

## Discussion Questions to accompany 'In the Shadow of The Cross'

### The Mother's Tale

1. What range of emotions does Mary express in her story?
2. Who was Simeon? What impact do you think his words given to Mary many years before have on her current situation?
3. What does Mary's story tell us about Jesus?
4. What are the examples of Mary's strong faith in her account?
5. Where are the examples of Mary's honest struggles?
6. What does Mary's experience tell us about the place of questions in the life of faith?

### The Executioner's Tale

1. What do you think are the challenges for a young soldier serving far from home?
2. What are 'the 39'? How does it add to the horror of crucifixion?
3. What things surprised the soldier about that afternoon's 'work'?
4. What clues are there in the soldier's story of how he manages to cope with the horrific aspects of his job?
5. Does the soldier have a choice in doing the things he does?
6. Are there circumstances in our lives where we have felt forced into doing something we didn't want to do? How did we cope with it and what were the consequences?

### The Disciple's Tale

1. What emotions does Mary Magdalene express in her story and who are these feelings directed towards?
2. How did Mary's relationship with Jesus make a difference to her?
3. What does Mary's story tell us about the role of women in Jesus's life?

4. What do you think she means when she says she must prepare herself for the 'coming storm'?
5. Mary says that people never look at her without seeing the shadow of her past. How easy is it to have a new perception of someone?
6. Mary expresses her anger towards God. Do you think that is a sign of faith or disbelief?

### The High Priest's Tale

1. Why does Caiaphas think that crucifying Jesus was helpful? To whom was it helpful?
2. Why is he challenged by the tearing of the temple curtain?
3. Caiaphas calls Jesus a 'danger', 'a deluded peasant' and a 'rebel bent on destroying all we cherish.' What do you think of these views of Jesus?
4. How does Caiaphas use Scripture and Tradition to justify his views?
5. How does Caiaphas propose to manage the 'curtain issue'? Can you think of any issues in the news today that are 'managed' in this way?
6. What do you think is the dominant motivator for Caiaphas – political expediency or religious conviction?

## Leader's Notes

### The Mother's Tale

1. The various emotions are:- grief at the loss of a child, pleading with God for action, confusion at the situation, gratitude and love at the care of her son, enjoyment of their shared memories, remembering the ways in which God has worked miracles in her life before in order to build hope and faith in God that even if she doesn't understand she still trusts in him.
2. Simeon was the prophet who prophesied about Jesus when Mary and Joseph took him to the temple to be presented when he was a baby (Luke 2:22-35). Although Mary will feel the reality of a sword piercing her (verse 35) she may take some comfort from the rest of the prophecy that Jesus would be God's salvation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel (verses 30-32). Although Jesus was dead Mary would have held onto the fact that somehow God could still miraculously prove these prophecies correct.
3. Mary remembering singing lullabies to Jesus when he was a baby and thinking of him as a child playing with his brothers and watching his father work locates Jesus in an ordinary family. It emphasises his human nature and the fact he lived a normal life with others. Also Mary's story tells us how Jesus cared for her even when he was dying on the cross. He thought about how she would be supported and looked afterwards and asked John to care for her. Mary also noted that Jesus showed an acceptance of death and a submission to God's plan for him, whatever that was.
4. Mary still believed in and prayed to God even though her son was dead. She still felt that God could possibly raise him from the dead. Even in her confusion she prays and trusts. She is still 'The Lord's Servant' (see Luke 1: 38). She reminds herself of the evidence of miracles in her own life.
5. She doesn't understand how a promised child, the gift from God can die like this. She struggles with the silence of heaven. She would have given her life for him but for some reason 'God wanted his life' not hers. She feels powerless because she can't save him. Even though she calls out to God there are no answers, she can only bring her faith and unbelief to him.
6. It is normal to have questions when life doesn't make sense, when our expectations are frustrated and when we are in pain. God is able to bear the questions and Mary models the reality of bringing them to him, praying that he will help her in her struggles. Questions are part of faith when we don't have all the answers, or the answers we have don't seem to fit. They are also a response to the mystery of God whose ways are higher than ours. Our questions may not be answered but Mary's story is an example of living with questions we can't answer but still trusting in God.

## The Executioner's Tale

1. The young soldier will be taken from his homeland and trained to subdue the populace of a place where Rome is the occupying power. He has authority by virtue of his position but he also has to deal with the rebellion, hatred and distrust of the locals. He will have to be constantly on his guard to protect himself and to quell any uprising. He is in a place with a very different culture, language, religion and customs. He talks about the 'women wailing' and 'all that religion'.
2. 40 lashes were seen by the Jews as a death sentence, so most punishment was the 39 lashes. The Apostle Paul talks about receiving this flogging in 2 Corinthians 11: 24-25. Although this was a Jewish punishment, the Romans had their own version of it using a Flagellum (sometimes called a cat o' nine tails.) This was a whip of about three foot long made out of three ropes of leather attached to a wooden handle. The leather cords had knots tied into them at three inch intervals and into those knots sharp pieces of bone, glass, nails and hooks were tied. This meant that when the victim was flogged the whip ripped into the back causing deep cuts and lacerations. When Jesus was flogged it would have been with the Roman flagellum. It explains why Jesus was not able to carry his cross to Golgotha and why he fell down a number of times on the way.
3. The soldier was surprised that they were crucifying a 'half-crazed holy man' who he didn't suppose had 'done much harm' and that his superior, the Centurion, thought Jesus was 'a Son of God.' What he was most surprised about however was Pilate's response to the whole situation. Pilate was known as a ruthless man but didn't want to be part of this punishment, to the point of symbolically washing his hands of it. It was the first time the soldier had seen Pilate like that.
4. The soldier has hardened himself to the grim aspects of his job. He has done this by keeping focused on his identity and of being in charge of keeping the locals in check. He recognises he is part of a brutal, authoritarian regime and he knows that his long term survival depends on him doing as he is told and not asking questions. He tries to see everything in black and white:- Rome is in charge and rebels need to be subdued; the prisoners deserved it – whatever they did; the people need to learn to do as they are told otherwise there are harsh consequences; and he is just doing his job. In interpreting his actions as 'just following orders' in the service of Rome he denies his humanity and becomes numb to the pain and suffering around him.
5. The soldier was part of a brutal regime and to refuse to follow orders would likely to have resulted in his immediate execution. In this way one could argue that he had no choice but to comply with what was expected of him. Another viewpoint might be expressed if one was to compare his position with the guards in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany who used the defence of 'only following orders'.
6. This question could result in some interesting ethical debate and may need to be facilitated carefully and sensitively.

