Peace be with us

Pick and mix worship resources
Introduction:

During Advent and Christmas, our hearts and minds naturally, and poignantly, turn to praying for peace. This year, we’re also thinking about those for whom pieces of their lives are missing – be it family members, money, a carefree childhood, or a home.

Jesus provides our peace and, through the work of his people, can help restore wholeness to fractured lives. So, as we prepare for, and celebrate, the coming King – our Prince of Peace – we look at how we can help bring his peace and restoration to a hurting world.

In this booklet you’ll find a range of different worship resources to help you explore our Peace be with us theme. Our Leader’s guide gives an overview of all that Embrace has to offer your church this Christmas, including a variety of ways to inspire your congregation to give, pray and raise money.

Malik’s aiming high!

If you used our Embrace Christmas Resource Pack last year, you’ll remember Malik. Along with his family, Malik, who has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, sought refuge in Lebanon from the conflict in Syria. Initially, Malik struggled to settle. His cousins bullied him and he didn’t have essential medical care or equipment. But, thanks to you and Embrace partner, Tahaddi, which means ‘challenge’ in Arabic, Malik was able to access healthcare and to go to school. Today, we’re pleased to report, Malik is thriving…
‘Malik is a hardworking and positive student,’ report his teachers. ‘He used to barely smile, but now the smile hardly leaves his face!’

His mum has seen a change in Malik. ‘He comes back home, shows me his schoolwork and talks to me about his day,’ she says. Malik is also making friends with the other children and gaining confidence to speak up in class. ‘At Tahaddi, they treat him like he is no different from everyone else,’ explains his mum, ‘and that is exactly what we want.’

Malik is about to receive a new wheelchair which will enable him to get around much more easily. And he has high hopes for the future. ‘I want to be an actor and a celebrity,’ he says with a smile.

Thank you so much if you prayed for Malik and helped raise vital money for him last Christmas. We hope that, next year, we can give an equally positive report about Amyra and her family, who feature in this year’s pack.
You can tell this story in your own words, read it out, or share it in your church magazine, on your website and notice sheets. You can find a PowerPoint with photos of Amyra’s children, and the apartment they live in, at embraceme.org/christmas

Amyra and her four children, ranging in age from 5 to 13 years old, have been living together in a one-room apartment since fleeing Syria. Until recently, Amyra didn’t know whether her husband was alive or dead. ‘He went to Aleppo to rescue his mother, but he got trapped by the fighting’ she says. Happily, Amyra has recently discovered that her husband is alive. But he remains trapped in Syria. The only way to get him across the border is to pay. But the family have no money.

In the meantime, Amyra and her children live, hand to mouth, in basic accommodation. They struggle to pay £80 per month rent. ‘I work as much as possible,’ explains Amyra who cleans, does laundry and prepares food to earn a living. But still it is not enough. ‘Every day I go to sleep with tears in my eyes, thinking the owner of this apartment will kick us out.’
In order for the family to survive, Amyra’s nine-year-old son, Nazir, works in a vegetable store one day a week. The family also get two boxes of food each month from the local church, supported by Embrace’s partner MERATH. The church has also given the family two mattresses, four blankets, a stove and vouchers for fuel. ‘But sometimes we can’t make the fuel last because it is so cold.’ reflects Amyra. ‘I take my children for a walk in the sun every day to warm them up after cold nights.’

Amyra dreams of the day when life will change, and she can see her husband again. In the meantime, she thanks God for everything she has – her home, her children, and the church. ‘No one helps us apart from the church,’ she says. ‘God bless you.’

Amyra and her children have so many pieces of their lives missing this Christmas: money, security, their husband and dad. But we can help fill some of those gaps.

Let’s follow the example of our restorative God, who comes alongside and cares; who seeks to provide the missing pieces of people’s lives. Let’s be God’s hands and feet on this earth and join Embrace to bring practical help and hope to refugees like Amyra and her children. And let’s continue to pray for wholeness and peace for the future, for all who live in poverty and insecurity in the Middle East.

**Suggested readings**

You may have set readings from the lectionary, or your general focus already. But the following passages particularly connect to our theme:

- Psalm 34:8-14
- Isaiah 9:2-7
- Romans 12:9-21
- Luke 2:8-20

**Sermon notes**

- We see and hear the word peace everywhere at this time of year. But the reality of experiencing it is much more challenging. ‘Peace on earth’ does not seem to be here in the way we want, or perhaps expect, it to be.

- The stunning imagery in Isaiah 9, and the announcement in Luke 2:14, are the main inspiration for ‘peace’ being a central Christmas theme. But our interpretations sometimes lose something in translation.
• ‘Peace’ in English means the absence of conflict, threat or even noise. But both the Hebrew ‘shalom’ and Greek ‘eiréné’ are much more about the presence of wholeness; the kind of joining together and flourishing that come from the inside out as we are set right with God, and proactively live well with those around us.

• At Christmastime, we celebrate this biblical peace that is available to us through Jesus. Jesus bring us wholeness through restoring our relationship with God and with each other. But we have a part to play too in ushering in this wholeness and peace. We are called to ‘love the Lord [our] God with all our heart, strength and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves’ (Luke 10:27).

