



Prepare Ye The Way



How often do we open ourselves up to change? Especially at Christmas, when we are warmed by tradition and the familiar, and find comfort in people and homes we know well, we don't always welcome things that will disrupt us from our norm.

Over the next four weeks of advent, as once again we prepare the way for Jesus' arrival, we will reflect on how we might be disrupted from our norm by seeking out **transformational encounter**.



In the Magnificat we read,
"He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the humble".

Do we recognise our own pride and might
which needs to be undone?

Do we see the hunger of those who hope to be filled?
How can we join in the work of God and cause holy disruption?



Join us on this journey to prepare the way for Jesus' arrival through transformational encounter. Look out for more stories and reflections, by following us on social media:

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Transformational Encounter

*He has filled the hungry with good things
but he has sent the rich away empty.*

Luke 1: 53

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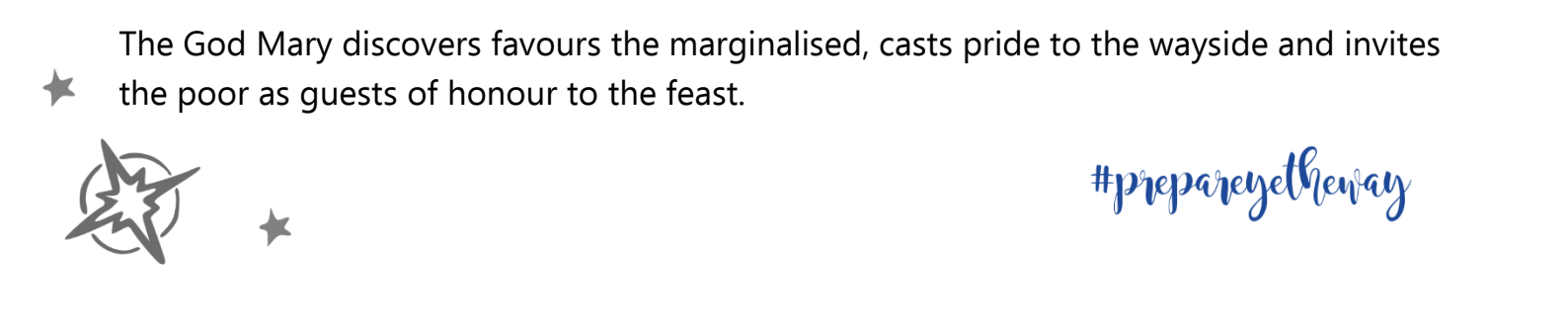
Over the next four weeks of advent, as once again we prepare the way for Jesus' arrival, we will reflect on how we might be disrupted from our norm by seeking out **transformational encounter**.

The story of Jesus' birth is full of disruptive encounters. Beginning with Mary's visit from the Angel Gabriel, and ending with a group of scholars travelling thousands of miles to meet a teenage mum and her child, the experiences of those in the biblical stories couldn't be more unlikely. Yet these are stories of transformation, as people step into the presence of God and have their worlds changed.

Take Mary, for example. In Luke Chapter 1, a teenage girl encounters an angel in her home. Finding herself suddenly in the presence of the heavens, the disruption of a simple Bethlehem room by the angel's blinding light must have been a transformation in itself. But not only was Mary's physical world transformed by the divine, so too was her understanding of God.

The words Mary speaks in Luke 1: 46-56, in response to her experience, show her discovery of a God who turns things upside down. Through the revelation of the angel, Mary meets a God who comes to perform the mightiest act of salvation the world has ever seen, but does so without power or pride. In fact, she encounters a God who chooses instead to be found with the humble and the hungry.

The God Mary discovers favours the marginalised, casts pride to the wayside and invites the poor as guests of honour to the feast.



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A God who chooses to see value in those who may look unpromising to human eyes. This is certainly a far cry from the earthly displays of power and leadership Mary would have been used to. This God tips the balance of power.

Mary encounters a God of justice, service and humility, and her world is transformed.

Through his choice of arrival, God foretells of Jesus' ministry to come – one of holy disruption, interruption and change.

This act of disruption didn't stop with Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, but surely is the commission of the church today too. A calling to step out of the comfortable, and into transformational encounter with the divine.

Richard Foster says that

'to stand before the holy one of eternity is to change'.

Just like Mary, we are called to encounter God's presence, and in doing so be open to holy disruption.

This advent, you are invited to prepare the way for Jesus' arrival by stepping into transformational encounter.

As Mary meets God in the humble and the hungry, we too can choose encounter God through those we might least expect.

