

CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

GOD ONE OF US

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LEADER'S GUIDE

1. Gathering

People coming to a group for the first time will often have some anxiety –

- ◆ Will I know anyone?
- ◆ What will be expected of me?
- ◆ Did I switch off the oven?
- ◆ It is important to help them through this first awkward stage. Have all your preparations done well beforehand so that you are able to greet each person warmly on arrival, introducing them to one another, and perhaps having tea and coffee available.

2. Beginning

- A. When all have arrived get the session started by giving them a clear statement of what the group is about -
Welcome the group
- ◆ who we are;
 - ◆ why we're here;
 - ◆ when we will finish.

It might go like this: "Welcome to my place, and I'm delighted that each of you has been able to make it. We are a group of people from Churches gathered together to reflect and share our ideas on ... (*name of study*). Tonight we will be looking at Study One

- B. Then invite the members to introduce themselves saying:
- ◆ who I am;
 - ◆ why I'm here;
 - ◆ what I hope to get out of the program.

Lead yourself by giving a short response to each of the three areas. Then invite each of the others to do likewise. Don't worry if some respond to only one or two of the areas.

- C. Then distribute copies of the program.

Encourage participants to listen to one another's ideas with respect.

3. Opening Devotion

- A. You may wish to play some music quietly in the background and give the group a few moments to reflect on the opening devotion. Then call for volunteers to lead it.
- B. You might like to choose an appropriate song for the group to share

4. Reflection on the Topic

Invite a couple of people to read the teaching. Encourage the readers to pause between each section.

5. Discussion

Allow a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions. Encourage participants to share responses to each question but there is to be no pressure put on anyone to speak. Be sure to make some response to each speaker if only to say e.g. "Thank you John". This makes sure the participant feels that he / she has been heard.

6. Closure

Thank the participants for their participation. Check to ensure venue is right for next session.

Closing Devotion

Cuppa

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God: One of Us

STUDY 1: Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary

Opening Devotion

A responsive reading from Philippians 2:5-11. You will need a leader and two response groups.

Leader: Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Response 1: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

Response 2: but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Response 1: And being found in appearance as a man,

Response 2: he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross.

Leader: Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

Response 1: and gave him the name that is above every name,

Response 2: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

All: and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

To sing or read:

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail the incarnate Deity,
pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark, the herald angels sing,
glory to the new-born King.
Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank and honour you for becoming like us, being made in human likeness, for humbling yourself and being obedient to death, even death on a cross. Let your Holy Spirit guide and enrich us as we search the Scriptures together and share our faith with one another. We join now with the angels of heaven and, ultimately, with the whole of creation, to confess that you are Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION

The first chapters of the Gospels according to Matthew, Luke and John offer fascinating insights into the incarnation. They explore the origins of Jesus of Nazareth, the unique God-man. Read these accounts together and share your points of view.

Matthew 1:18-25.

Matthew tells the story of Jesus' conception and birth as Joseph's story. Joseph discovers that his betrothed, Mary, is pregnant, and assumes that she has committed adultery. But before he can follow through his intention to divorce her quietly, the respectable thing to do, an angel meets him in a dream and persuades him to change his mind. The fact that Joseph is addressed as "son of David!! (direct descendant of King David) indicates that the child Mary has conceived will also be a descendant of David. The fact that it is Joseph who names the child shows that he is, legally, his father.

Read Matthew 1:18-25

- Note that Mary is *found to be with child from the Holy Spirit* (verse 18) and that the angel announces to Joseph that *the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit* (verse 20). What does this suggest to you about the divinity and humanity of Jesus?
- In verse 25 Matthew quotes Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 7:14) and names Jesus **Emmanuel** - which means **God is with us**. Discuss the meaning of this.
- According to the angel what does the name of Jesus have to do with his mission in life?
- What else in this story helps you to understand the "incarnation"?

Luke 1:26-38

Luke, in contrast to Matthew, tells the story of Jesus' conception and birth as Mary's story. The angel Gabriel visits Mary, a virgin pledged in marriage to Joseph, a descendant of David. He announces that Mary will give birth to a very important child. Mary is incredulous and questions Gabriel, *How can this be, since I am a virgin? The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*, is the angel's answer.

Read Luke 1:26-38

- What does the virgin birth (or conception) of Jesus mean to you? How central is this teaching in your personal faith?
- How do you respond to the description of the Virgin Mary as "Mary, the mother of God"?
- What do you believe Gabriel means when he says of Jesus (v32), *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High?*
- When Mary queried the angels message, he replied (v35), *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you*. Therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. For other New Testament uses of the word translated overshadow refer to Luke 9:34, Acts 5:15. What does this tell you about the way Jesus was conceived, and about his status?
- What else in this story helps you to understand the "incarnation" - God becoming human.
- What still puzzles you about this story in Luke? Talk about this.

John 1:1-18

John does not include a story in his Gospel about Jesus' conception and birth. However, in the prologue he makes some striking declarations about "the Word, and the testimony of John the Baptist about this "Word". What does he mean by this unusual expression?

The Greek Stoic philosophers believed the universe to be pervaded by "reason" and they called this "reason" the logos ("word"). This expressed their deep conviction that the universe is rational. They did not think of the logos as a person, but as a principle, a force. They thought of this principle as one that runs right through the universe. It originated everything and directs all things. Everything acts in accordance with it.

Even though John's original readers may not have been very familiar with Stoic thought, they would have recognised that he was referring to a being or principle of the greatest importance.

