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Life at Christmas





A gift that means the world

We all want a really meaningful gift

I found God in a letterbox

Postie, Phil, felt God draw him into church while delivering our mail

Carols and karaoke!

Karin shares her experience of Christmas growing up in the Philippines

Room for one more

Jennie & Chris chat about finding family at the Community Soup Lunch



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Tom is one of the pastors at Kennet Valley Free Church

A gift that means the world

You slowly make your way down the Christmas shopping list. You've got the presents for the immediate family, something thoughtful for your friends, perhaps a few stocking fillers. But there at the bottom is the name of that one person who is practically impossible to buy for.

They have everything already. If they want something, they buy it. Socks and gift vouchers are starting to feel a bit impersonal. So, in desperation, you turn to Google or ask AI for suggestions.

The suggestions are reasonable, but none feel quite right. So you add more detail. This person has had a rough year: work has dried up, relationships at home are strained, and poor health means they can't get out as much as they'd like.

Suddenly, the problem isn't really what to buy. It's how to give something meaningful to someone you care about.

What if we are that person on someone else's list? What we need isn't more stuff, or a novel experience, but something more. What would we ask for?

Earlier this year, I spoke at an event held on the University of Reading campus for students interested in the big questions of faith. I shared about the gift of new life that Jesus invites us into. During the Q&A, one student asked, "What if I'm happy as I am?"

That's a pretty common response; perhaps you feel that way too. When it comes to questions about God, your response might be, "I'm happy as I am".

> **"What if God knows you better than AI ever could?**

But what if God knows you better than AI ever could? What if he genuinely loves you and cares for you? And what if he's done something about it?

Perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible offers an answer:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."
– John 3:16

> **"... for the person that's impossible to buy for ... there's a more meaningful gift to receive.**

Jesus is the gift that gets us. He understands the human heart, our deepest longings and greatest need. He doesn't just understand us, he came to rescue us. He doesn't just offer a better life, he invites us into a relationship with the God who made us, loves us and rescues us from a life without him.

At Christmas, we celebrate the astonishing truth that God doesn't just understand us. He wants us. That's why he gave us Jesus.

Perhaps for the person that's impossible to buy for – whether that's the person on your list or yourself – there's a more meaningful gift to receive. One you may never have thought to ask for, something no shop sells and no AI-generated list suggests.

Keep reading to discover stories of ordinary local people who have come to know Jesus for themselves. Watch the videos, download the free ebook advertised on the back, or better still, come and hear the news of Jesus spoken and sung about at our Christmas services. Everyone is welcome.







I found God in a letterbox

Working at Royal Mail for 40 years, Christmas meant early alarms, dark and freezing mornings and, if I wasn't miserable enough already, arriving at the office to enormous sacks of mail and parcels, asking the question, "How can there possibly be THAT much post?" Just when you think you've got through it, someone gives you another sack to sort, and you start to wonder whether Christmas Day might arrive before you get home!

> **"I felt a pull from God ... to find out what lay behind those doors ...**

Christmas as a postman can be long, cold and tiring. You spend your days delivering cheer while often forgetting what Christmas is about.

Last Christmas, everything changed. I was delivering post to the church in the lead-up to Christmas, as I had done for years. But this time, something was different. Each time I went back, more and more, I felt a pull from God from the other side – a pull to find out what lay behind those doors and what it might have to do with me. At first, it wasn't something I felt I could talk about with others, but a Christian friend invited me to come and see the Christmas carols. That's where my journey began.

There was something special about walking into a warm church and being welcomed. It wasn't just a warm building; there was something about the people, the singing, the hearing about the birth of Jesus that stayed with me.

> **"... I witnessed people genuinely loving and supporting each other ...**

For the first time, I began to understand that Christmas wasn't simply about the presents we give each other; it was about the gift that God had given us: Jesus.