Each week, there will be an opportunity to reflect on the transformational encounters experienced by those at Jesus birth, and think about this in the context of some of the issues we currently face as a society. As we do so, we will ask ourselves:

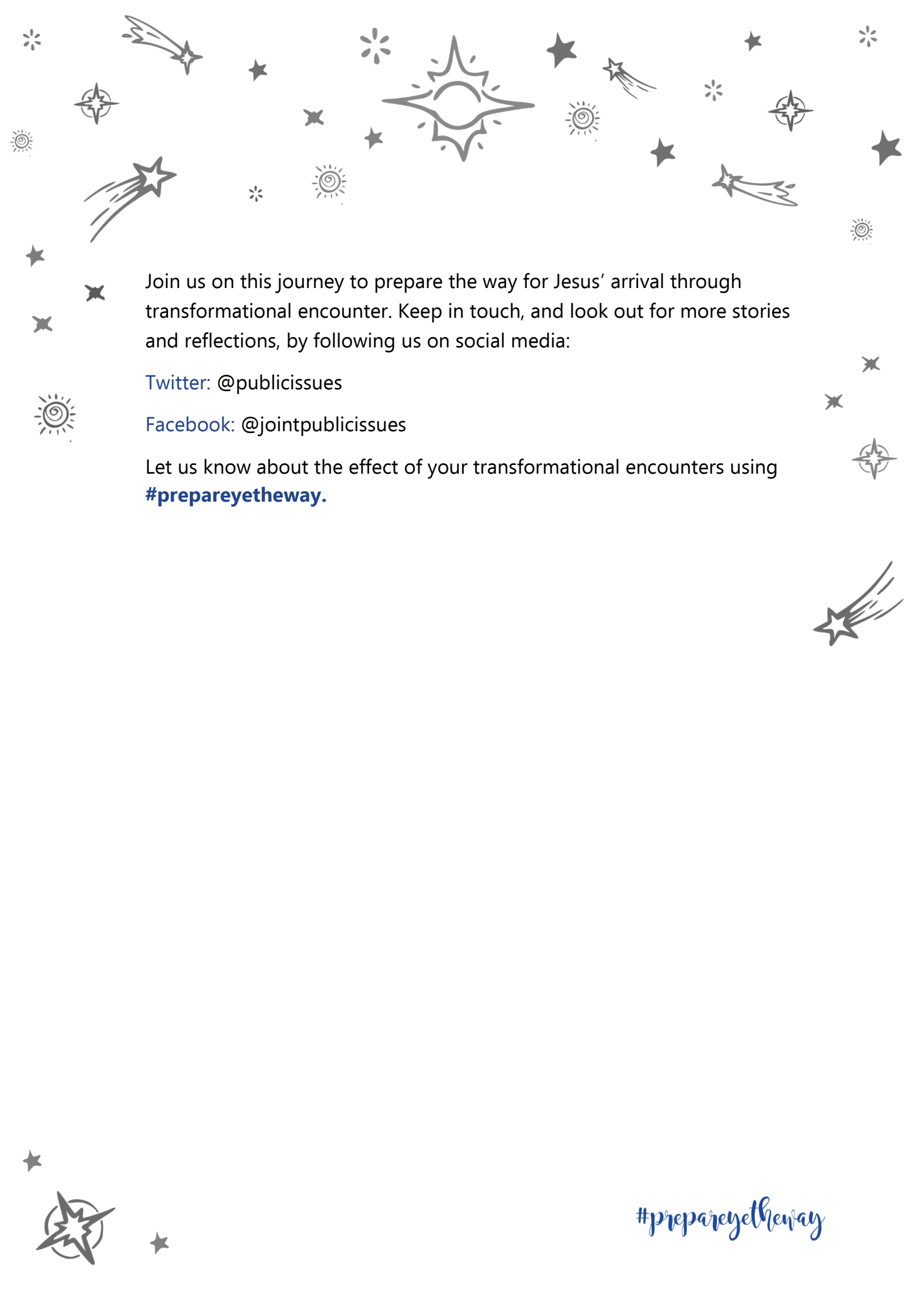
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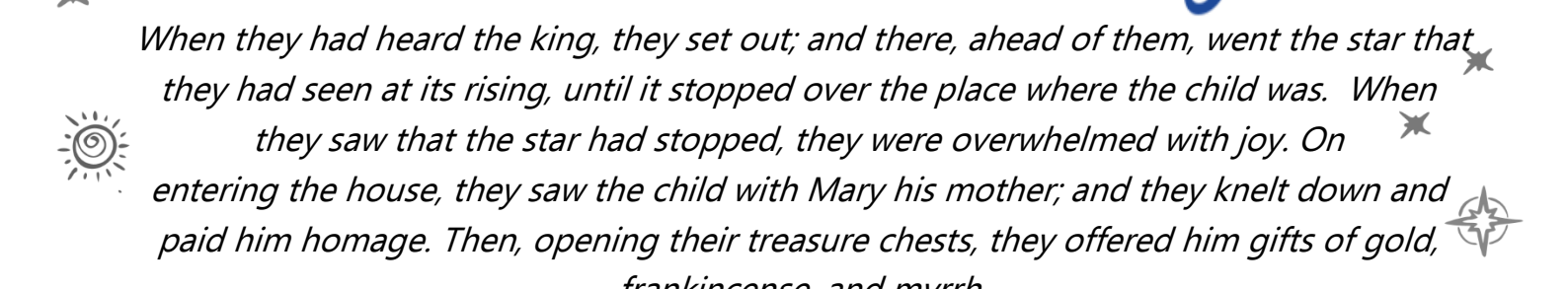
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Week 1: One Body



