

Living Faith (2020) was prepared by Lindsey Hall. This Course contains some material from the previous Bishop's Certificate Course, Prepared for the Ministry Division by Pauline Shelton, David Heywood and Elizabeth Jordan.

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Ordinary Harvest Advent Christmas

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Living Faith is an introductory course for people who want to learn more about the Christian faith and discipleship. It follows the seasons of the Christian year, and looks at some key aspects of Bible study, belief and the work of the Church. It ties in with the worshipping life of the Church as we journey through the Christian year and mark the key seasons and festivals. It is possible to start at the beginning of any of the modules, and you may want to adjust the times to fall in with Lent and Easter in particular.


By the end of this course, participants should be able to:

- Identify some of the distinctive features of each of the four Gospels
- Outline some of the core doctrines of the Christian tradition
- Reflect on the relationship between belief and practice
- Demonstrate an understanding of faith-life conversations

Facilitators Notes:

You do not need any particular qualifications to lead this course; however it is useful to nominate someone to be the facilitator. Their role is:

- to make sure that everyone gets chance to speak
- to move the discussion on when necessary so the rest of the material is covered
- to set up a screen/sound to watch the YouTube clip or download the clip (or to nominate someone else to!)
- to ensure that every member of the group has a copy of the module
- to look through the material for each session before it starts so that you can allocate the time appropriately
- To organize the film week (there are some films available to borrow from the Vocations Team) and the end of module meal.

 Indicates a discussion point

Session One

The Kingdom of God

Aims of the session:

- ❖ **To consider what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God**
- ❖ **To reflect on Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom**
- ❖ **To look for signs of the Kingdom in our own lives and communities**

Opening Prayer

Lord you announced the coming of your kingdom, and invited us all to be part of it. Help us to see opportunities to build your kingdom, and chances to help it to grow. We pray that you will give us the strength to live according to the values of your kingdom, and the grace to invite others to join us.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Autumn 1**

The 'kingdom' is the description Jesus gives to the world he comes to make real. Jesus talks of a world in which things will be different – the first will be last and the last will be first, for example; a world where different values reign and the love of God is made known in everything.

Although we live in the United Kingdom, we don't necessarily think that kingdom is defined by its monarch. It is a long time since the King or Queen had real power to rule over this nation. In times past, this would have been the case. If we think of the Victorian era, or England under Henry VIII, we might reflect on the way in which the personalities of those monarchs had far reaching effects for the people they ruled over.

In fairy tales and legends as well as some histories, kings and queens and princes and princesses are often fighting over their kingdoms. Kingdoms seem to consist of wealth and lands that can be won and lost. Shakespeare's Richard III famously shouts in despair on the battlefield "a horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!" believing that losing his horse in battle will also mean the loss of his kingdom.

↔ **What do you think of as a 'kingdom'?**

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, he does not seem to be talking about lands which can be ruled over, claimed and then won and lost in battle. He is talking about a quality of life, or a way of life, more than a particular place. The clues about what the kingdom will be like, are given by calling it the kingdom of *God*. Because we know what God is like, we have an idea what the kingdom will be like. We know that Jesus is talking about a world where every person is loved and valued; a world characterised by justice and joy. In his letter to the church in Rome, St Paul writes: "... the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17)

The Gospels' refers to the first four books in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The word means Good News, and they are called Gospels because each of them tells the story of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus – good news for the whole world.

The Kingdom is near ...

In the Gospels, there are lots of different explanations about what the Kingdom of God is like, and how it will be brought about.

Look at the following passages about the kingdom of God:

As you go, proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

Matthew 10:7

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Mark 1: 14-15

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

Luke 17: 20 - 21

↔ What does Jesus seem to be saying about the Kingdom in these passages?

You may have noticed that in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven rather than the Kingdom of God. This is probably because Matthew's Gospel was originally addressed to Jewish people, who would have had a clear understanding of Heaven as the place where God's will is already done; as the realm which already reflects the love and care of God.

The 'Kingdom of Heaven', is another way of explaining what the Kingdom is like. You may also have commented that the Kingdom seems to be a bit elusive! In the first two passages, the Kingdom is 'near' and in the passage from Luke Jesus explains that it is 'among you'. The Kingdom of God is not a place, but a way of living.

When Jesus talked about the Kingdom, it was probably as confusing for the first hearers as it is for us! They probably wanted Jesus to be a bit clearer about what the kingdom is, and where it is! One of the reasons that it was difficult for the first hearers to understand, was that they had to 'unlearn' some of their previous thinking and expectations. The type of kingdom that Jesus talked about was not quite what they were expecting. The same is true for us today- to be able to really hear the Good News of Jesus, we have to unlearn some of the things we might believe about ourselves, about religion, and about God.

⇔ Can you think of anything you need to 'unlearn'? What beliefs do you have that might stand in the way of you accepting an invitation to life in the kingdom of God?

We absorb all kinds of beliefs throughout our life time, some of them we don't realise we have taken on until a situation happens in which they become obvious. Many things that we heard in childhood still influence us years later. This is as true of what we hear about God, as of what we hear about ourselves. Those of us who were given the idea that God is angry with us, or expects things of us we cannot do, for example, may find it hard to believe that God is good, and generous and loves us, and that this is what the Kingdom is like.

