Aim: to reflect on the values of Christmas and how these apply to Christmases past, present and future.

Materials/preparation:
- the Christmas Past, Present and Future presentation (available to download at christianaid.org.uk/learn)
- prepare five students to say 'Merry Christmas' in different languages (see below).

ASSEMBLY PRESENTATION

Show slide 1
Five students should step forward to read out the following:
Slide 2. Feliz Natal (Brazil)
Slide 3. Jwaye Nowel (Haiti)
Slide 4. Melkin Yelidet Beaal (Ethiopia)
Slide 5. Nadolig Llawen (Wales)
Slide 6. Shubho Borodin (Bangladesh)

Ask the rest of the assembly group if they know what they are saying. The answer, of course, is: Merry Christmas! Explain which countries the different greetings come from and then read this quotation:

‘If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with “Merry Christmas” on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart!’

Ask pupils if they can guess where that quotation is from.

Show slide 7
The answer is A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. Many of you will be familiar with this story, which tells the tale of Ebenezer Scrooge, a mean and miserable man, who resents not just Christmas, but all the people around him. He is visited by a ghost who warns Scrooge that he must change his ways. Further visitations from the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come finally persuade Scrooge that he must embrace Christmas and show kindness to those around him.

Christmas can bring out a range of emotions in all of us. Many of us will feel happy at the prospect of spending time with friends and family. Others might feel excited about presents they are expecting. But for many people, Christmas can provoke mixed emotions. It can be a difficult time for those who are missing someone who is not able to spend Christmas with them, and a very sad time for those who have recently lost someone special. For some of us, perhaps those of different faiths, Christmas will not really be a big deal at all. And many of us, to some extent, might sympathise a little bit with Scrooge’s ‘Bah! Humbug!’ attitude, as we look around at the fuss that is made over just one day of the year.

Today, we are going to think about some different aspects of Christmas, and reflect on how we can all try to reconnect with some of the most important values celebrated at this time of year, whatever our personal beliefs might be.

For our Christmas Past, we will try to remember a particular Christmas (or other festival) that we have enjoyed and reflect on what was really most important about it. For our Christmas Present, we’ll look at what life is like for people living near Bethlehem today. And for our Christmas Yet to Come, we’ll think forward to the sort of Christmas we might like children to enjoy in the future.

Show slide 8
Ask students to close their eyes and recall their favourite Christmas ever. Acknowledge that students of other faiths might want to recall another special festival that they have celebrated.

What is it that you liked so much about Christmas (or other festival) that particular year? Was it a Christmas from years ago, when you were overwhelmed with excitement at the prospect of a visit from Santa? Or was it a more recent Christmas, perhaps one that was made special by a visit from a friend or relative? Was it a year when the Christmas dinner was especially delicious, or one where the family all got along very well? What really made it extra special?

Now ask students to try to remember what their main presents were last year. What about the year before? And the year before that? What about five years ago? Isn’t it funny that it is actually quite difficult to remember gifts. Usually, the things that stick in your mind, the things you really value, are not the presents at all, but the other experiences of Christmas: the peace of being at home, the comfort of a warm fire, the love of those around you.
These are the things that Scrooge was missing when he dismissed Christmas with a ‘Bah! Humbug!’ And it is these things that we can all forget to cherish at Christmas time. So this year, let’s think about what is really special about Christmas, and take to it the things we hope to get out of it: peace, comfort and love.

Show slides 9 and 10
We are going to look at how some of these values are being demonstrated in the world today. And as it’s Christmas, we will look to the region at the heart of the Christmas story: the West Bank, which is part of the occupied Palestinian territory. This region, which includes the town of Bethlehem, is the scene of a long conflict between two groups of people: the Palestinians and the Israelis. Life in this area is very difficult. And yet here, in the very midst of conflict, some people are demonstrating the values that we have identified: peace, comfort and love.

Show slide 11
Pnina Feiler is an 88-year-old Israeli nurse. In spite of her age, and the huge social and political pressures that could prevent her from reaching out to Palestinians, she determinedly carries on providing medical care to people on the other side of the conflict. She explains what motivates her: ‘Most of all, I believe it’s important to show that in all populations in the world there are those who are humane, good and compassionate.’

Her courage in extending peace, comfort and love to those who many would see as her ‘enemy’ is based upon her belief that common humanity is stronger than political differences: ‘I often have very interesting talks with children. Children are curious, they are interested in everything. They can never believe it when I say I’m an Israeli. I ask them “Why don’t you believe it?” They say, “Because Israelis are bad.”’ I ask them, “Are all the children in your school nice? Is everyone always nice to you?” and then they go quiet. And after a minute one of them will say, “There is this boy… at my school, and he is such a bully and he did this or that to me.” And I say, “Well, some Israelis are like that, but some are like me and the doctors here. There are good people and bad people everywhere.” I believe such talks don’t disappear into thin air. They are somewhere. And maybe when things change politically they will still be there, for us to build peace upon.’

Pnina volunteers for Physicians for Human Rights Israel, a group of Israeli medics who courageously continue to provide healthcare for Palestinians, in spite of the conflict. Show slide 12. They have helped Waleed, who was born almost totally deaf, to hear with the help of a hearing aid. Show slide 13. And they work hard to ensure that Salsabeel, who has a kidney condition, can travel to get the treatment she desperately needs.

These doctors believe that their obligation to help others overrides all political differences. They are supported by the charity Christian Aid, which provides essential funding for their work. Christian Aid works with partners of all faiths and none to overcome poverty and to promote the values we have talked about – peace, comfort and love – all through the year. Christian Aid works for a more just and sustainable future for everyone, which is based on their vision of a world free from poverty.

Show slide 14
For our Christmas Yet To Come reflection, I’d like you to close your eyes again and imagine a Christmas in the future. Remember the things you valued when you remembered a past Christmas. What values would you want to take to a future Christmas? Where would you like to be – and who would you like to be with? What sort of Christmas would you wish for your own children? And what are your Christmas wishes for the world?

REFLECTION

Today we have followed in the footsteps of Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens’ famous tale, as we have reflected on a Christmas Past and a Christmas Yet to Come. And we’ve heard about how the values that matter to us at Christmas time are being played out right now, in the work of people who are living in the conflict zone that was the setting of the original Christmas story. Let us approach this Christmas with those values close to our hearts, as we pray for peace around the world.

IDEAS FOR FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- run a Big Christmas Sing event in your school to help raise money for Christian Aid’s inspiring work around the world: christianaid.org.uk/bigsing
- give a present with a difference this year! Check out our range of Present Aid gifts at presentaid.org