When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Matthew 2: 9-11

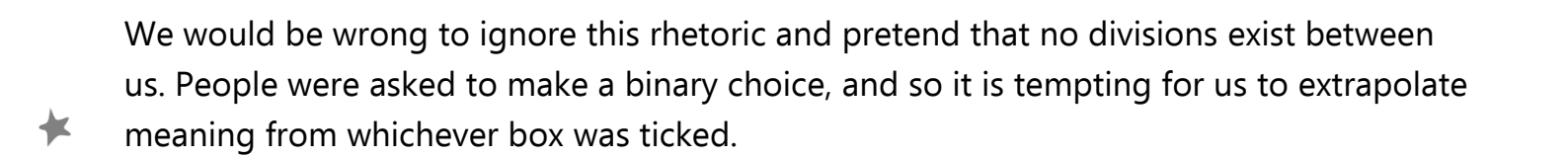
Many times in the Bible, we are reminded of the importance of Christian unity. We are one body. We are to be united in word and thought. We are to live in harmony with one another.



This is considerably easier in theory than practice. We are all different, but sometimes our differences lead to fractures even in our churches and family units.

As a nation, our differences have been brought into sharp focus by Brexit. Our response to a single question, to leave or remain, has seen us all categorised simplistically into two groups: the 52% and the 48%. Instead of bringing our disagreements before one another and before God, very often the temptation is to dismiss alternative points of view as inferior to our own.

The language used around Brexit is often unhelpful. People who express their concerns are dismissed as 'remoaners'. The Collins Dictionary has chosen 'gammon' as its word of the year for 2018, used insultingly in the context of 'a person, typically middle-aged and white, with reactionary views, especially one who supports the withdrawal of Britain from the European Union'. This undignified language is not used by everyone, but it pollutes the discourse and affects us all.



We would be wrong to ignore this rhetoric and pretend that no divisions exist between us. People were asked to make a binary choice, and so it is tempting for us to extrapolate meaning from whichever box was ticked.



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Strong opinions were – and still are – held on both sides of the argument. But nor should we be fooled into thinking that our divisions are eternally irreconcilable.

As we approach 2019, the year when some questions will be answered and many more will arise, how will we respond to political disagreements?

Perhaps we can learn something from those who travelled to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The learned Magi, bearing riches and worldly knowledge, and the provincial shepherds, still reeling from the sight of an angelic host in the sky, arrived at the manger from very different places. They would have embarked on their journeys to the manger with very different experiences of life. Their understandings of the divine would have been so incongruent that their arrival at the very same point seems baffling.

And yet here they are, kneeling before the same God who marked his arrival on Earth in the form of a lowly infant. Here they are, stepping into a transformational encounter with the divine.

Encounters with Jesus inevitably lead to change. But as we encounter the divine, we do not forgo our own identities. Our relationship with God calls us into fellowship with believers, but we are not called to passive conformity. Rather, we are called to honour and value one another through our differences.

A. W. Tozer asks in 'The Pursuit of God':

'Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.'

Different instruments, yet in tune with another. Journeying from different places, we all arrive at a place of unity, gathered around the manger.



As God calls the wise men and shepherds to celebrate the birth of his son, he declares the truly inclusive nature of his kingdom. He casts the foundations wide, inviting the learned and the provincial to join with him, actively seeking out differences in society. Our God embraces difference – he is bigger than the divisions that threaten to overwhelm us.

Before Immanuel, 'God with us', who lived, died and rose again for us, we find our unity made complete.