The Kingdom is like ...

Matthew 13 contains seven different parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is difficult to know exactly what the parables mean. This is partly because they use images and refer to things which would have been familiar to the people of the time. 2000 years later, and in a different climate, culture and age, we do not necessarily understand the point being made. The first parable is the story of the sower. This a detailed parable, which Jesus then goes on to explain. For example, at the end of the parable of the sower Jesus says that in the good soil, the corn will increase, 30, 60 and even a hundred fold. Many of us are not farmers, and do not know what sort of yield we should expect. Even those of us who do farm, do so under very different conditions than Jesus' contemporaries would have. When we know that farmers at that time might have thought a yield of 5-fold was an abundant harvest, we understand the parable in quite a different way.

Another difficulty in interpreting parables is that they are meant to be ambiguous! If Jesus had wanted to teach in a direct and didactic way, he would not have told stories. Parables don't just

give us one explanation, they give us many, and it is an on-going process to reflect on what Jesus meant.

The parable of the buried treasure is just one verse, with no explanation:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Matthew 13:44

⇒ **What do you think that parable means?**

The parable of the hidden treasure is quite a strange little tale. What different ways did you interpret it? Perhaps you identified the Church as the people who know where the treasure is; as a people who are on their way to buying the field? Perhaps you talked about what the treasure is that is worth selling everything for? Or perhaps you talked about the dangers of trying to identify buried treasure, when so many things that glitter turn out not to be gold! You might not have mentioned anything like this, but talked about totally different things. There is no single right understanding of a parable – any understanding that helps us to know more about the Kingdom of God is right.

⇒ **What do you think the kingdom of God is like today?**

One of the challenges the Church faces is how to see signs of the Kingdom and build on them. Although the Kingdom is God's, we are invited not just to join it, but also to help build it! The Kingdom is near whenever God's love is being made known, and the values of the Kingdom – justice and joy – are being made a reality. This might be happening in all kinds of places and ways.

⇔ **Where do you see signs of the Kingdom in your church or community? Where do you see signs of the Kingdom across the world?**

Signs of the Kingdom can be found in all sorts of surprising and exciting places. Some will be in the church, and some beyond the church in charities, social justice groups, and in care offered to neighbours and strangers.

Look at the list of things you have identified as signs of the Kingdom. Is there one of them that you could support? This may be through giving your time, campaigning about it, giving a financial donation, or raising awareness by telling others about it. You could also pray for it and for the growth of God's Kingdom in all places.

Recap on ... The Kingdom of God:

- ★ Jesus talks about the Kingdom in parables - stories about what the Kingdom is like.
- ★ The values of the Kingdom are justice, peace and joy
- ★ We may have to 'unlearn' some things about God and ourselves so that we can experience the goodness of the Kingdom of God.
- ★ Signs of the Kingdom may be found in all sorts of places!

Follow up reading ...

- Harvey Cox 'Best of Intentions' from Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/best-of-intentions/>
- Margaret Guenther 'Living By the Word' from Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/living-by-the-word-matthew-1331-33-44-49a/>
- David Wenham The Parables of Jesus (1989) IVP
- Walter Wink 'Letting Parables Live' from Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/letting-parables-live/>

Session Two

Creation

Aims of the session:

- ❖ To consider what it means for God to be the creator of the world
- ❖ To reflect on what it means for us to be part of God's creation
- ❖ To explore some of the debates over creation

Opening Prayer

The world belongs to God: **the earth and all its people**

God you have created the heavens and the earths and given us all that we need. We thank you for the gift of creation and we pray that you will make us mindful of the resources of the world and our brothers and sisters with whom we share them. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

>> Watch the video clip Autumn 2

That God created the whole world, the whole universe, is one of the core beliefs of Christianity. In the *Nicene Creed*, God is described as the creator "of all that is seen and unseen". God did not just create the trees and rivers, and soil etc but also the parts of our universe we can't see. This could include things like our mental capacities, emotions, spiritual being as well as parts of creation we may not yet have discovered.

There is no doubt that the natural world is amazing! The complexity and beauty of many aspects of the natural world can be awe-inspiring. The grandeur of mountains and oceans, or the intricacy of flower petals or insects can make us stop and think how amazing creation is. In Louis Armstrong's well known song, the beauty of creation leads him to suggest that it is a wonderful world!

I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.

I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.

The colours of the rainbow so pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces of people going by ...

[by Rice-Oxley, Chaplin, Hughes and Sanger]

A 'creed' is a statement of belief. In the Christian tradition, creeds have been used in churches to show agreement with, and remind ourselves of, the core beliefs of Christianity. One that is used in many churches is the Nicene Creed. It is called this, because it is based on an understanding of the faith agreed by Church leaders at a meeting in Nicaea (Turkey) in 325 AD

When we look at an amazing view, a beautiful sunset, or the face of someone we love, it may be easy to think that it is a result of God's creation.

