

# Epiphany reflections

An exploration of 1 Corinthians through mandalas by Daisy Barnes

## Introduction

Mandalas are circular paintings ('mandala' – emphasis on the first syllable – means 'circle' in Sanskrit) produced during meditation on a sacred text, and occur in several religious traditions. The circle is a symbol of the unity of all creation. Early examples of such circular designs are found in Celtic patterns, and here the patterns symbolise life that has no end, the love of God which has no beginning and no end, and our union with him.

Mandalas can be painted or drawn using a variety of styles and media. They can be a simple blend of colours, a simple drawing or of a most intricate design. Looking at a mandala alongside the sacred text that inspired it can help us, in turn, to reflect on the meaning of that text and its application to us.

The mandalas presented here were inspired by readings from the first letter to the Corinthians, as set by the lectionary during the season of Epiphany (Year A). Find this article and all the images online via [www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)

## How to use the mandalas

The images and accompanying resources can be used for personal reflection or in a group, as part of a Bible study 'with a difference'. They could also be used as the basis for worship during the Epiphany season – for example as a series of stations, or several short acts of worship on different occasions.

The mandalas should be visible to everyone throughout. You could print individual copies (download via [www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)), or display/project one large image for everyone to see. Always start your reflection by looking at the image.

Each image is presented with:

- **To think about:** some thoughts and questions to consider while reflecting on the mandala.
- **To do and to talk about:** activities that can be done individually, in small groups or as a communal activity.
- **To find out:** suggestions for 'research', which can be done before the sessions if people are given prior warning. They can then share their findings with the rest of the group.
- **To sing:** suggestions for suitable song and hymns, well-known or new, to help in reflection.
- **To pray:** a simple prayer or form of words to say together.

## 1 and 2 Celtic knots



These two mandalas, woven into Celtic knots, are inspired by **1 Corinthians 1.1-9**, in particular, the words 'called to be saints together with all those who, in every place, call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (v.2). One of the images emphasises seeking and reaching out, from many different directions. The other gives a definite impression of calling out to, and being called by, a specific person: Jesus Christ. Download these images via [www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)

## To think about

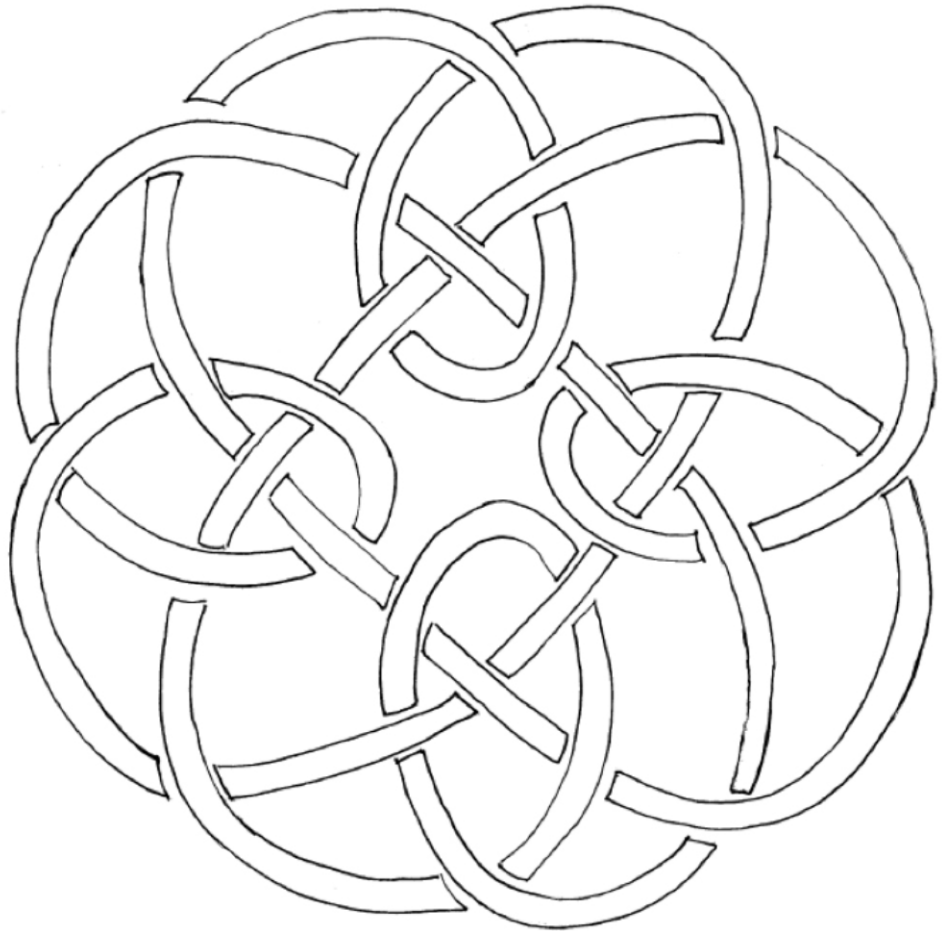
- Which of the images best suggests to you 'calling on the name of Jesus'?
- Does the way in which we 'call on the name of Jesus' divide or unite us?
- Are we aware of the people 'in every place' and accepting of the way in which they call?
- Within the 'Celtic knot of unity in Christ' is there space for variety?
- Can we accept and live with variety?