• In Psalm 34:9-10, we read that the person that fears the Lord lacks nothing. Clearly, as we look around our world, this doesn’t mean that, as Christians, we will have an abundance of material possessions (all of which bring temporary pleasure), or a life without any difficulties. Instead, it means that, amidst the imperfection of our lives, we have access to a never-ending flow of qualities that will last – love, joy, peace. These qualities provide comfort now and hope for eternity.

• However, we must balance these ‘eternal qualities’ with the practical needs of here and now. The Bible is clear in its call for us to respond to the physical needs of others, as Jesus illustrates in the story of the Good Samaritan and as Paul exhorts us in his letter to the Romans. We are Jesus’s hands and feet on the earth and, as part of that restored relationship with each other, we are called to respond and help provide the missing pieces of people’s lives where we can – be this food, water, shelter or finances.

• Restoring the pieces (story on page 2-3) powerfully demonstrates how Embrace’s partners are helping to fill the gaps in Amyra’s life – providing practical help and, through this, sharing love and restoring peace, even in the midst of need. Through your giving and your prayers, you too can help fill the missing pieces in people’s lives, bringing wholeness and restoration to those that need it.

• One day, today’s wars will end. One day there will be no more conflict or refugees in the Middle East or anywhere else. Let’s earnestly pray for both. But we do not have to wait in the advent of either of these times for more peace to come and for abundant life to start. Christmas means Peace Himself is with us, already, and we can be a part of spreading that peace and restorative wholeness in the here and now.
All-age talk idea

This outline provides illustrations that complement aspects of the sermon notes, so you can use either or both at different points, or bring parts of one into the other.

You will need:

- Peace written on to a large piece of paper
- Piece written on to a large piece of paper
- Simple child’s jigsaw
- Knives, forks and spoons for four people
- Two slices of bread, margarine, cheese and pickle

Talk

Each time you use the word peace or piece, hold up the appropriate sign!

- Ask three members of the congregation to come up and complete a challenge. Hand one person the pieces to a simple child’s jigsaw, another the components needed to set a table for four people and the third the items they need to make a cheese and pickle sandwich.

- However, for each task there should be an essential piece missing (a piece of the jigsaw, the forks for the table, the pickle for the sandwich).

- Provide a short commentary, as the volunteers struggle to complete their tasks. When it becomes clear that none of them can complete their tasks, send your volunteers back to their seats. Explain that none of the volunteers could complete their tasks because an essential piece that they needed was missing.

- Our lives are made up of lots of important pieces – God, family members, our health, and education, a job, enough money, friends, a home. The list goes on. When one of these pieces is missing, life can become very hard. For children like Nazir (see page 3) who has so many pieces of his life missing – his dad, his home, his country, and the chance to enjoy his childhood without having to work – life can feel almost impossible.
• The message of Christmas though, is that Jesus can be our missing peace <hold up the peace sign> and our missing piece <hold up the piece sign>. Jesus coming to earth is the missing piece <piece sign> between us and God. He also helps to mend our relationships with each other. And, in the middle of the mess and the difficulties that we all experience, Jesus’s Holy Spirit is with us, bringing his peace <peace sign>.

• The sort of peace that Jesus brings isn’t the sort of peace that means all is calm and quiet. It isn’t the sort of peace that means kids never misbehave, families never argue, disease never takes hold, conflict never destroys and people like Nazir never become refugees. But it is the sort of peace that means, whatever is happening in our lives and in our world, we can be reassured that everything will, one day, be OK. In the meantime, God’s spirit gives us courage, strength, peace and hope.

• God also gives us each other. Like Jesus, God asks us to share His hope, to spread His peace and to bring His practical help to difficult situations. God uses us to help fill the missing pieces in people’s lives.

• This could mean we give money so that Embrace’s partners can continue to help people like Nazir. It could mean us continuing to pray that there will be peace in the Middle East so that children like Nazir don’t become refugees in the first place. And, for the people around us who are going through difficult times, it could simply mean listening, giving someone a hug or offering practical help.

• Call your volunteers back up to the front and produce (with a flourish!) the missing jigsaw piece, missing forks and missing pickle.

• Whilst your volunteers complete their tasks, challenge the congregation this Christmas to look for ways that they can help bring both God’s peace <peace sign> and those missing pieces <piece sign> to people who are struggling, wherever they are in the world.
Prayers

You can use one or more of these prayers at different points in your service to respond to the themes raised. A specially written set of Advent candle-lighting liturgy is in your pack, and a PowerPoint version of all our written prayers, suitable for projection, is available at embraceme.org/christmas

A prayer for peace

Leader: Into any hearts feeling anxious or overwhelmed this Christmas,
All: Come Lord Jesus, bring your presence, your provision and your peace.

Leader: Into every home where broken relationships are causing pain,
All: Come Lord Jesus, bring your presence, your provision and your peace.

Leader: Into the lives of all refugees who are frightened, in need of safety and help, and longing for home or family,
All: Come Lord Jesus, bring your presence, your provision and your peace.

Leader: Into the neighbourhoods and communities in Lebanon and across the Middle East who have been hosting refugees for many years now,
All: Come Lord Jesus, bring your presence, your provision and your peace.