⇔ **Can you think of a time when you looked at something, or experienced something and were filled with awe or amazement at the beauty, or specialness of it?**

⇔ **Did it make you feel that it was the work of God?**

Reflecting on the enormity of creation may well lead to reflection on how it came to be. In this Psalm, the writer believes God has created all that is, and this raises yet another question: given the splendour of creation, why does God care about human beings who are such a small part of that creation?

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The Psalmist concludes that God not only cares about humans, but has blessed them by making them like God, and given them charge over all of the other species.

It has often been argued that the complexities of things in the natural world, and the way in which they are regulated into patterns is proof that they were designed intentionally, rather than being the random result of an accidental process.

⇒ **Can you think of any examples of things in nature which are so complex or regular, that they seem like they must have been designed?**

The Psalms are a collection of 150 hymns, prayers, songs and laments, often attributed to David. This may mean that they belong to David, rather than that they were written by him. The Psalms are not so much God addressing us, but humans addressing God and expressing a whole range of emotion – joy, anger, fear, jealousy, contentment, praise etc.

Like many other books of the Old Testament, the book of Psalms is an anthology – a collection of works dating from many different periods of Israel's history. Many of the psalms are hard to date, but the collection was first put together after the return from exile which started to happen in 538 BC.

The Psalms were used as part of the worship offered by Jews privately and corporately in the Temple.

You might have reflected on the human body and how complicated and sophisticated it is, or thought of a snowflake which will always have six points and no two of which are ever the same. These things, and many others, demonstrate that the natural world works according to rules and patterns, many of which are highly complicated. If God did not design them, where did they come from?

One of the big questions about creation is about this question of design. Indeed, it has become such a hotly debated topic, that creation has been one of the most controversial topics in Christianity in recent times, especially in America. This is because there are some Christians who feel that teaching anything other than, what they call a "biblical account of creation" is unacceptable.

Creationism, Evolution and Intelligent Design ...

Creationism, the belief that the world came into being in six days, is of course based on one of the accounts of creation in the Bible: Genesis 1-2.4. This is the very beginning of the Old Testament and the narrative tells how God created different aspects of the earth: light and dark, sun, moon and stars, sea and land, birds, fish, animals, humans, and God saw that it was good. We will look at this more next week.

Evolution is the theory that human life, and indeed, all of nature has evolved from earlier, simpler forms of being. The theory was first advocated by Charles Darwin in his book *The Origin of the Species* published in 1859. Darwin argued that in each generation, species are modified and adapt through a process of natural selection. Ever since his theory was made known, it has been opposed by some Christians who believe it undermines their belief in God as creator of the world.

Intelligent Design is the view that many things in creation are so complex, that they are better explained as the result of an intelligent design process, than as the result of a random process like natural selection.

In modern Christian history, the view that creation points to a creator has been a common one. However, some versions of this would be compatible with a theory of evolution: God created the world so that it would develop and evolve and become the complex creation we now see. However, the versions of Intelligent Design popular today, particularly in America, specifically rule out any place for evolution. In fact, many teach Intelligent Design (ID) specifically as a way of getting round the court rulings prohibiting creationism from being taught in schools.

The newspaper article shows how one journalist summarises the debate:

Creationists defeated in Kansas school vote on science teaching

- Guidelines challenging Darwinism banned
- Decision is latest blow to intelligent design activists

Suzanne Goldenberg in Washington
The Guardian, Thursday 15 February 2007

...Teaching creationism in American public schools has been outlawed since 1987 when the Supreme Court ruled that the inclusion of religious material in science classes was unconstitutional. In recent years, however, opponents of the theory of evolution - first developed by Charles Darwin, - have regrouped, challenging science education with the doctrine of "intelligent design", which has been carefully stripped of all references to God and religion. Unlike traditional creationism, which claims that God created the earth in six days, proponents of intelligent design say the workings of this planet are too complex to be ascribed to evolution. There must have been a designer working to a plan - that is- a creator.

There have been many legal cases taken by and against school boards and education authorities in this battle. When it became illegal to teach creationism, advocates of that view talked about it instead as 'intelligent design'.

⇔ **Why do you think parents and teachers have fought so hard to be able to teach creationism in schools?**

A lot of energy is put into debating whether the account of creation found in Genesis 1 – 2.4 should or can be taken literally. Creationists say that this is a factual account of the way the world came into being, and no scientific discoveries can have more authority than this. Indeed they argue that scientific accounts are wrong. Not only do they mislead us, but teach us to understand the world coming into being without God being responsible for it at all.

Other Christians suggest that the account of creation in Genesis 1-2.4 and the other account of creation in Genesis 2.4 – 2.25, are both stories which express essential truths about the God who created the universe. Rather than looking at these passages as scientific explanations of how the earth came into being, they tell us what God is like, why God created the earth, and what our place in creation is. For many Christians, Intelligent Design and evolution don't have to be seen as opposing views, but can both point to a complex process of creation which started with God.

⇔ **What do you think? Is it possible to believe in evolution and also to believe in God as creator?**

In the debate about creation, Christians recognise that *how* and *why* the world came into being is important – we just don't agree about how it did happen. Although a lot of the debate focuses on the question of *how* this really is not as important as *why* and neither of these are as important as *who*!