Among John's Jewish readers "the Word" would have been a reminder of the creative and powerful word of God, the wisdom of God, or even of the person of God.

It is also helpful to consider what the term "flesh" means in John's Gospel. He uses the word 12 times to signify "humanity" over against God, humanity in all its weakness and vulnerability.

Read John 1:1-18

- John writes in v1 that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God". Then in v 14 *The Word became flesh and lived among us*. What does this tell you about the incarnation?
- What do you believe John means when he writes (v 17), *The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ?*
- In v18 John writes, *No one has ever seen God. It is God the only son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known*. Who is this describing and what does it say about the incarnation?
- What other insights into the incarnation does this Scripture offer?
- What else here do you find difficult to understand? Discuss.

CLOSING DEVOTION

A responsive reading from Colossians 1:13-20

Leader: He has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Response 1: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Response 2: For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Response 1: He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Response 2: And he is the head of the body, the church;

Response 1: he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Response 2: For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,

All: and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

To sing or read:

Why lies he in such mean estate
where ox and ass were feeding
Good Christians fear; for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through,
the cross be borne for me, for you;
hail, hail the Word made flesh,
the babe, the son of Mary.
William Chatterton Dix (1837-1898)

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, image of the invisible God, firstborn over all creation, creator of all things, we praise you for your love, that you lived among us as one of us, making peace through your blood, shed on the cross. Our finite minds cannot understand how you can be at the same time fully human and fully divine. In the light of this mystery we praise you for your glory and treasure you for your saving love. Amen.

God: One of Us

STUDY 2: Who are you?

Gathering

Go around the group introducing yourself as seen through the eyes of someone you know. For example: "John Smith, the butcher from our local Shopping Centre. This is Mary Jones who is one of the pleasant customers who comes into our shop each week. She always buys bones for her dog. We like teasing her about it."

Leader: An itinerant preacher and a band of men and women followers wandered around some of the areas of Galilee preaching about the realm of God, healing sick and forgiving sinners. His followers were growing, as were those whose power seemed threatened by his presence.

One story was told of his even being able to calm the sea!

37A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" [Mark 4:37-41]

Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?

Some saw the Baptist, some saw Elijah, others a prophet from long ago

Whom do you see today?

A conversation reported between several travellers:

"Who are you?"

"A person, just like all of you."

"But who are you really?"

"A human being, just like you."

"I can see that! But they say you are more than that!"

"Who do they say that I am?"

"A prophet! John the Baptist ... Elijah ... ????" [Mark 8:28; Luke:9: 19]

"You! The one who is noisy and always has an opinion! Who do you say that I am?"

"You are the Messiah!"

"The who?!"

"The Messiah of God? " [Luke 9:20]

"For goodness sake, don't spread that story around!" [Mark 8:30]

A writer, probably quite a number of decades later, was trying to recount this episode to members of his community, in the light of happenings since the death of the traveller who had been questioned.

He wrote:

“You are from below, I am from above; You are of this world, I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.”

“Who are you?”

“Why do I speak to you at all?!!!!!!

I have much to say about you and much to condemn; but the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him”

“Who is he talking about now?”

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.” [John 8:23-29]

Is the central character in both writings the same person?

Who was he?

Why do you think there is such a difference between the descriptions? Are the writers trying to get over the same basic message? What is it?

What is the message of the ‘incarnation’? Who is this person today?

If you were writing to the people of the 21st century, how would you explain to them the identity of this person?

What authority have you?

Another question which was asked of Jesus was, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?” [Mark 11:28, Luke 20:2, Matt 21:23] In Mark, Luke and Matthew, the question was countered with another.

I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? Answer me.

When they couldn’t without tricking themselves into displaying their injustice, Jesus said “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

When Jesus was on trial, the chief priests and the scribes said:

If you are the Messiah (or Christ), tell us.

Jesus replies, If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.

Are you then the Son of God?

You say that I am. [Luke 22:67]

In John’s gospel, again there is a different approach to the authority issue than that found in the synoptic gospels.

The ‘Jews’ said to him, *What sign can you show us for doing this?* (Overturning the money changers’ tables)

Jesus: *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*

‘Jews’: *This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?*

The writer, John, explains to his community... *But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.* [John 2:18-22]

Neither John nor the writers of the synoptic gospels is more right than the other; each was writing to a different community in a different context.

- How can people in a post modern age understand the authority of God in Jesus?
- How would you tell the story?
- To sum up the study for this week - How can we perceive the presence of God in Jesus from the writings we have in the scriptures?
- What actions, timing, words or music do we share in our various church liturgies which celebrate aspects of God’s presence in Jesus, and Jesus’ presence as God with us today? Is the one more obvious and organised than the other?

CLOSING DEVOTION

As the group concludes the discussions for the day, use the following as a form of reflection, led by the convenor.

Individual members of the group can share their thoughts (without discussion) where they feel moved.

Leader declares: Jesus is with us!

Leader: Where would you walk today, Jesus? Would you ...?
 Where would we meet you today, Jesus? Would we meet you... ?
 Where would we find you today, Jesus? Would we find you... ?
 Would we recognise you?
 Would we mistake you for someone else?
 Would we crucify you?
 Do we do it again and again
 as with the unloved, the abused,
 the unwanted, the poor, the homeless?
 Where are you today, Jesus?
 Where do we look?
 Where people give themselves in...
 Where faith gives hope and hope brings love
 That is where we see you today, Jesus.

Together: Jesus our friend! May we continue to walk with you! Amen.