## To do and to talk about

Use this basic Celtic knot template, you can download it via [www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)

If you follow the line of the knot, you will notice that it weaves under and over, alternately. Starting anywhere – but remembering your starting point – follow the line with your finger. Pause each time you need to jump over a line and pray for a group of Christians in another place or country, or in another church near you. You can make this a communal activity if you use a large/ projected image, with people invited to suggest ideas for prayer at each pause.

Using the same template, choose a verse from the reading from Corinthians to think about, while colouring parts of the knot. You could also write the words of the verse in the spaces, or draw something in the spaces that comes to mind as you reflect on the words.



## To find out

Think of another Christian group in your area. Find out how they 'call on the name of Christ'. You could ask for some of the prayers which they use, and try using them in your worship. If they use silence, try a period of silence.

## To sing

'The Circle'  
(tune: What a friend we have in Jesus)

**Come and join the growing circle,  
Everybody heed the call,  
Spread the circle, push the limits,  
God is love and loves us all.**

**There's no place for narrow vision,  
'keeping out' or 'keeping small'  
Here's a circle of true freedom,  
God is love and cares for all.**

**Love, the circle which surrounds us,  
God the centre, source of all,  
Not for us to set false boundaries,  
God is love and loves us all.**

**Where we find the lost and broken,  
When we see the ones who fall,  
Stretch the circle to embrace them,  
God is love and cares for all.**

**When we pray, we say 'our father'  
Asking for our daily bread,  
We are praying 'in a circle'  
So the world may all be fed.**

**We forgive and are forgiven,  
'All for one, and one for all'  
Seeking for the coming kingdom,  
Where God's love can conquer all.**

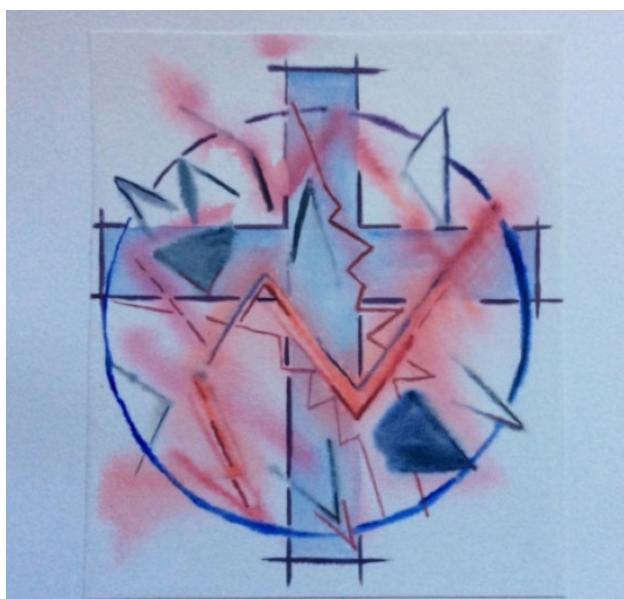
## To pray

Lord Jesus, you call us to be your followers.  
Help us to follow when you call.  
**Together we call on your name.**

Lord, help us to be loyal in praying to you  
and finding what you want us to do.  
**Together we call on your name.**

Help us to remember that we are members of a worldwide family.  
We are all different but united in your love.  
**Together we call on your name.**

### 3 The shattered cross



This mandala is inspired by **1 Corinthians 1.10-18**, in particular, the words 'there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters' (v.11). Paul is disappointed that they are claiming allegiance to various factions, rather than simply following Christ. The power of the cross of Christ should unite them, and us. Download this image via: [www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)

#### To think about

- What other title(s) could you give this mandala?
- What strong feelings does it evoke about the way in which we live?
- Are there some divisions among Christians which we can live with and some which are unacceptable?
- What divides us as Christians and are these things as important as what unites us?

#### To do

Collect a series of crosses, or images of crosses, in different styles and materials. For example: the cross of nails from Coventry Cathedral, the cross left standing after the recent fire in Notre Dame, Paris. Include the mandala image of the shattered cross. Arrange them around the room with space to sit or kneel beside them. Invite people to spend time in front of these crosses, and to think about why and how each cross was made or painted the way that it is, and what it tells you about 'the power of the cross of Christ'. Why has this barbaric symbol come to mean so much to Christians?