Recap on... Creation:

- ★ God is the good creator of the whole universe - all that is seen and unseen.
- ★ The complexity of creation and the beauty of the earth could point to an intelligent and good creator
- ★ There are a whole range of views about how God created the world, including creationism and evolution
- ★ Debates over creation might draw unnecessary divisions between religion and science

Follow up reading ...

- Elizabeth Achtemeier 'Debating Evolution: The God who would intervene' Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/debating-evolution-the-god-who-would-intervene/>
- Jason Byassee 'Dinosaurs in the Garden' Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/dinosaurs-in-the-garden/>
- David Fergusson *The Cosmos and the Creator* (1990) SPCK
- John C. Lennox *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (2009) Lion Hudson
- William Phipps 'Darwin the Scientific Creationist' Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/darwin-the-scientific-creationist/>
- Huston Smith 'Evolution and Evolutionism' Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/evolution-and-evolutionism/>

Session Three

The Project of Creation

Aims of the session:

- ❖ To study the first account of creation in Genesis
- ❖ To reflect on our own understanding of the Biblical accounts of creation
- ❖ To explore the way in which God invites us to be part of the project of creation
- ❖ To reflect on the fall and the brokenness of creation

Opening Prayer

If the people of God remain silent: **even the stones will shout aloud.**

Creator God, you have brought into being all that is. You have given us this earth with its great resources and riches. Lord we do not always treat the earth well. We take it for granted, abuse its resources and forget that you have created it and given it to us. We thank you that even when we neglect you and squander your creation, the works of your hands reveal your goodness to us.

If the people of God remain silent: **even the stones will shout aloud.**

Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Autumn 3

The Bible begins with God, and with the story of God bringing the world into being. In the beginning is emptiness and chaos and out of that God brings forth creation which is purposeful, ordered, fruitful and good. Although there aren't many other passages about creation in the Bible – some in the Psalms and the Letter to the Romans and perhaps the Gospel of John – the two accounts at the beginning ground the whole story of Scripture in the understanding that the world exists because God brought it into being. That we, and all the living things, are here, because God created us.

The book Genesis, is the first book in the Bible. In Christian and Jewish tradition the first five books of the Bible are known as the books of Moses, or the books of Law (Torah in Hebrew). They are also known collectively as the Pentateuch, which just means 'five volumes' in Greek.

⇔ **From the discussion last week, and what you know about debates over creation, what do you expect the Bible to say about the way in which the world was created?**

The first account of creation in Genesis divides the process of creation into seven days. The narrative follows a particular pattern and uses certain phrases repeatedly – look out for them as you read through each section.

Day One	In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
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⇔ **Does anything strike you in these verses about the action of God, the pattern of creation or the words used?**

The passage is pretty clear that creation is brought into being through the deliberate actions of God. It does not appear accidentally, but because God chooses to bring it into being. God does not create out of loneliness or boredom, but because God chooses to create something good. "God said" "and it was so" are both phrases that appear repeatedly in this account. They continually remind us that this is the work of a powerful God.

Day Two	And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.
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⇔ **Does anything strike you in these verses about the action of God, the pattern of creation or the words used?**

'There was evening, and there was morning' is another of the phrases repeated in this narrative. When stories were passed on orally and listened to rather than read, it was important to have recurring phrases that people would remember and that gave shape to the narrative. This particular phrase gives an overriding sense of rhythm and pattern to the story of creation. It represents the order that is brought out of chaos and the purposeful process of creation.

Day Three	And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.
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⇔ **Does anything strike you in these verses about the action of God, the pattern of creation or the words used?**

The story of creation is also the story of the provision that God has made for us. The earth is filled with plants and trees which bear fruit and will provide for the creatures who are going to inhabit the earth. The reality of our world today is that not all people share in this provision; not all people experience the world as a generous and safe environment. There is a challenge here for each of us to think about all of the other people with whom we share the earth, particularly those who struggle to survive whilst we have plentiful natural resources.

⇔ **In what ways might you read this story differently if you lived in a land that did not provide sufficient crops year after year?**

Day Four	And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.
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⇔ **Does anything strike you in these verses about the action of God, the pattern of creation or the words used?**

As God creates, God also observes that what has been created is good. (On the sixth day, it is very good.) When natural disasters happen, or even when the weather is inhospitable, we can think of the earth as a hostile environment- that it is not a good place for us to be. No doubt natural forces can be hostile and destructive, but according to this account, when the earth was created, God saw that it was good.

Over the centuries, Christianity has sometimes given the impression that it is only interested in spiritual things, and that it despises physical, fleshy, earthy things. In other words, it is interested in our souls and not our bodies. The Genesis 1 account of creation challenges that. God sees that creation is good, not just as a spiritual environment, but the soil and the grass and the air and the bodies of animals and humans. The physical things of God's creation are good, and part of the environment God provides us with. Far from being despised by Christianity, or irrelevant to it, God chooses to give us a physical environment in which to grow and develop.

Day Five	And God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.
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⇔ **Does anything strike you in these verses about the action of God, the pattern of creation or the words used?**

God does not just make one type of thing, or even just one type of each thing, but things of 'every kind'. There is great variety in creation, and as we look around the world we can see a huge wealth of different landscapes, creatures, flora and fauna, people, customs etc etc. This passage seems to suggest that God intends that variety to be part of creation. Sometimes the church has given the impression that it values uniformity – that people who are different to us are a problem and should become more like us. This does not fit with the celebration of plurality in this passage.