I went back, then I went back again. I got to know people, I saw things that really touched me, I witnessed people genuinely loving and supporting each other, not just when things were going well but especially when life was difficult. At a funeral of a much-loved lady, I was overwhelmed by the way Christians celebrated her life and that she had gone to be with the Lord. I wanted eternal life too, and all I had to do was put my faith in Jesus.

> **"Every card has a name and a story ...**

I realised that being a Christian wasn't about being perfect or having all the answers, it was about putting my trust in Jesus. Eventually, I made the decision to put my faith in him, and I was baptised in June this year.

So, when I think about Christmas now, I think about it differently. Just as Jesus entered the darkness, I know that he is with me in mine, he sees me and is with me even on a cold and quiet morning.

When I am out delivering the post, I often think about the people behind the doors I am delivering to. Every card has a name and a story, and I am reminded that Jesus came into this world to bring his message of love to us too.

For me, Christmas has become very personal. I know now that Jesus came for me, and that he meets me wherever I am, even on those cold, dark mornings when I am out delivering post. Somehow, knowing that makes those mornings feel a little less dark.

— Phil



Jolly Choccy Crispy Puds



You will need

- 200g milk chocolate
- 50g white chocolate
- 50g unsalted butter
- 180g mini marshmallows
- 100g Rice Krispies
- A packet of holly shaped ready-made icing (or make your own)



Make the puddings

1. Break the milk chocolate into a bowl and add the butter.
2. Gently melt the chocolate and butter together over a pan of simmering water (alternatively, heat them in the microwave in 30 second bursts).
3. Add the mini marshmallows and stir until they have melted and combined.
4. In a large mixing bowl combine your Rice Krispies with the chocolate/ marshmallow mixture. Stir until completely mixed.
5. Once cooled, use a tablespoon to separate the mixture equally. Roll them into balls to look like little puddings! (Wet your hands a little bit before rolling, to keep the mixture from sticking to your hands.)
6. Place the balls onto a parchment-lined tray and put in the fridge for 30 mins.

Decorate

7. Melt the white chocolate in a bowl and let it cool slightly.
8. Using a spoon (or a piping bag) drizzle the chocolate onto the pudding.
9. Finish each pudding with your holly leaf icing decorations.

Cocoa & Craft

Friday 11th December, 7-9pm



Suitable for adults & teens

Join us for a cosy, Christmassy evening at Kennet Valley Free Church, with a build-your-own hot chocolate bar and a handful of festive crafts.

No craft experience needed. Make one thing, make four things, or just drink hot chocolate and chat.

Places are limited so booking is essential.

Visit **kvfc.org.uk** to book or scan the QR code.

**suggested donation*





Carols and Karaoke!

Christmas in the Philippines is often described as the longest Christmas season celebrated by any country. Filipinos love Christmas, so much so that the Christmas holiday season starts at the start of the 'ber months'!

From the 1st September, shops, schools, homes and any establishment would noticeably have colourful and brightly lit Christmas decorations up like the Parol (a star-shaped lantern) and countless glittering Christmas lights. Shopping malls would have ice rinks put up, Christmas carols blaring through speakers, Christmas events start taking place and Church Christmas activities and services begin.

> **"With just some wire, and a few nails we could create our own tambourines ...**

One Filipino tradition that I will never forget growing up in the Philippines is carolling. Carolling is when a group of children, adults, friends or families go from house to house singing Christmas carols. As children we would make our own musical instruments out of flattened beer bottle tops or soft drink lids.

> **"No Filipino Christmas celebration is complete without karaoke!**

With just some wire, and a few nails we could create our own tambourines and maracas! Through the years carolling has evolved into street Christmas parties and even full-on productions with a band or portable speakers to showcase neighbourhood talents.

No Filipino Christmas celebration is complete without karaoke! Most households and establishments have a karaoke machine which comes out whenever there is any sort of gathering. It is the Filipinos' favourite pastime. Whether it's the current favourites or the timeless classics, local or foreign, joyful or reflective, you name it, we will get it on the karaoke.