We will hold different opinions about the best course for our nation's future, but this need not be an excuse to avoid dialogue. In fact, it is an encouragement to engage with one another. For when we encounter the living God, who transcends all our differences, whose love binds us all together in perfect harmony, how can we fail to work together?

Questions:

Take time to consider where you might have used a difference in opinion as a dividing point.

Where have you been quick to speak, and slow to listen?

When have you chosen not to hear the opinions of others?

Challenge:

Is there someone in your life from whom you are divided because of Brexit? Maybe it's a friend, a family member, a colleague or even a group of people in your community.

Challenge yourself to step into transformational encounter, by choosing to meet with them. Challenge yourself to listen.

Maybe you could use the opportunity to talk to those around you about what you want your community to look like after Brexit.

Prayer:

God of Unity,

Thank you that you are one, always in unity with one another and with you.
Thank you that you see beyond division, and call us into fellowship with yourself.

We are sorry that we often resist this call,
and instead allow our differences to divide us.

Call us again into transformational encounter with your spirit of unity,
that we might be 'tuned' to your voice, to hear yourself and one another.
Humble us, that we might kneel by the manger and know that in your divine
kingdom, we all serve the same God.

Amen.



As the Joint Public Issues Team, we work to try and build hope of a society which
seeks to hold the most vulnerable at the centre, despite conflict and division. This is
explored through many different areas of our work.

Why not find out more about the workplan of the Joint Public Issues Team at
www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/about-us.



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Week 2: People over place and status

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2: 16-20.

2018 has seen the increasing profile of Universal Credit. We have seen news of its rollout in the media, heard it debated in government and seen the impact on our local communities. There are now over 1 million families receiving Universal Credit with more moving across every day.

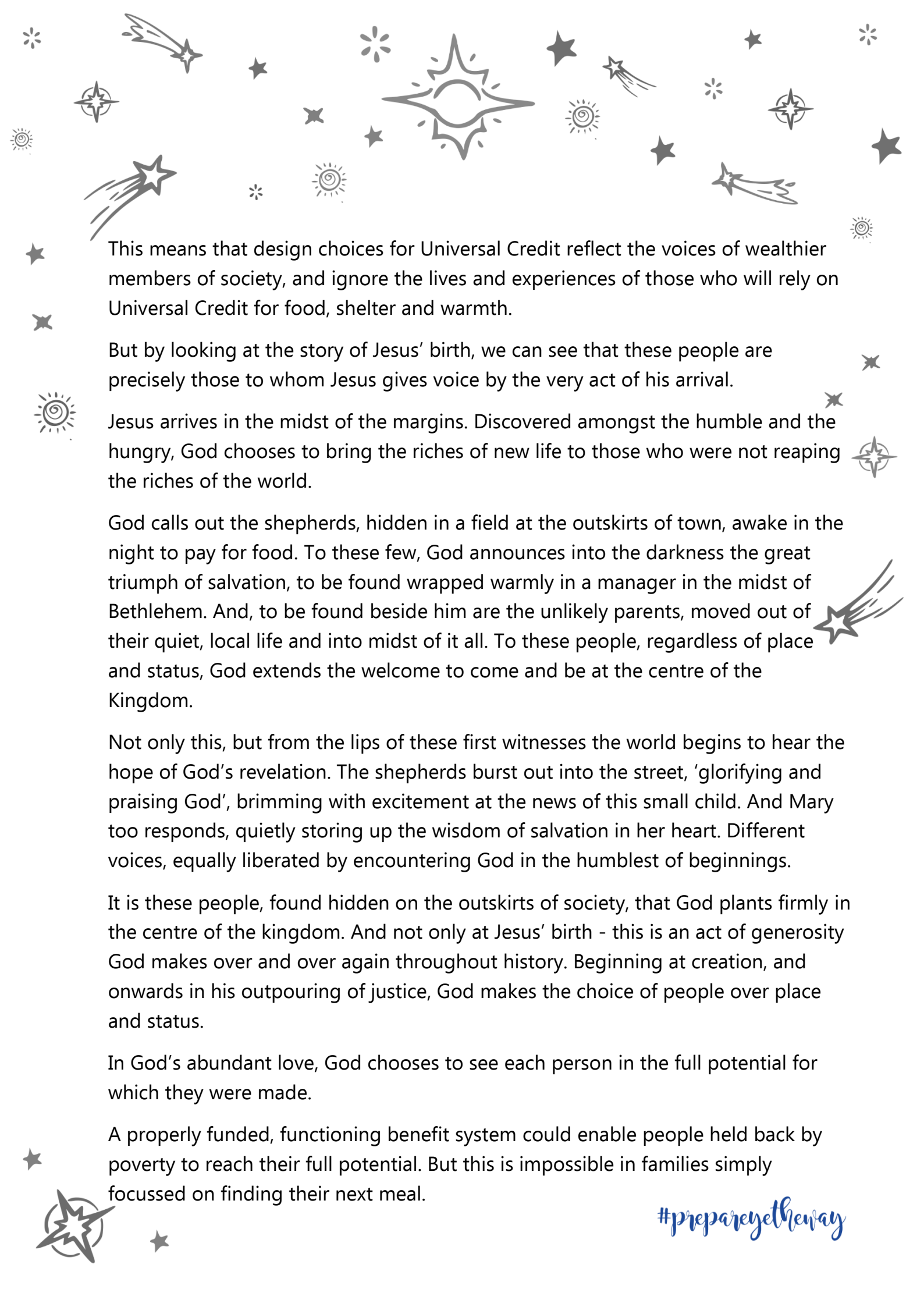
Churches, charities and claimants themselves have repeatedly said that Universal Credit leads many towards financial crisis and even hunger. Trussell Trust foodbanks have seen demand rise 51% in areas that have had Universal Credit for a year. A foodbank visit is often because of a crisis – an unexpected expense or a benefit payment going missing. As benefit levels fall families, often those unable to work because of illness, simply do not have enough to live day to day. This system is not working: instead, it is driving people further into poverty.