⇔ **Can you think of any issues or debates that are related to the way in which we respond to difference?**

You may have mentioned issues of racism, or discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation or class. A lot of the conflict that occurs between groups of people, stems from the way in which we respond to those who are different to us in some way.

Day Six	<p>And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.' And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.</p> <p>Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'</p> <p>So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.</p> <p>God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.</p>
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⇔ **Does anything strike you in these verses about the action of God, the pattern of creation or the words used?**

God has the power to create, and humans are part of the created order. This is an important reminder to us that we are created, and not creators. We are not 'masters of our own destiny' but beings reliant on God for our existence. When we behave as though the world belongs to us, and we can do whatever we like with it, we have lost sight of this central truth that God is the creator of the world.

The creation of humans is slightly different than any other species, because God creates them in His own image and likeness and gives them charge over all the plants and trees and all of the animals, birds and fish. Humans are given a particular role and responsibility in the process of creation. God chooses to involve us in the work that He is doing. Humans are not given charge over animals because God doesn't have time for them, or doesn't care for them, but because God chooses to invite us to participate in the great project of creation. The earth that God creates is not a finished product, but a work in progress, and we are all involved in determining how the earth and its resources are used.

⇔ **What are the differences and similarities between the account of the creation of humans in this passage, and in the following passage from Genesis 2?**

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed...The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Genesis 2:7-25

You may have noted that there are some similarities, such as humans being given charge over other species, and the particular connection between God and humans, made in the image of God or given breath by God. One of the major differences is the distinction between the two genders which is a major feature of the second account and not of the first.

Day Seven	Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.
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*How does our discussion about creation relate to the environment?
What responsibilities do we have for looking after the earth and using its resources wisely?
Are there any ways in which we could personally, or as part of the work of our Church, take better care of our environment?*

⇔ **Does anything strike you in these verses about the action of God, the pattern of creation or the words used?**

God resting on the seventh day is where we get our tradition of Sundays as a day of rest. For centuries

Sunday was marked as a distinct day and one of the signs of this was that shops used to be closed on Sundays. During the 1980s there was a lot of debate over whether we should "keep Sunday Special".

⇔ **Do you think it is important that Sunday is a day of rest, or set aside from the other days of the week?**

The change of Sundays to become like every other day of the week for many people is regarded by some as a sign of our disconnection from God the creator. In Genesis, it does not take long for humans to turn against God and to break the communion between humans and God.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Genesis 3: 1 - 7

Throughout Christian history, the question of where evil came from, and why so many people do not experience the world as 'good' has been debated. The traditional answer was that evil came

into the world because Eve and then Adam were tempted to eat the apple, and were expelled from the garden. Therefore, their relationship with God was broken.

This seems to characterise the human condition – we live with broken relationships with God, with one another and with the earth. At times, we mend these relationships and flourish, but at other times we live with the brokenness that is part of life. Many of the environmental problems that we face today, result from both our, and our ancestors, attitudes towards the resources of the earth. The way in which we have exploited the earth and kept resources to ourselves rather than share them seems a long way from the picture of the earth and its provision described in Genesis.

Recap on ... The Project of Creation:

- ★ The first account of creation in Genesis emphasises that creation is the work of God and brought order out of chaos.
- ★ God repeatedly states that the creation is good, and celebrates the variety and plurality of the universe
- ★ We don't live in a perfect creation, but in a broken and fragile world.
- ★ Our part in the project of creation requires us to take responsibility for other humans and creatures as well as the environment.

Follow up Reading ...

- Paula Gooder Pentateuch: A Story of Beginnings (2004) T & T Clark
- William Greenway 'Animals and the Love of God'
<http://www.religion-online.org/article/animals-and-the-love-of-god/>
- John Habgood 'A Sacramental Approach to Environmental Issues'
<http://www.religion-online.org/article/a-sacramental-approach-to-environmental-issues/>

Session Four

Harvest

Aims of the session:

- ❖ **To explore the festival of harvest**
- ❖ **To reflect on God's provision for us**
- ❖ **To think about places where the harvest fails and what happens to our relationship with God**

Opening Prayer

Let us thank God for the abundance of blessings He gives to us. Thank you for all the things which bring us joy, comfort and nourishment. Thank you for all the blessings which challenge, excite and develop us. We thank you for all of the people who are a blessing to us and all with whom we share our gifts. We remember those who do not experience times of plenty, who are hungry, lonely or bored. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Autumn 4**

The festival of harvest is one of the oldest Christian festivals, and in many rural places is one of the most popular events in the Christian year. It is an opportunity to celebrate the crops that have been gathered in, the provision of God for the coming year.

⇔ **What are your experiences, memories or impressions of Harvest Festival?**

There is a great tradition, not just in Christianity, but in all human cultures and religions of giving thanks for what we receive. Harvest is not a chance to keep God sweet, in the hope that we will have another abundant harvest the next year. It is more about recognising that what we have is from God and that it should be used in accordance with what God wants for the world. Many churches share the harvest offerings with people in need in their community. In Old Testament times, Jews took the first fruits of the harvest to the temple as an offering, this was part of their religious commitment, that they would offer back to God the best of what God had given them.