Personally, my favourite Christmas Carol is *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. This song brings back a lot of memories singing in church as a young child back home in the Philippines. It is a song that expresses the exciting anticipation of Jesus Christ being born.

The chorus repeats that the birth of a Saviour is such good news for all mankind, that it can't be kept quiet but must be shared. This was good news then and it is still good news today; not just to be remembered or discussed during the festive season but rather, news worth proclaiming and singing about!

> **"... we are singing about the Jesus we have known throughout the year ...**

Beyond the flashing lights, food and merry making we take great joy in the Philippines bringing our loved ones together to sing and commemorate the arrival of Jesus. From September onwards, the celebrations keep on going and songs continue to be sung.

Perhaps the ongoing delight and jubilation is only fitting because the good news is not just an event that happened but a person who came to save us and to be known in our everyday lives. So, at Christmas, we are not just remembering and giving thanks for his arrival; we are singing about the Jesus we have known throughout the year and inviting others to get to know him too.

— Karin



Christmas stocking playlist

Bring a bit of life to your algorithm this Christmas! We've filled our Christmas stocking playlist with thought-provoking stories, big questions and fresh perspectives on the Christian faith.

Whether you've got a spare minute or fancy settling down for something longer, there's something here for you. Pick a video, press play and see what you think.

Quick watches

Life according to Jesus Glen Scrivener (Speak Life) *3 minutes*

What is the Bible? Bible Society *3 minutes*



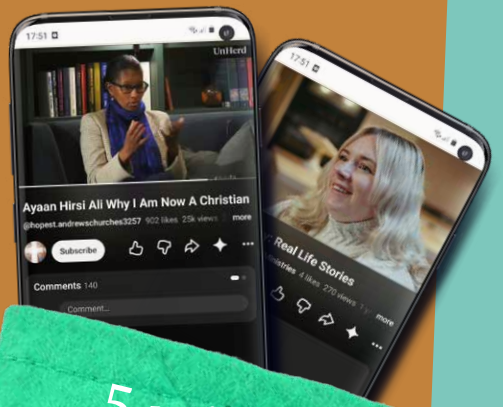
3 mins

Stories worth hearing

Personal stories of people exploring faith and discovering Jesus.

Muslim, atheist, then follower of Jesus Ayaan Hirsi Ali *5 minutes*

Jack & Amy explore Christianity and try church *5 minutes*



5 mins

Worth settling down for

Fancy a break from usual Christmas telly? Here are a couple of longer watches to get you thinking.

King of Kings Animated family film (2025) *1hr 43m*

Jesus' life retold by Charles Dickens. Available on Amazon Prime or to rent from other platforms for under £4. (QR code takes you to the trailer).

John Lennox on The Diary of a CEO *1hr 26m*

Oxford mathematician and Christian author John Lennox joined the global podcast to discuss God, AI and hope.



1+ hour

Movie review: Toy Story 5

As a family we were excited to hear about the new *Toy Story* film earlier this year. As parents of three boys aged 8, 6 and 3, and having enjoyed Toy Story films ourselves as children, we decided to work our way through the series from the beginning.

> **“ It portrays a screen-saturated society, much like our own ...**

Toy Story 5 felt very current. It portrays a screen-saturated society, much like our own yet very different from the one I grew up in. I remember life without much tech apart from the family TV.



I remember getting our first computer and phoning my friends for a chat on the landline in the hallway! Perhaps it's because *Toy Story 5* aims to speak into this growing tech saturation, that the laugh out loud moments seemed fewer and further between. Instead, it prompted us to think deeply and initiated conversation between us and our boys around tech and its impact on well-being.

We see a change in Bonnie almost as soon as she is given a tablet, Lilypad. She goes from being fun-loving, energetic, imaginative and playful to being tired and moody, worrying about missing the next game on her tablet with her new ‘friends’. Ultimately, this makes her miserable – even Lilypad, her tablet, reflects to Jessie, “No, I’m what’s wrong for Bonnie”.