Leader: Into all fractured diplomatic processes and negotiations, all causes we are humanly tempted to call lost, and each and every violent war and conflict that wounds your image in us,
All: Come Lord Jesus, bring your presence, your provision and your peace.

Leader: Into the resolve and resources of all who long to help – whether among Embrace’s partners in the Middle East, or its supporters here in the UK,
All: Come Lord Jesus, bring your presence, your provision and your peace.

Leader: Into situations where we can help provide the missing pieces of people’s lives through practical help and loving support,
All: Come Lord Jesus, and let us be the means by which you bring your presence, your provision and your peace.
All-age creative prayer idea

You can use this idea corporately, leading everyone through it step by step, or adapt it into a prayer station or ongoing installation.

You will need:

• a Christmas tree (real or artificial)
• enough Embrace Christmas peace stars for everyone (see page 10), plus a few extra
• enough short lengths of thread and hole-punched, coloured paper stars (or another shape if that’s easier) for everyone
• pens
• fairy lights (optional)

In advance:

• Set up the tree and hang a few Christmas peace stars on it. (If you are going to use fairy lights arrange these too, but don’t switch them on yet.)
• Leave a coloured star, piece of thread and pen on each seat (or hand them out as people arrive).
• Keep the rest of your Christmas peace stars ready by the tree to hand out later.

During prayer:

• Invite each person to hold their coloured paper star/other shape and think about Amyra and her family, along with other refugees like them in Lebanon. What practical ‘pieces’ of life or hopeful elements of peace do they want to pray for, for them?
• Get people to jot down one or two of these things on their coloured paper star/other shape.
• When everyone is ready, ask people to hang their prayers on the tree; praying, as they do so, for Embrace’s partners, as well as for each other as, together, we respond to how the Prince of Peace is calling us to play our part in bringing practical help and hope to refugees and others who have pieces of their lives missing this Christmas.
• If you would like to, turn on the fairy lights, and have a few seconds of silence for everyone to pray for peace in the home countries these refugees come from, especially Syria.
• Let everyone leave with an Embrace Christmas peace star to hang on their own Christmas tree at home. Let this remind them to continue to pray for peace this Christmas.
A prayer for our own preparations and celebrations

Peace be with us – and break through among us – as we go about all our busy Advent preparations and fill our diaries with Christmas celebrations; shine through our glitter with Your greater light. Restore a bigger vision of what Christ-with-us means – Peace incarnate – dwelling with us! And cause us to celebrate You as You deserve by making more room for what is close to Your heart. Show us how to more faithfully pursue Your peace for the Middle East in prayer; and inspire us to better build it too by laying down our riches for refugees in need. Give us Your wisdom as we consider our spending and giving and help us invest more in building Your kingdom of peace. We ask for Your help because we know we need Your presence to reconcile our hearts to Your priorities for our lives.

Prayers of intercession

Leader: Lord Jesus, Peace of heaven born into our struggle, visit us with new faith for the advance of Your kingdom, as we come before You in prayer today. In the midst of our own anxieties, and the pressing needs that fill our headlines, we open our troubled hearts to Your hope again.

All: Lord Jesus, source of all true peace on earth, come.

Leader: Lord Jesus, Peace of heaven born into our struggle, we thank You for all those following You by leaving behind their own comfort to come alongside refugees today. Minister Your peace to their hearts and minds, and strengthen them as they bring practical help and hope. We especially lift to You all Embrace’s partners in Lebanon, and particularly the team that are helping Amyra and her family; give them everything they need to continue this vital work.

All: Lord Jesus, source of all true peace on earth, come.

Leader: Lord Jesus, Peace of heaven born into our struggle, we thank You that Amyra’s family have found a safe place to live. We pray for this house to become a home; for provision and security in its walls. And may your peace, hope and love sustain this family as they wait for the day when they can be reunited and return home.
All:  Lord Jesus, source of all true peace on earth, come.

Leader: Lord Jesus, Peace of heaven born into our struggle, we thank You for the many people in our world who reflect Your image. For those people praying and working to build Your kingdom of peace and to supply the missing pieces of people’s lives.

Be their ever-present help and establish every work of their hands and voices. We pray that we would find ever more ways to be your hands and feet on this earth too.

Almighty God, we lift to You those whose hearts seem set on war, or power, and ask for Your convicting, softening Spirit to change their minds, words and actions in Your powerful name.

We dare to pray again for full and just peace and reconciliation, most especially in the precious lands and communities of the Middle East.

All:  Lord Jesus, source of all true peace on earth, come.

Our star prayer

You can put our lead ‘Peace be with us’ Christmas prayer into the hands of everyone coming to a special service, by ordering a free Christmas peace star prayer card and decoration for each one of them. Call 01494 897950 or email resources@embraceme.org to order.

Emmanuel,
God with us,
Restorer of Peace.
Let your perfect peace
take root in our hearts and minds,
this Christmastime and always.
And help us to carry your peace
into difficult places and painful situations -
to separated families, to those far from home,
and to those seeking safety - through our prayers,
our actions and our giving.

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