



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:

Twitter: @publicissues

Facebook: @jointpublicissues

Keep in touch, and let us know about the effect of your transformational encounters using **#preparetheway**.



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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.

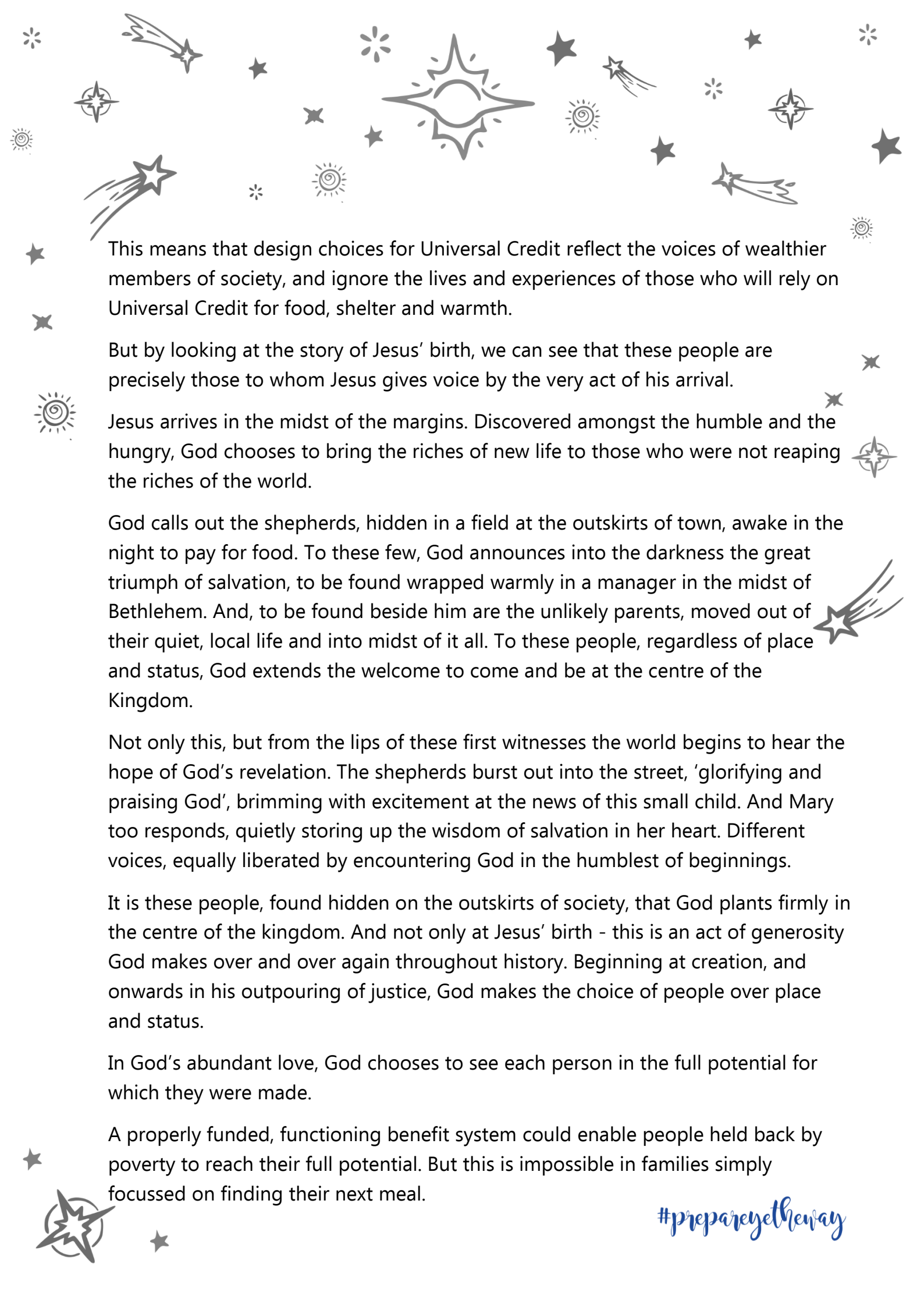
Churches, charities and claimants themselves have repeatedly said that Universal Credit leads many towards financial crisis and even hunger. Trussell Trust foodbanks have seen demand rise 51% in areas that have had Universal Credit for a year. A foodbank visit is often because of a crisis – an unexpected 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.