The *Toy Story* films have always resonated with our deep longing for connection and relationship, which is why I think we enjoy them so much. From Woody and Andy, to Woody and Buzz and the rest of the gang. Through everything they go through together, what drives them to help one another in times of trouble is their connection: their identity as friends, and their sense of belonging to one another.

What inspired Bonnie’s parents to give her a tablet? It was because Bonnie was struggling to make friends, and that’s all she really wanted.

> **“ ... tech cannot meet our deepest need for connection and relationship.**

Unfortunately, Lilypad massively under-delivers on her promises of connection. Instead, she damages Bonnie’s relationships, undermining her confidence in real-world social situations. We watch on as she becomes a slave to her device, always checking, always feeling like she's missing out. I’m sure many of us can relate to those feelings and the impact tech has on us and our kids.

Ultimately, tech cannot meet our deepest need for connection and relationship. It cannot fill the God-shaped hole within us. Even our human friendships, which are a gift, sometimes let us down. We need something more.

Toy Story 5 is definitely one to watch. As always, it captures our desire to be known, loved and to belong. If you watch it this Christmas, enjoy the nostalgia of seeing some well-loved characters on screen, along with the chance to reflect on your own tech use and chat with your kids about it in a perhaps less naggy way. But also consider how this season of Christmas reminds us that God hasn’t left us searching for belonging, or trying to connect at a distance. He has come near.

— Sarah







HOPE | EXPLORED

Where can I find real and lasting hope?

What are the big questions you've always wanted to ask? Where do you go for answers?

You could turn to Google or ChatGPT, but some questions deserve more than a quick answer. Just as looking up symptoms online isn't the same as talking to a doctor, exploring life's biggest questions is about more than finding information. It's about discovering a hope that makes a difference in the here and now.

Come and join others with similar questions as we explore what Christianity has to say about three things we all need: hope, peace and purpose.

Scan the QR code below or visit our website to express your interest.

Ask questions

Informal sessions

Explore Christianity

Hope Explored looks at the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in Luke's Gospel (a biography of Jesus in the Bible). This three-session series shows that Christianity is about real hope: a joyful expectation for the future, based on true events in the past, which changes everything about the present.

Venue: Kennet Valley Free Church, Carters Rise

You will need

Toilet roll tubes
Paper/card
Cellotape or glue
Scissors
A phone torch



Shadow Torch

Cut out the shapes around this page, or trace them onto new paper/card ready to cut. (Draw the first letter of your name in the blank bottom-left one.)

Place the shape at the end of the tube, then fold and stick down the little tabs.

Find a dark room and **shine your phone torch into the other end** of the toilet roll.

Point it at a wall and watch your Christmas shadow appear!











Charlie has used his shadow torch to shine a light on what Christmas is all about! Scan the QR code to watch his 1 minute video.



Crossword



Answers are on our website: **kvfc.org.uk**

Across

1. Actress who played Susan in *Miracle on 34th Street (1994)* (4,6)
5. Reindeer whose name means 'thunder' in German (6)
6. Fruit in a Christmas stocking (7)
9. Tree limb (5)
11. Elf played by Will Ferrell (5)
12. Town Jesus was born in (9)
14. Birthplace of St. Nicholas (6)
15. Lyrics after 'All is calm' in *Silent Night* (3,2,6)

Down

2. Celestial body (4)
3. Magical, wintry place without Christmas (6)
4. Top cinnamon-producing country (9)
7. Former Canadian PM born on Christmas Day, Justin _____ (7)
8. Glee; fun (9)
10. Plant, *ilex aquifolium* (5)
13. Third gift given to Jesus (5)