Whilst improvements are possible, many of the problems with Universal Credit are fundamentally designed in and are ongoing throughout a claim. They are not going away without big changes.

At the heart of the issue with Universal Credit is the absence of 'people-based' policy. Those who receive and rely on Universal Credit have not been at the centre of discussions. They have not been considered the 'experts by experience' that they are.



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This means that design choices for Universal Credit reflect the voices of wealthier members of society, and ignore the lives and experiences of those who will rely on Universal Credit for food, shelter and warmth.

But by looking at the story of Jesus' birth, we can see that these people are precisely those to whom Jesus gives voice by the very act of his arrival.

Jesus arrives in the midst of the margins. Discovered amongst the humble and the hungry, God chooses to bring the riches of new life to those who were not reaping the riches of the world.

God calls out the shepherds, hidden in a field at the outskirts of town, awake in the night to pay for food. To these few, God announces into the darkness the great triumph of salvation, to be found wrapped warmly in a manger in the midst of Bethlehem. And, to be found beside him are the unlikely parents, moved out of their quiet, local life and into midst of it all. To these people, regardless of place and status, God extends the welcome to come and be at the centre of the Kingdom.

Not only this, but from the lips of these first witnesses the world begins to hear the hope of God's revelation. The shepherds burst out into the street, 'glorifying and praising God', brimming with excitement at the news of this small child. And Mary too responds, quietly storing up the wisdom of salvation in her heart. Different voices, equally liberated by encountering God in the humblest of beginnings.

It is these people, found hidden on the outskirts of society, that God plants firmly in the centre of the kingdom. And not only at Jesus' birth - this is an act of generosity God makes over and over again throughout history. Beginning at creation, and onwards in his outpouring of justice, God makes the choice of people over place and status.

In God's abundant love, God chooses to see each person in the full potential for which they were made.

A properly funded, functioning benefit system could enable people held back by poverty to reach their full potential. But this is impossible in families simply focussed on finding their next meal.

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Universal Credit is not helping to release people from the trap of poverty. Instead, it continues to keep hidden those God seeks to set front and centre.

Maybe this is where our challenge begins, as we carry the problems of Universal Credit forward with us into a new year. As God continually does, we need to choose to place people at the centre. The restraints Universal Credit places on the flourishing of those relying on it simply does not allow for fullness of life to grow.

The words of John 1, often read at advent, sound disruptive when read in the voice of those God chose to be at the centre of his Kingdom.

'The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us'.

Immanuel, 'God with us', is with those at the margins of society, drawing them in to the riches of new life. God builds his Kingdom with his people at the centre. Here too should be the place from which we begin to grow our 'people-based policy', in the vision of fullness of life for all.

Questions:

The next time you see facts and figures about the welfare system, try to imagine the people behind them. How might this help you understand the reports and statistics better?

What are some of the stereotypes of people receiving welfare you have heard? Does this line up with your lived experience?

When was the last time you had a conversation with someone receiving Universal Credit? Did you take the time to listen to their story? What difference did this make to you?

Or, if you receive Universal Credit or another welfare payment, when was the last time someone listened to your story? What difference did this make to you?