Some preachers have tried to encourage people to become Christians by telling them that if they do, it will bring them wealth and success. This is sometimes called 'prosperity theology' – if you believe this you will prosper. But this is a distortion of the Christian Gospel, and Jesus certainly makes no such promises. Indeed, in this parable Jesus says almost the opposite:

Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

Luke 12

Luke's Gospel is the only one written by a Gentile (non Jew). Luke contains many parables and stories that do not appear anywhere else such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the account of the walk to Emmaus. A strong theme throughout Luke is Jesus' concern for the disadvantaged, women, the poor and other social outcasts. His gospel contains a great deal of teaching on money.

It is thought that the Gospel writer Luke may have been a doctor who travelled with St Paul and particularly wanted the gentile world to hear the Good News of Jesus. Luke's introductory verses (1:1–4) begin in the style of a history-book of the time, with a dedication to 'most excellent Theophilus', and a claim for the orderliness and authenticity of what is to follow. Luke's aim is clear: 'So that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed'.

↔ **What do you think this passage is about?**

One of the recurring themes of Luke's Gospel is wealth and poverty. In this Gospel in particular, the good news of the kingdom of God is clearly related to the letting go of earthly riches. Throughout the gospel, Luke is concerned that Jesus and his message bring those who are on the edge, marginalised, ignored, poor into the very centre. In other words, there is a re-ordering in which those who are important in society are on the edges of the kingdom, and those who barely register in earthly hierarchies are at the heart of Jesus' vision of God's reign.

The Good News is not about economic prosperity, and the message of the Gospels is not that if we do certain things, the harvest will be plentiful; rather it is a paradoxical message that suggests the more we let go of, the more we will gain.

At harvest time, we celebrate the provision God gives us, but we also remember places where the harvest has been poor, not just this year, but maybe year after year.

In 1984, the drought in Ethiopia meant that most of the crops failed in the north of the country, effectively meaning that there was no harvest. This was compounded by shortages elsewhere in the country, government policy on food relief and areas in the country where resources were being absorbed by on-going fighting. The result was that millions of people were starving. Part of the reason that this particular famine is so well known, is that when Irish singer Bob Geldof saw the news reports, he was determined to do something. Out of this came the charity single, 'Do they know it's Christmas?' and the Live Aid concerts in summer 1985.

Bob Geldof and Midge Ure wrote the words to Do they know it's Christmas? really quickly, and probably did not mean them to be a theological statement - but - they are worth reflecting on.

⇔ **What is the song about?**

⇔ **Are there any lines that you find difficult?**

Bob Geldof and Bono had an argument about the line that Bono eventually sang 'tonight thank God it's them instead of you'. Bono didn't want to sing it and challenged Geldof as to whether he really wanted this line in the song at all. But Geldof felt that the line would hit home to

Do they know it's Christmas?

Bob Geldof and Midge Ure

It's Christmastime, there's no need to be afraid
At Christmastime, we let in light and we banish shade
And in our world of plenty we can spread a smile of joy
Throw your arms around the world at Christmastime

But say a prayer: Pray for the other ones
At Christmastime it's hard, but when you're having fun
There's a world outside your window
And it's a world of dread and fear
Where the only water flowing is the bitter sting of tears
And the Christmas bells that ring there are the clanging chimes of doom
Well tonight thank God it's them instead of you

And there won't be snow in Africa this Christmastime
The greatest gift they'll get this year is life where nothing ever grows
No rain nor rivers flow
Do they know it's Christmastime at all?

(Here's to you) raise a glass for everyone
(Here's to them) underneath that burning sun
Do they know it's Christmastime at all?

Feed the world
Let them know its Christmastime again
Feed the world

Blessed Be Your Name

Matt Redman

Blessed Be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your name
Blessed Be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed Be Your name

*Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord
Still I will say
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name*

Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's 'all as it should be'
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

Every blessing You pour out ...

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord, blessed be Your name

people. Bono reported that they had many arguments about religion and God, and that he said to Bob Geldof "you've written your first hymn"!

Harvest time reminds us that worshipping God, giving thanks, is not just an activity for good times. Part of the challenge of the Christian life, is that we do not just worship God when things are going our way, but also when things are really tough and we are not sure what God is doing. In his song, 'Blessed be your name', Christian song writer Matt Redman talks about this. Even when we are walking the road 'marked with suffering', we still worship God, or bless the name of the Lord.

⇔ **What do you think of this song?**

⇔ **Do you think it is possible to praise God even when times are difficult?**

Following Christ does not guarantee an easy ride! In fact the Gospels say almost the opposite; not only do we have to let go of many of the trappings of wealth and security we surround ourselves with, but we also have to take up our crosses, and expect to suffer for Christ's sake. When this happens, it does not mean God has abandoned us, even though it may feel that way, but we are still called to hold on to God and bless the name of the Lord.

Recap on ... Harvest:

- ★ Christianity is not about prosperity and praising God does not guarantee abundance.
- ★ When the harvest is not abundant, we still give thanks to God
- ★ Luke's Gospel repeatedly challenges us to let go of wealth and security, not to store up goods for ourselves.
- ★ Christians thank God for all that He has provided them with.