## The Disciple's Tale

1. Mary Magdalene expresses a range of emotions in her story: grief at the death of Jesus; rage at God for letting him die; love and devotion towards Jesus; distrust, contempt and fury at the disciples for betraying and deserting him; solidarity with, and loyalty to, the women disciples; fear of being put down, ridiculed and humiliated by the society now Jesus isn't there to remind her and others of who she is now.
2. Jesus empowered her to think things could be different and she could have a new start. He saw her as someone who could be seen as precious and that she didn't have to be imprisoned by her past or by what Society told her she was. Jesus taught her about faith and even now she can imagine him encouraging her to believe that 'this is all part of how things must be.' He offered her light and protection and she now feels vulnerable that he has gone.
3. Women played a very central role in the life and ministry of Jesus. Mary Magdalene's story is called 'The Disciple's Tale' because she too is a follower, along with the 12 and many others. She is also the first to be the witness to the resurrection in John's Gospel. Mary is secure in her sense that the women loved Jesus and Jesus loved them. The way he treated them taught them a different way and it was 'a new order.' Mary talks about being given love and status by Jesus. She also highlights the fact that it is the women who stayed with him at the foot of the cross, whereas others, with the exception of John, deserted him. The women have expressed a strong bond of loyalty and devotion to Jesus.
4. Mary talks about 'preparing herself for the coming storm' after saying how her life will change. Jesus has given her protection and status and she feels acutely vulnerable now that he is not there. She is preparing herself for being seen as a 'mere woman' again and for a return of the old ways where she is treated with contempt and distrust because of her own background.
5. This question should raise some interesting points. It might be useful to consider that there is still a general view that Mary Magdalene was a former prostitute. There is no biblical evidence for this. The only reference to her having a particular past is that seven demons were said to have been cast out of her (Luke 8:2). It's interesting that Mary is often portrayed in art and stained glass still depicted as a prostitute (red cloak, hair loose) and yet Peter is remembered with the keys of the kingdom rather than with a cock crowing in the background at the point of his denial. It raises questions of who is allowed to start again? Are there some people who cannot, or should not, be viewed differently? And are there some mistakes that are more easily forgiven than others?
6. Even anger against God can be seen as a form of engagement and therefore authentic faith.

## The High Priest's Tale

1. Crucifying Jesus was seen as 'helpful' to the religious establishment because he was viewed as a rebel and a blasphemer drawing people away from the faith and challenging the authority of the religious hierarchy.
2. It was very common at that time for events to be interpreted as signs of God's involvement in the world, therefore the temple curtain being ripped from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus dying on the cross, (Matthew 27: 50-51) or just before in Luke's gospel, is interpreted as a significant 'sign'. Caiaphas tries to make sense of it himself. He says that he knows that the people will say 'this man was a prophet sent from God' and the ripping of the curtain is a confirmation of this. As High Priest, he is the only one entitled to go behind the curtain on one day of the year - the Day of Atonement, he is also wondering whether this is a direct challenge to his authority. In addition, there is the wider question of whether this is a sign of a new era where God's presence is no longer confined to the Temple. Depending on which interpretation one uses, this 'sign' could be a potential challenge to Caiaphas's authority, his power and control, or more widely to his theology.
3. The image of Jesus as a rule breaker has often been eroded over time and in its place, he is presented as meek and mild. Re-reading the gospel accounts challenges that view. The vitriol that Caiaphas has against him shows that he was viewed as a trouble maker and a problem to be eradicated. There is an important question here as to what image the Church presents of Jesus today.
4. Caiaphas is concerned with his interpretation of the Jewish Law and the teachings of the Rabbi's. He looks to the tradition in scripture of the High Priest's role (Exodus 30:10 and Leviticus 16). He also refers to the faith being handed down from 'our father Abraham' so he is being seen as the guardian of the faith. Referring to Moses meeting with God in Exodus 34: 35 he makes the case for the continued need for a veil or curtain, because no one can see God's face and live (Exodus 33:20).
5. Caiaphas plays down the possibility of it being an authentic 'sign' from God. He concludes that it must be sabotage from Jesus's disciples intent on destruction and carrying on the work that their rebel leader started. He uses logic to dismiss the idea that this is a new way of relating to God by referring back to the original tradition of a sanctuary as an earthly dwelling for the place of God's presence and it being kept holy and pure by being curtained off. He also uses the Patriarchs as his reference points to show that he is continuing with tradition.
6. Caiaphas was motivated by both political expediency and his religious convictions the extent to which one dominated can only be a matter of debate.