West End has Faith

LUCY MILLER-WALL

KATRINA MARKHAM

DAVID BIRCH

KATY TREHARNE



£10

An evening of songs from the musicals, and inspirational stories featuring world class performers from London's West End

Performers have starred in *Phantom of the Opera, Legally Blonde, Matilda, Mamma Mia,* and a UK tour of *It is Well with My Soul*

Friday 5 March 2027, 7:30pm

At Kennet Valley Free Church. Refreshments provided. Book your tickets at **kvfc.org.uk.** Scan the QR code to watch a medley of *Joyful, Joyful* and *O Come, All Ye Faithful.*



Room for one more

The Community Soup Lunch brings people together twice a month. We spoke to Jennie and Chris about why they love it.

How did the idea for the soup lunch come about?

Jennie: Moving to Reading to be near my family was a big wrench after 44 years in Somerset. My husband and I had always been involved in church life, and our family enjoyed inviting friends and neighbours for meals.

I am a widow now and so grateful to God for my new home, church and friends. But eating alone can be lonely, and I realised that others ate alone too. After sharing my thoughts with Chris, the idea of a community lunch came into being.

Chris: Jennie and I met at Kennet Valley Free Church not long after her move. When we were chatting together in 2024, we realised that a simple lunch together would be welcomed by other people who were also living alone.

The idea also grew out of the coffee mornings. We noticed some people were keen to stay in the safe and warm space, while others were going into town for lunch. The church has a kitchen ideal for catering, so providing lunch seemed a natural thing to do.

What has happened around the tables since you started?

Jennie: Since the lunches started, we have seen old friendships strengthened and new friendships formed. People share their interests and life experiences, helping to build bonds with each other. And laughter is definitely part of the experience!

Chris: I've particularly enjoyed reconnecting with old friends I hadn't spoken to properly for a long time, as well as welcoming people who live locally. Working with the team to make the lunches enjoyable for everyone is also very rewarding.

Why is a meal a good way to bring people together?

Jennie: The Bible talks about how, as humans, we are made to be in community and build relationships with others. Some people eat on their own every day, but it is so much more enjoyable to share a meal, however simple it may be.

Chris: Sharing a meal encourages people to come and meet with others, whatever kind of day they are having. There is something very ordinary and special about sitting around a table, eating together and having time to talk.

You are warmly invited to join the Community Soup Lunches at Kennet Valley Free Church on the 2nd and 4th Thursday of each month.

The Christmas Soup Lunch is an additional lunch on Thursday 17 December 2026.

Optional donation of £1.50.

Why is it particularly significant at Christmas?

Jennie: Traditionally, Christmas is a time when we come together to celebrate the birth of Jesus. At our Christmas community lunch, we enjoy crackers, hats and jokes! Everyone gets a small gift to show that we value them, but also as a reminder that Christmas is about God's gift of Jesus to us.

Chris: It's a lovely occasion to share memories and experiences of Christmas. There's something particularly special about having one more person around the table at this time of year, so anyone thinking of coming would be very welcome.

– Chris Cowley and Jennie Bonnington



Free ebook

Christmas: The Greatest Gift

What if there is more to Christmas?

In this short, readable book you'll discover the greatest gift at the heart of Christmas! It's our free gift to you.

Maybe the greatest gift of Christmas is one you are yet to receive.

If you'd prefer a paper copy, pick one up for free at any of our Christmas services.



Scan the QR code to read it now. Use the code: **GREATESTGIFT** (valid until 01/01/27).



You're invited!

We would love to welcome you to our Christmas services

All-Age Nativity
Sunday 20 December, 10:30am

Carol Service
Sunday 20 December, 5pm

All-Age Christingle
Christmas Eve, 4pm

Christmas Day Praise
Friday 25 December, 10:30am

kvfc.org.uk
tom-kvfc@hotmail.com
(0118) 942 1591
07956 391146 (WhatsApp)
Kennet Valley Free Church,
Carters Rise RG31 7YT

Registered Charity No. 1174002