#### To do and to talk about

Give out A4 sheets of paper with a simple cross drawn on them. Ask people to tear the paper into pieces. Then provide some sticky tape and ask people to 'mend' their cross.

- Talk together about how easy it is to damage and shatter objects and relationships.
- Had we known we would have to 'mend' the cross, would we be so careless in tearing it?

#### To find out

Find out about some organisations which try to reconcile different groups of people, possibly in conflict. These could include cross party committees in the House of Commons, organisations such as Relate, or a local 'Churches Together' group. Ask different people to research different groups, and to share what they have learnt with the wider group.

#### To sing

Think of as many hymns as you can which mention the cross. Hold a ballot to choose the most popular one and sing it together. Examples to get you started: 'When I survey the wondrous Cross', 'Lift high the Cross', 'The Old Rugged Cross', 'In the Cross of Christ I glory'.

#### To pray

When we quarrel and get angry over unimportant things,  
**Lord, forgive us.**

When we think our ideas are more important than other peoples',  
**Lord, forgive us.**

When we forget that the one we worship died for us on the cross,  
**Lord, forgive us.**

Lord, show to us the things that are really important.  
**Point us to the Cross of Jesus.**

## 4 Upside-down



This mandala was inspired by **1 Corinthians 1.18-31**, in particular, the words 'For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom' (v.25).  
Download this image via:  
[www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)

### To think about

Often small, weak and seemingly foolish things have much to teach us.

- Does this mandala make you want to turn it the other way up? If so, why?
- Now turn it the other way up and see if you react differently to it.
- What in the image makes you view the world differently?
- Does the Cross of Christ turn worldly values on their head? If so, how?

### To do

If kitchen facilities are available, make an upside-down cake with pineapple and glacé cherries in the base and a simple sponge mix on top. Turn it out so that the pineapple is on top. Share the cake and talk about how sometimes things need to be 'turned on their head' to fit in with God's Kingdom rather than prevailing values. Alternatively, the cake could be prepared beforehand and left in its baking tin, providing (hopefully) an element of surprise when it is turned out onto a plate.

### To do and to talk about

Sometimes artists turn their work upside down to check if the composition or tones or colours need adjusting. Turn a familiar image upside down and see if it makes you notice anything new about it. You could use one larger image or a series of pictures from (e.g.) greetings cards.

If you can, borrow a few 'Weeble' toys. These toys are weighted and will wobble but will not fall. Ask for volunteers to try to turn them over. Talk together about how circumstances are often 'weighted' in favour of the powerful and rich, or in ways which need changing. How can the cross of Christ help us to see things differently and act for change?

### To find out

Research an organisation such as Christian Aid to find specific examples of how it looks at problems from a different angle to try to redress some balances.

### To sing

'O Lord, all the world belongs to you' (by Patrick Appleford)

'All I once held dear' (by Graham Kendrick)

### To pray

Whenever things seem to work in favour of the powerful,  
**Help us to work for change.**

Whenever we see something unfair, which needs to be turned the other way up,  
**Help us to work for change.**

Spend a few moments thinking of anything in your lives that needs turning upside down to fit in with God's values. Then continue:

When our lives need turning upside down,  
**Help us to work for change.**

## 5 The box



This mandala is inspired by **1 Corinthians 2.1-12, 13-16**, in particular, the words 'What no eye has seen nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God' (vv.10-11). Download this image via: [www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)

### To think about

We often associate the Holy Spirit with life and power.

- What does this mandala tell you about the Holy Spirit and about discovery?
- Why are 'the things of God' hidden and in need of being revealed?
- What would you hope or expect to find in a box being opened by God?
- How is God revealed to us?
- Does our searching help God to reveal himself to us?

### To do and to talk about

Prepare a series of boxes in various shapes and sizes. Inside each one place a piece of paper with one of the 'gifts of the spirit' (1 Corinthians 12.27-31 and Galatians 5.22-23) written on it. Cut up an image (an old greetings card is ideal) into several pieces and put a piece into each box. Give out the boxes among the group. Invite people to open their box, read out the 'revelation' from the sheet and bring the image piece to a table, to be assembled by other members of the group. Alternatively, the 'picture' could be a Bible verse giving a statement about God, with the words separated, ready to reassemble to reveal the statement.

### To find out

Using a book of quotations, or research on the internet, find out some things said by well-known people (biblical figures, or people from more recent times) about their experience of God. Examples might include Mary's song (the Magnificat), or the words of Martin Luther King. Encourage people to reflect on their own experiences of God, and to add their own 'quotation' to the mix.

### To sing

Quietly and meditatively, while looking at the mandala:

Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus (by Robert Cull).