Follow up Reading ...

- Bruce C. Birch 'Hunger, Poverty and Biblical Religion' Christian Century found at:
<http://www.religion-online.org/article/hunger-poverty-and-biblical-religion/>
- Timothy Gorringer Harvest: Food, Farming and the Churches (2006) SPCK

Session Five

Film week

This week, you might like to watch a film which picks up on some of the themes of this term. You may have your own ideas, or you could pick one from the list below. Some films are available to borrow from the Vocations & Training Team but do arrange that in good time. It may be useful to do a bit of research about the film before you watch it and think of some questions relating to the theme you particularly want to draw out. IMDB is a good website for finding out further information about films (www.imdb.com).

Opening Prayer

You are the creator of the sun and stars, the earth and all that is on it. You hold each one of us in your care, and weave your presence into our lives. As we watch this film, and reflect on this story, help us to see more of your presence; to understand more of the ways in which you are at work in the world, and to celebrate the people who are so gifted at telling their story. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The Truman Show

Director: Peter Weir (1998) (105 mins)

'The Truman Show' in the film is a TV programme following the life of Truman Burbank. Truman doesn't know that he is on TV, or that he lives in an enormous TV studio where secret cameras record his whole life. The producers of the show manipulate Truman's existence and control his environment completely. The film follows what happens when he realises that all is not as it seems, and raises some questions about what difference it makes for us to be free, even if that means our environment is less cosy!

Gattaca

Director: Andrew Niccol (1997) (106 mins)

The genre of this film is obviously science fiction. It invites us into a world of the future where people are genetically designed, and only those with a flawless DNA make up are able to get positions of power and privilege. People who have a natural biological make up are considered to be inferior. There are a range of themes within this film that are of interest to us: what does the film suggest about creation? What role does God have in this sort of world? How seriously does it take the 'fallenness' or brokenness of creation? How is the theme of destiny developed? What does the film have to say about humanity?

Tsotsi

Director: Gavin Hood (2005) (94 mins)

This film is based on a novel by Athol Fugard, it follows a week in the life of criminal gang leader in Johannesburg. The main character is known as Tsotsi, which literally means 'thug'. The film explores a whole range of human emotions and behaviour and looks at some of the background which has shaped the main character's experience of life. The tagline of the film is "In this world ... redemption comes just once." The film explores the re-humanising of Tsotsi, and his journey of learning how to treat others as human too. The film has subtitles and there is a lot of swearing and some violent scenes.

The Straight Story

Director: David Lynch (1999) (112 mins)

This film is based on the true story of a man, Alvin Straight, who travelled 260 miles on a lawn mower to make peace with his estranged brother. The film is a very gentle (slow moving!) and understated tale which nevertheless explores some of the great themes of human existence. The film is not divided into chapters in the way that most DVDs are, because the Director wanted viewers to stay with the journey that Alvin Straight makes. Although not much happens on one level, a lot of the themes of the Christian story are explored here. Straight's encounters with the people he meets on his journey are transformative for himself and also for others; through the hospitality and kindness of strangers, he views the world differently. The themes of preparation and waiting are at the heart of this film – themes that are core to the season of advent. It is worth reflecting on what difference the preparation makes to the eventual reconciliation and redemption. If Straight had just taken a train or plane to visit his brother what would have been lost?

Follow up Reading ...

If you want to read more about films as a way of exploring theological themes you may be interested in these books:

- Robert K Johnston 'Reel Spirituality' (2006) Baker Academic Books
- Catherine Barsotti and Robert K Johnston 'Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith' (2004) Baker Books
- Clive Marsh 'Theology Goes to the Movies' (2007) Routledge
- Gaye Ortiz 'Explorations in Theology and Film' (1997) Wiley Blackwell

For blogs and resources, visit: <https://www.cmu.ca/faculty/gmatties/ONLINE%20ARTICLES.htm>

Session Six

Modern Prophets

Aims of the session:

- ❖ **To reflect on what it means to be a prophet**
- ❖ **To consider the place of the 'prophetic voice' in our communities and worship**
- ❖ **To think about the situations in the world which need challenging, however unpopular that change may be.**

Opening Prayer

For those who unsettle us, and remind us of suffering;
For those who discomfort us and speak out for the voiceless;
For those who annoy us and demand justice;
We give you thanks God and pray that we will hear their cries.
In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

> > **Watch the video clip Autumn 6**

The 'prophets' have an important place in the history of Judaism and Christianity, and are very closely linked to the emphasis on social justice which is an essential part of Old and New Testament teaching. The prophets are the ones who speak the word of God into societies and communities that have lost sight of their religious and social responsibilities. This did not make them popular! Very often, it was only much later that people realised that the prophet had been right, and that the message they had delivered was an important one. Prophets often have a difficult time because they make people uncomfortable and challenge the status quo.

