Learning Context:

Since the date of Jesus’ birth is not mentioned in the Bible, it is not likely that the early Christians would have celebrated it. Furthermore, the observance of Christmas is difficult to track to 2nd century Christians either, because there is no evidence that anyone kept Christmas that early. What is known, however, is that early Christians kept Passover, Pentecost, and other days considered to be of Jewish origin. Different theories exist about how and why 25 December was chosen as the date to celebrate Jesus’ birth.

This time in schools is traditionally known as a busy time with many things to be completed. Sometimes teaching about these two significant seasons of the Church can be lost or even omitted with a clear focus being given to the secular meaning of Christmas. A suggested approach could be to structure the last weeks of the school term as follows: Week 7: teaching about Advent; Week 8: teaching about Christmas. This teaching and learning can be incorporated into preparation for Christmas pageants and end of year prayer celebrations. Given the limited amount of time, it is recommended that teachers choose approximately 3 learning opportunities from the Possible Learning opportunities for Teaching Christmas and 3 learning opportunities from the Possible opportunities for Praying Christmas.

Learning Intentions and Conceptual Organisers:

Celebration and Prayer

.2 Prayer and ritual give expression and meaning to experiences of God.

Scripture

.1 Scriptural texts contain a range of textual features and text types that assist Christians in making meaning.
.2 Scriptural texts are composed and comprehended contextually.
.3 Scriptural texts are interpreted critically using a range of processes.

Inquiry Questions:

- Where does the word Christmas originate from? What does the word Christmas mean?
- Which gospel writers recorded the events of Jesus’ birth? What are the differences/similarities between the two accounts?
- What did the star symbolise in First Century Palestine? Why does Matthew include a star in his recount of Jesus’ birth?
- What were houses like in First Century Palestine? Was Jesus really born in a stable amongst animals?
- What were the Jewish customs and practices when a new baby was born in First Century Palestine?
- Where did the Nativity Scene [Christmas Crib; Creche] originate from? Is the Nativity Scene historical?

Teaching and Praying Christmas

Possible opportunities for Praying Christmas:

- Pray while creating a Mandala. Create a class or whole school Rice Mandala with the prayer focus: celebrating the waiting period of Advent.
- Pray with scripture passages using Lectio Divina. Select a passage from one of the Infancy Narratives.
- Create a placemat prayer on the theme of journey, waiting, preparing in anticipation.
- Have the students keep a Prayer Journal each day. Explore themes of waiting, yielding to God, surrender. Pray using the prayer reflective Advent Calendar: [www.caritas.org.au/advent](http://www.caritas.org.au/advent)
- Organise a student retreat or prayer walk on the theme of Journey. Focus on Matthew’s Gospel and the Journey of the Magi. The Magi began a journey, when they visited the infant child, they were changed; they went home by another route. How often do we begin a journey on one path, thinking we know the map, the way home, the way we are going in life, and then to have that changed, to then continue the journey on another path?
- Explore the theme of Waiting through Contemplative Prayer: being still, in the moment, yielding to God through stillness, silence and meditation.
Possible learning opportunities for Teaching Christmas:

- “What do we know about Christmas?” Students are prompted to identify the liturgical colours, prayers, practices, symbols and traditions associated with Christmas. Student record their responses e.g. using Writeboard™, Wallwisher™ or Placemat Strategy.
- Reflect on the data from previous activity and brainstorm possible inquiry questions (see above for some examples). Display these questions e.g. Poster or chart, whiteboard, or Wallwisher™.
- Students use the “Sounds, Sights and Feelings” Retrieval Chart to explore the way sounds, sights and feelings help people understand and make meaning of the liturgical season of Christmas. Students use the retrieval chart questions as a stimulus for further research and exploration.
- In learning teams students participate in a brainstorm of words associated with the birth of Jesus. Students can be assisted in this task by using Christmas cards as a visual device to prompt their brainstorm. Students read, or listen to the story of Jesus’ birth from Matthew or Luke’s gospel. Students analyse the stories by responding to a variety of Code Breaker questions [Four Resources Model]: What are the difficult words and what do they mean? What words are new to you? What words are about people / places / things? What words are repeated? Are there similes or metaphors? What do they mean? These types of questions are presented to students e.g. verbally, on charts or posters, using a simple online questionnaire such as Polladdy™ or SurveyMonkey™.
- Students read, or listen to the story being read, the two versions of Jesus’ birth found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. Compare and contrast the two infancy narratives. Students analyse the stories by responding to a variety of Meaning Maker questions [Four Resources Model]: What does this text mean to you? What does the title tell us about what the text might be about? What are the characters thinking / feeling? How do you know? What might happen next? Why? What message is the author trying to tell us? What is the text about? What are the main ideas? These types of questions are presented to students e.g. verbally, on charts or posters, using a simple online questionnaire such as Polladdy™.
- Compare and contrast the two infancy narratives using a Venn Diagram to highlight the similarities/differences. Students use Wordle.com™ to visually compare the two infancy narratives. What are the prominent words/themes? What and why are there differences?
- Students set up a nativity scene according to one of the gospel writers. Investigate who the authors of the gospels were writing to.
- Using an Interactive Whiteboard students manipulate images to reflect the gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth e.g. move images of shepherds under a Luke heading and move the star under Matthew’s heading.
- Students complete the Infancy Narratives Learning Object. Design your own simple Learning Object using PowerPoint.
- Students read and view the online illustrated story book: Living the Light with Jesus - Preparing for Jesus. Students respond to a variety of Meaning Maker questions [Four Resources Model]: What does this text mean to you? What does the title tell us about what the text might be about? What message is the author trying to tell us? What are the main ideas?
- Other Learning and Teaching Ideas: Read the story and act it out; create a collage; create a story map; dress up in characters; role play; research First Century Palestine dress, houses, food etc; play celebrity heads; sequence events of the story; map the area of where Jesus was born/grew up; research types of houses living arrangements of First Century Palestine.

Possible assessment opportunities:

- Provide students with an image of a traditional nativity scene (one that combines images/symbols from both Matthew and Luke’s versions and later traditions). Students colour the image reflecting the gospels e.g. colour anything found in Matthew’s gospel red; colour parts of Luke’s gospel yellow etc.
- Set up the a traditional Nativity scene which includes shepherds, angels, Magi, star, angels, donkey, ox, sheep, manger, Joseph, Mary, Jesus, the Inn, Inn Keeper etc. After reading the scripture stories student arrange the Nativity scene to reflect the Gospel of Luke and then Matthew.

Resources & Teacher Background:

- Cribs, Caves and Christmas
- Infancy Narrative (According to Luke)
- Infancy Narrative Scripture Text
- Gospel Audiences
- Betrothal and Wedding Ceremonies within Christianity and Judaism