

master what had happened. Then the master became angry and said, 'Go at once into the streets and alleys of the town, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame ... and urge the people there to come so my house will be full. I tell you, none of those whom I invited first will eat with me.'"
Luke 14 v 16-24

Jesus invites everyone to join his kingdom - whoever you are and whatever you have done. We can all experience a fresh start, forgiveness for the past and new life to enjoy for ever. *But it is possible to refuse it.*

The important people of Jesus' time rejected God's true King, and one awful day he was led out to die on a cross as a common criminal. But three days later he rose again to prove that he is the Ruler of all, and that his death made forgiveness and new life possible for anyone who embraces Jesus as their King.

How do I become part of the kingdom of God?

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are God's answer to the spiritual problem of the human race. We all push God out of his rightful place at the centre of our lives: as our Creator, Guide and Friend. But the same Jesus who welcomed sinners when he walked on earth still offers a welcome to each one of us; whatever we have done, whatever we have become. But, as Jesus' story makes clear, if we persist in refusing his invitation, we will find ourselves excluded from the joy of heaven for ever.

But for those who respond to his invitation - those who receive Jesus the Lord into their hearts and lives, there is a marvellous welcome that we don't deserve. A welcome into God's presence with our sins forgiven. A welcome into God's worldwide family. And a welcome, ultimately, into his home in heaven - to be with him for all eternity.

How will you respond to the King's invitation this Christmas?



A CHRISTMAS PRAYER

Dear Father in heaven,

Thank you for sending Jesus into the world at that first Christmas as the King of all creation.

Thank you that he lived and died and rose again so that we can find forgiveness and new life.

I'm sorry for pushing you out of your rightful place in my life.

Please forgive me. Jesus, please come into my life as my Saviour, Lord, Teacher and Friend, and help me to live for you from now on.

Amen

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Strange that a season so full of happiness and light should find its origins in a story which, at first sight, seems so dark and tragic.

Here is a couple living under the occupation of a foreign power, travelling down a hard road to another town, 80 miles distant. A four-day journey for a heavily pregnant woman, and then, weary and footsore, they find that the inn is full. The child is born in obscurity and squalor, with a makeshift crib made from a cattle trough. Jesus was, quite literally, born an outsider. Even more astonishing when you consider that the Bible claims that this child is none other than the King of the universe.

The story turns even darker when the family is forced to flee to Egypt, after King Herod tries to kill the infant Jesus. Herod had learned that the Old Testament prophecies about a new king - God's one true King - were starting to come true.

And when, at the age of 30 or so, Jesus of Nazareth became a wandering preacher, his message focused on what he called "the kingdom of God", or the "kingdom of heaven".



What is the kingdom of God?

Jesus criss-crossed the countryside of Israel telling anyone who would listen that the kingdom of heaven had arrived, and that everyone needed to wake up and get ready. He told stories like these:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. One day a man found the treasure, and then he hid it in the field again. He was so happy that he went and sold everything he owned to buy that field. Also, the kingdom of heaven is like a man looking for fine pearls. When he found a very valuable pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it." *Matthew 13 v 44-46*

Finding the kingdom, *embracing* the kingdom, *having* the kingdom, is the most important thing that anyone can do - more important than anything else in life. But what is this kingdom, and where do you find it?

Quite simply, the kingdom of heaven is where God's one true King rules.

All the time Jesus was teaching about the kingdom, he was showing its power. He healed sick people with a word; he stilled storms and provided plentiful food for starving people; he showed his power over the dark forces at work in the world by freeing people oppressed by evil spirits. And he showed his mastery of the ultimate enemy - death - by raising dead people back to life. And while performing these astonishing miracles, he taught about God, as no-one else had taught before or since.



Where is the kingdom of God?

The answer becomes more and more obvious - Jesus announced that the Kingdom is *here* because the King had arrived! Jesus is the King whose birth was seen in the stars by the wise men, and whose arrival was

announced to shepherds by angels. Jesus is God's everlasting King, and he shows it by displays of kingly power and generosity. Jesus is God's loving King, who showers gifts of forgiveness, freedom and new life on those who receive him. When Jesus walked on the earth we glimpsed what the kingdom of heaven will be like for ever - no more crying, or grief, or hunger, or sickness, but peace and plenty for everyone.



Who is welcome in the kingdom of God?

And here's another surprise. When Jesus the King started telling others the good news about his kingdom, the rich, powerful and "important" people were astonished because he welcomed the outcasts and friendless—the people who were excluded from polite society. Jesus' kingdom was for everyone: prostitutes, tax collectors and notorious "sinners" included. His healing hands reached out to the unclean and unwanted.

Jesus told this story to explain why:

"A man gave a big banquet and invited many people. When it was time to eat, the man sent his servant to tell the guests, 'Come. Everything is ready.' But all the guests made excuses. The first one said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go look at it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five pairs of oxen; I must go and try them. Please excuse me.' A third person said, 'I just got married; I can't come.' So the servant returned and told his