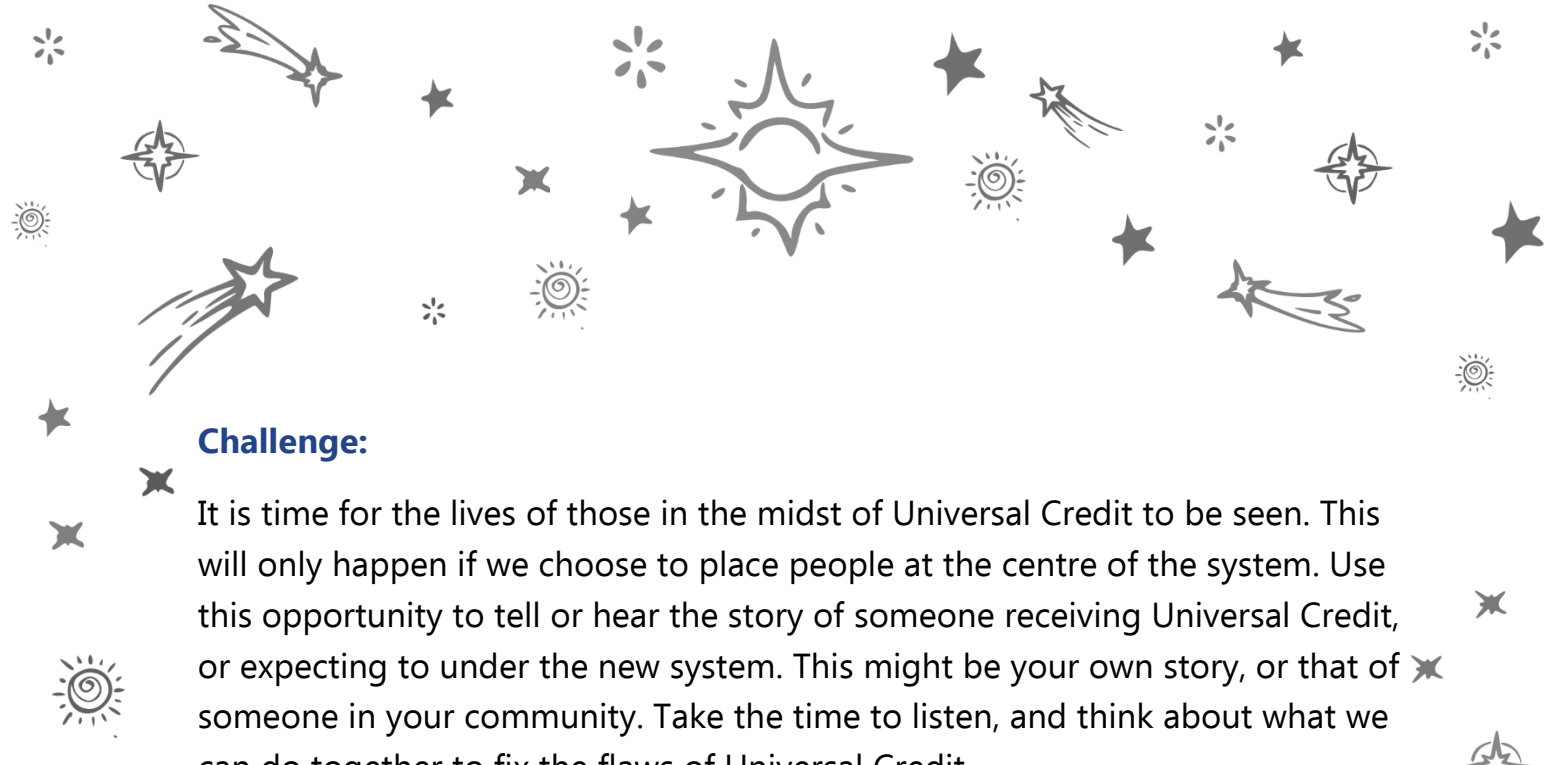
Questions:

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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