Challenge:

It is time for the lives of those in the midst of Universal Credit to be seen. This will only happen if we choose to place people at the centre of the system. Use this opportunity to tell or hear the story of someone receiving Universal Credit, or expecting to under the new system. This might be your own story, or that of someone in your community. Take the time to listen, and think about what we can do together to fix the flaws of Universal Credit.

Prayer:

God, who in grace chooses people over place and status,
we rejoice that when you came to earth,
you chose to be found amongst the humble and the hungry.
We rejoice that you care about the voices of those society chooses to silence.
Help us to see the riches of your Kingdom amongst those who haven't been
served well by the systems and structures of Universal Credit.
Help us to value the stories and wisdom of those who are 'experts by
experience' when it comes to the welfare system.
Challenge us that we may always invite those with lived experience to the table.
Amen.



You can find out more information about the rollout of Universal Credit on our
website, and by reading our blog, at
www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/poverty-and-inequality.



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Week 3: A New Order

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."*

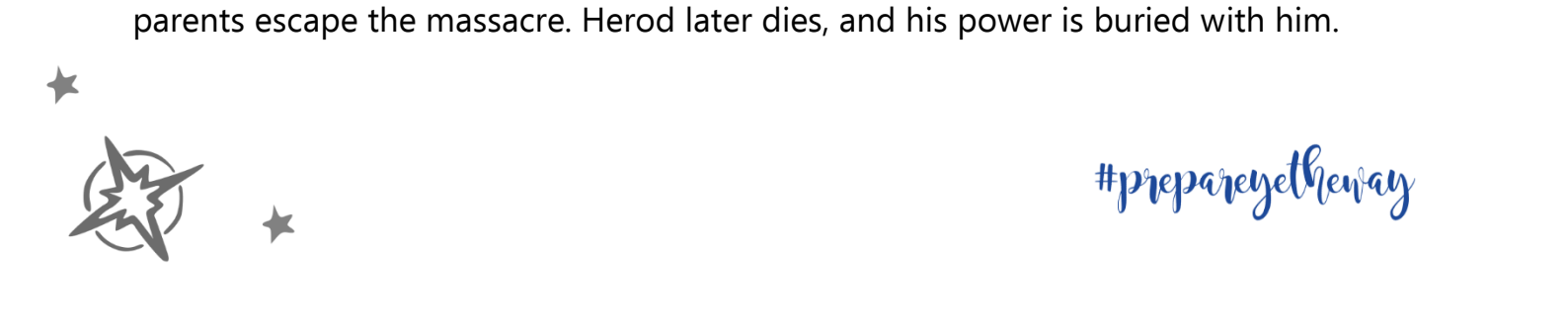
Matthew 2: 16-18

The shepherds hurried to Bethlehem. The wise men followed a star. Even in an era before breaking news alerts, the birth of Jesus was a major event.

Sometimes we forget, however, that the arrival of this great hope of humanity was not universally celebrated. Luke's Gospel tells us that King Herod was "disturbed" by the news. Indeed, the consequences of his rage are profoundly disturbing. Consumed by insecurity, jealous to protect his own power, the king orders the killing of every single male infant in Bethlehem.

The Christmas story proclaims new birth, but here we find ourselves confronted with the pain of loss. We see the vengefulness of a ruler who uses his authority for evil purposes. We hear the 'weeping and great mourning' of those whose children are no more. We feel the injustice of power abused, as the powerless are slaughtered by the powerful.

This, mercifully, is not the end of the story. With divine protection, Jesus and his parents escape the massacre. Herod later dies, and his power is buried with him.



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How was it that Jesus, this vulnerable baby born into the humblest of beginnings, could cause such disruption? How could someone seemingly so powerless threaten someone so powerful?

As Christians, we embrace a counter-cultural understanding of how to strive for peace. We live in a world where, all too often, our preference is for leaders who project strength. At the beginning of the year, the President of the United States launched a Twitter tirade against the leader of North Korea, boasting: "I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is much bigger & more powerful than his, and my Button works."

Such declarations of physical strength go against everything Jesus teaches about power. Born in the humblest of circumstances, he comes to establish a new order, representing a profound challenge to the powerful.

In his own exercise of power, Jesus shows us a different, better way. Instead of inciting the anger of an oppressed people living under Roman rule, Jesus preached a message of peace and reconciliation. Instead of spending time with the movers and shakers of society, he welcomed tax collectors and sinners. Instead of denouncing those who conspired against him, Jesus was full of compassion as he looked down on them from the cross. He urged: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

Peace in the face of provocation would strike many as timid submission. Indeed, in his birth and death, Jesus became greatly vulnerable. But in his resurrection he has overcome the world. We can rejoice that true power is found by walking the way of Christ, as he reconciled sinful humans to the holy God. Our calling is not simply to marvel at Jesus's actions, but to emulate his pursuit of peace, to carry with us his spirit of reconciliation.

