we have blamed you for any hurt or pain we have suffered. Please help us to realise that you are always there and you want to be part of the healing process. Amen
Reflection 4 – MARY

Moving on to reflect on Mary. Mary can represent so many different things; purity, trust, receiving messages. Mary was chosen for a very special task and yet she was immediately despised, outcast and ostracised. This evening I’d like us to think about the fact God asked her to do something and she gave him her ‘yes’ in the full knowledge that it was going to be incredibly difficult.

At what point in our lives has God asked us to do something and we’ve given him our ‘yes’? It may not have been an easy decision but let’s write down some of the times we’ve given God our yes. I’m sure you all know the footprints in the sand poem and as we reflect, you may recognise that God has carried you through some situations and you didn’t know you’d given him your yes… please do add these to your sheet as well.

- Perhaps you’ve had to move somewhere else to live?
- Perhaps you’ve been called to change what you do for work?
- Perhaps God’s asked you to change where you worship?
- Perhaps you’ve made changes to who you spend time with?
- Perhaps the challenge for you has been the responsibilities you take?

Maybe you can’t think of a time when God has asked you to do something specific but you know there are changes you need to make in your life right now. Let’s spend a few moments thinking about where we are in our journey today and write down anything God may be saying to us.

MUSIC?

Lord, you are in control. We thank you for guiding us even when it feels like a challenge. Please help us to recognise your hand on our lives and to give you our yes when you call us to times of change in our lives.
Reflection 5 – JOSEPH

I’m not sure why we focus on Mary so much more than Joseph. He was chosen just the same as Mary was for the incredible task of being a parent to the Son of God. He made a very tough decision to stay with Mary even though he knew it would bring shame on himself and his family. He accepted the consequences – he chose to man up and took a hit for the team, he chose to stand by someone who needed his help, his companionship, his love and his care.

Who have you stood by who needed your help? Perhaps you give to certain charities or support a child through compassion. Maybe you’ve raised money though running a marathon or sitting in a bath of beans. Some of you may have volunteered with a charity, a church group or in a residential home. Maybe you’ve been on a mission trip to support a church or project in another country. Perhaps, like Pixie here at Lee Abbey you have a passion for fair trade, to buy products you know support the producers in a fair way. God calls us to the orphans and the widows – we need to get involved in issues of social justice. Let’s spend a while writing down the times we have stood by people, especially when that decision has come with consequences.

MUSIC?

Lord, you call us to stand with those who are less fortunate than ourselves, we pray you will guide us in how to spend our time, energy and money in supporting those in need. Amen
Reflection 6 – ELIZABETH

We don’t often focus much on Mary’s trip to visit Elizabeth yet it holds such value in the wider narrative of God’s story. Mary needed to escape, to find a place of safety and somewhere she could think about all that was happening. Elizabeth provided that environment, she offered hospitality at a time when no one else would. She accepted Mary for who she was with love and kindness.

You may have heard the phrase, thin place, somewhere it seems easier to connect with God, where heaven and earth seem a little closer than normal. I suspect that Elizabeth’s home was a thin place for Mary, somewhere she could connect with God and work through all that was going on.

Let’s reflect for a while and write down when we have experienced thin places during our lives... perhaps it’s a building like a cathedral or someone’s home. Perhaps it’s a particular mountain top or retreat centre. Perhaps it’s somewhere you’ve been on holiday and you’ve connected to God through nature or the beautiful surroundings.

Now let’s add to the our journey sheet some places where we have received great hospitality. Hopefully you are feeling welcomed at Lee Abbey this week but where else have you found a warm welcome, where else have you found acceptance and love?

Lastly, there may be particular people who have taken you under their wing, looked after you during times of struggle or hardship – why don’t you add them to your journey sheet too.

MUSIC?

Lord, we thank you for providing us with places of safety, of comfort and of rest. We pray that you will continue to bring people alongside us who give us acceptance and love. Amen.
Final Reflection

As our time draws to a close, let’s spend a few minutes in silence looking at all the amazing things God has done in our lives.

For the times God has found us in the ordinary, for the people who have travelled with us, for the times we’ve given God our yes or he has carried us through times of challenge, for the times we have come along side others to fulfil our call to social justice and for the times, places and people who have shown us hospitality and acceptance.

SILENCE

Lord, thank you for the time we have spent together this morning reflecting on your work in our lives. We ask that you daily remind us of your guiding hand on our lives. Amen