### To pray

**Lord, you are higher than we can imagine,  
higher than the mountains which reach into the sky.  
Lord, you are wider than our wildest dreams,  
stretching to infinity.**

**Lord, you are deeper than our reason and thought,  
deeper than the depths of the sea.**

**We ask for a glimpse and a taste of your glory and goodness.**

**We ask for the will to search and your Holy Spirit to help us find,**

**what you hold in store for us,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

**Amen.**

## 6 The height chart



This mandala is inspired by **1 Corinthians 3.1-9**, in particular the words 'So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose' (vv.7-8).  
Download this image via:  
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### To think about

We often think about what plants need to grow. If we relate growing directly to people:

- What does the mandala tell you about growth and maturity?
- What is needed for a child to grow into a mature adult?
- What or who helps us to grow into spiritual maturity?
- What do you think a mature Christian is like?

### To do and to talk about

Display a selection of food packets/tins, including some for babies and small children, and a few loose fruit and vegetables. Invite one or two volunteers to read out the ingredients and proportions of fat, protein etc. listed on the packets/tins. Talk together about what might help in healthy growth.

Display a selection of Bible reading notes for different ages and in different styles, a Bible and some hymn books. Invite people to look at these and think about which they might find useful. If forewarned, people could bring their own examples and favourites.

Give everyone two paper plates and a pencil. Invite people, on one plate, to make a pie chart showing the proportions of different kinds of food required to make a healthy diet. On the other plate, make a pie chart showing what we might need for healthy spiritual growth.

### To find out

Find out about one or two organisations that promote children's growth and development (e.g. Child Poverty Action Group, NSPCC), including one which helps children with a specific need (e.g. autistic children). Find out about at least one organisation which helps people grow as Christians – try to think as broadly as possible (e.g. include arts and sciences as well as 'churchy' things).

### To sing

One more step along the world I go (by Sydney Carter)

### To pray

Give everyone a piece of A4 paper on which is drawn/printed a simple staircase shape, and a pencil. Invite people to spend time writing on the steps the names or initials of people they know in various stages of their life's journey, and of those who help them to grow/mature. End with this prayer together:

**We commit to you, Lord, all those who need our prayers,  
young and old.  
We pray for those who have just started their faith  
journey – those with no faith,  
and those whose faith is being tested to the limit.  
We thank you for all who nurture us in our faith and help  
us to grow,  
and we pray your blessing on them.  
Amen.**

## 7 The transfiguration



This mandala is inspired by **Matthew 17.1-9**, the story of the transfiguration.  
Download this image via:  
[www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections](http://www.rootsontheweb.com/epiphany-reflections)

### To think about

- Have you ever imagined shapes, people, objects in the clouds?
- How does this mandala make you feel about an encounter with God?
- How do you meet with God?
- Are there special places for you, where meeting with God is easier or more likely?
- What might the other keyholes in the padlock image suggest to you?

### To do and to talk about

Display a selection of keys of various types. Invite some volunteers to choose and hold up a key from the selection. Invite people to suggest what doors – or opportunities – the key might open (for example, a large old key might allow you to explore a castle!)

### To find out

Imagine you are 'looking through the keyhole' (as in the mandala) and seeing Moses and Elijah. Use a concordance, Bible dictionary (or similar), or an internet search, to find out what Moses and Elijah represent in Matthew's story – and even, perhaps, some ideas of how they might have looked. Imagine what they were doing, holding or saying, and how those things might have suggested to the disciples who they were.

### To sing

(tune: Blessed assurance – the verse only; or use the chorus as in the original hymn)

Transfiguration, glimpses of glory,  
splendour unequalled, blazes of light.  
Brighter than white, up on the mountain,  
then to the plain, and back to mundane.

Word for the future, word from the past,  
lawgiver, prophet; then, at the last,  
God's own clear message spelling his choice,  
'Listen to Jesus, his voice, my voice'.

Clearer our vision journeying on,  
sharing the message of God's own Son.  
Jesus, Messiah, Saviour and Lord,  
Heeding his story, living his word.

### To pray

*A guided meditation with silences.*

Look at the mandala image. Send a few moments imagining yourself in the place of the figure. Imagine the most wonderful view you can think of.

Now think of it in dull light, seen through mist or drizzle, and imagine how it feels with rain and a chill wind.

Then think of a shaft of light, breaking through the clouds, beginning to light up the scene.

Recall an experience that brought you close to God, or a verse of Scripture that has helped you, or something someone has said to you, or maybe someone you have met who has encouraged and helped you.

### To listen and pray

Listen prayerfully to the reading of the transfiguration story (read it slowly, with silent spaces for reflection). Then pray together:

**Lord, reveal yourself to us in new ways.  
Help us to be open to new experiences of you.  
Help us to take these experiences with us  
into our everyday lives.  
Amen.**

Daisy Barnes is an artist, and a worship leader in her local Anglican/Methodist Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP) in North Yorkshire.