This is a difficult endeavour because peace threatens the most powerful. King Herod simply could not countenance the challenge posed to his rule by a baby born in a stable.



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Have we begun to understand the power of Christ's triumph through peace? Have we understood that his approach does not represent timid submission, but rather the outworking of a new order? In the coming kingdom, power is not the preserve of the strong, influential or wealthy. Rather, true power is vested in the one who shows us what it means to be humble, whose vulnerability and message of peace and reconciliation shatters our preconceptions and challenges the most powerful.

Questions:

When was the last time you used power or influence to get your own way? Did it work? Did anyone pay the price for your power?

Can you think of a time when you have seen the powerless confront the powerful and win? What difference did this make to your understanding of power?

Where might an attitude of peace and forgiveness help us to solve a current conflict, either in your own life or in the world?

Challenge:

Reflect on a time when you have seen a different kind of power in action, working for peace and based on reconciliation.

How could you use your influence to promote an attitude of peace?

Prayer:

God of reconciliation,
In peace and humility, you challenge the powerful who promote injustice.
Thank you that you cast divine protection over those who work for peace.
We pray for courage in the face of violent and controlling power,
that we might stand steadfast in trust of another way.
Help us to resist using power to exploit others. Instead, help us to lift up
reconciliation and forgiveness, as we work towards your kingdom.
Amen.

You can find more of our work on peacemaking at
www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/peacemaking.

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Week 4: A God On The Move

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."



Matthew 2: 13-15

The birth of Jesus is one of the most well known stories in the world. The people at the centre of the tale have become so well known that it is often difficult to remember the humanity of the situation Joseph, Mary and their young son found themselves in. Born into powerlessness and persecution by the state, Jesus and his family were forced to flee a tyrannical leader set on destroying any risk to his continued power.

Despite the instructions from the angel in Joseph's dream, the decision to follow God's orders and flee would have been a terrifying one. There was no certainty that the young family would be safe.

For the Israelites, Egypt had been a place of slavery for generations of their people's history. Mary and Joseph would have been well aware of this and had no way of knowing if they would be welcomed or shunned in Egypt.



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There must have been a real sense of urgency and fear. Woken up in the dead of night by an angel, and told to flee to a foreign land would have been frightening enough. Not to mention that King Herod was attempting to hunt down and kill their new-born son. Like so many modern day refugees and migrants, the decision to flee was based on the necessity of survival.

The news would have soon reached Mary and Joseph that Herod had killed many other children in his quest to retain power. It is difficult to comprehend what they would have felt when hearing this news. Almost certainly relief at escaping, but also the continued fear of still being hunted, along with grief for the many children who were murdered at Herod's hand and maybe even guilt for their own child's survival.

This is indeed a tale full of remarkable, transformational encounters and miraculous events. However, at its core is a tale of migration and displacement, through which God identifies with the many refugees in our world who have experienced similar hardships.

A husband, wife and their new-born son are forced to flee their home due to persecution from a tyrannical leader. Trusting in faith that the journey will be a safe one, they exchange their home, family, community and language, for the hope of safety, security and a life free of persecution.

This is Jesus' story, but it is also the story of many families across the world. The flight of millions from Syria hoping to escape a state complicit in its own people's persecution, or those leaving Somalia with the aim of escaping famine and political turmoil.

The Israelites were displaced as a consequence of slavery. Jesus himself was displaced even before he was born, and again in his early years of life in Egypt.



Jesus' birth and early life is remarkable, but it is also incredibly normal. The flight to Egypt reflects the experience of so many who are also forced to flee for safety and survival. Indeed, the story of Jesus' families flight would not seem out of place within the tales of the millions of modern day refugees who are endeavouring to reach safety.

Jesus, the king of all, worshiped, praised and adored, started his life as a displaced person, seeking refuge in a foreign land. Immanuel, 'God with us' goes with those who continue to make this journey today.

Questions:

How should the fact that Jesus was a refugee impact the way we treat, recognise and dignify modern day refugees?

What could we, as Christians, do to welcome and support displaced people?

How are we enriched by welcoming and supporting displaced people within our communities?

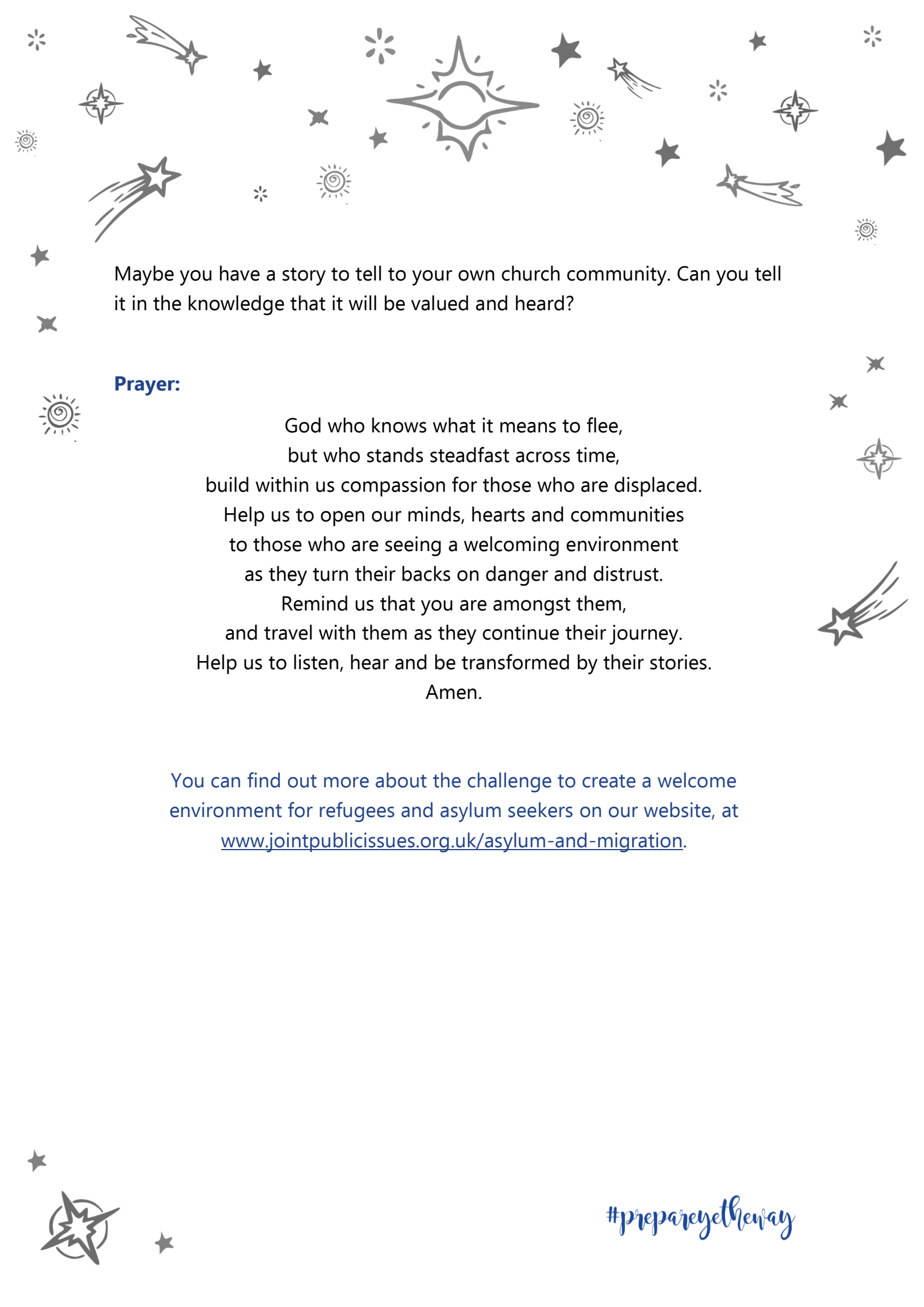
God's incarnation on earth tells us that God displaced himself to become present with all of humanity. What does this mean to you?

Challenge:

When was the last time you listened to the story of someone who arrived in this country after fleeing their own?

Why not find out what is behind the statistics and newspaper headlines. You could find a local project or community group, and get to know the stories of those who know what it means to be displaced.

You can also find some stories at <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/>.



Maybe you have a story to tell to your own church community. Can you tell it in the knowledge that it will be valued and heard?

Prayer:

God who knows what it means to flee,
but who stands steadfast across time,
build within us compassion for those who are displaced.
Help us to open our minds, hearts and communities
to those who are seeking a welcoming environment
as they turn their backs on danger and distrust.
Remind us that you are amongst them,
and travel with them as they continue their journey.
Help us to listen, hear and be transformed by their stories.
Amen.

You can find out more about the challenge to create a welcome environment for refugees and asylum seekers on our website, at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/asylum-and-migration.

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