↔ **Which of the following people would you describe as a prophet?**

Martin Luther King	Desmond Tutu	Mother Theresa	Greta Thunberg
Billy Graham	The Pope	Bono	Malala Yousafzai
Archbishop of Canterbury	Peter Tatchell	John Bunyan	John Wesley
St Patrick	Joan of Arc	C S Lewis	John Henry Newman
Emmeline Pankhurst			

⇔ **What criteria did you use to decide whether or not you would count them as prophets?**

⇔ **Who in the last 100 years might you describe as prophet?**

You may have mentioned people like Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Oscar Ramero, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, or a whole range of other people from different places who have been prophets in different ways.

Very often prophetic behaviour comes at a high price, and sometimes from the very people who should be nurturing and affirming the prophetic are the ones who silence them and side with the status quo.

Gerald Seymour, in his book 'Harry's Game' wrote the now familiar phrase 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'. A similar thing could be said of prophets! What some people regard as prophetic, others regard as unethical, dangerous, scandalous, irresponsible and unacceptable.



An example from the early 19th century, is the abolition of slavery. The campaigner **William Wilberforce** spent a lot of his life and political career campaigning and working for it to be made illegal to trade people and own slaves. It may seem obvious to us that it is morally right that no human being should be owned and sold and live with absolutely no basic rights or freedoms. However in his day, Wilberforce encountered opposition from all sorts of people, including his fellow Christians, who argued that some people were born to be slaves; that abolishing slavery would damage the economy too much and various other reasons why they did not recognise

his work as prophetic, but dangerous and misguided. Despite the opposition Wilberforce continued his campaign at great personal cost. He eventually became very ill and many of his friends believed that was a direct result of his tireless campaigning to end slavery. Wilberforce's commitment to the campaign stemmed from his belief in God and the values of the kingdom. He thought that slavery directly contradicted the teaching of the Gospel.

⇔ **Why do you think Wilberforce was so adamant he would carry on his work, despite the opposition?**

In 1968 Martin Luther King Jr was shot because of his involvement in and leadership of the civil rights movement in America. He was convinced that the Christian Gospel was not compatible with a nation which segregated people on the grounds of skin colour and prevented blacks from having access to good education, healthcare, homes, or jobs and which defined them as inferior because of the colour of their skin.

For both Wilberforce and Luther King, the cost of fighting for social justice was huge. They both ended up giving their lives for the causes they believed in. Yet they understood that their Christian faith did not allow them to worship God and not to speak out about poverty and oppression, not regard their fellow humans as being worthy of dignity, made in the image of God.

⇔ **Who are the oppressed people in our society?**

⇔ **Who is speaking out for them?**

In today's world the scandal of poverty and the gap between rich and poor is still a huge challenge to those trying to live faithfully according to the Scriptures. There are still groups of people who are oppressed because of their class, gender, sexual orientation, background, beliefs etc.

The teaching of the New Testament does not just focus on the inclusion of the marginalised, care for the poor and the breaking down of boundaries, it goes even further and states that when we show care for the least of our brothers or sisters, we do it for God.

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, * you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

Matthew 25: 31-46

The Gospel According to Matthew was written for a Jewish church coming to terms with the spread of the Gospel to Gentiles. It emphasises the teachings of Jesus, and includes the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7). Matthew's prologue is long, covering at least two chapters. He starts by giving us Jesus' family tree, showing His royal pedigree from King David, and His ultimate descent from the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Matthew is the gospel which owes most to the Jewish heritage, quoting frequently from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew urges his readers, the followers of Jesus, to be even more righteous than the most law-abiding members of the Jewish community from which they have broken away.

This is a really radical passage! It suggests that what we do to the worst or least of our fellow humans is the same as doing it to Christ. This passage is about more than offering care, it goes beyond being kind to others. This is about going the extra mile for people who the rest of society may have already written off. This passage is about showing kindness to those who others won't touch because they don't want to catch their sickness; or those who are in prison and no one wants to be seen associating with.

This radical caring, or extreme compassion is one of the things that

prophets talk about: giving a voice to the voiceless and 're-humanising' those who might have been dehumanised by their own behaviour, by society, or by religious structures. The consequence of how we treat others could not be more serious! According to this passage it is all that will be taken into consideration when we give an account of our lives.

⇔ **How might we go about feeding the hungry and thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and imprisoned today?**

This passage has not become more difficult over time – it was always difficult! If you think about the people we regard as the worst kind of people today - we might think of child sex offenders or murderers, or violent criminals – these people, or the equivalent in each society are included in Jesus' command for compassion, even more they are the people of whom Jesus says, if you do it for them, you do it for me.

The Christian Gospel is challenging, unsettling and even upsetting. It is very often prophets, who challenge, unsettle and upset us, who remind us of the real meaning of the Gospel and who draw us back to the teachings of Jesus, often at great personal cost.

As a group, or individually during the week, see what you can find out about groups and organisations who work to challenge poverty, injustice and other things that the Prophets spoke out against. You may be particularly interested in the work of Christian Aid – you can find out more on their website (www.christianaid.co.uk). Note that they not only raise money but campaign to change attitudes as well. Are you being challenged to do something to tackle injustice?

Recap on ... Modern Prophets:

- ★ Prophets are those who speak up for the voiceless, marginalised or poor, or who call us back to the true message of the Gospel
- ★ Being a prophet, or acting prophetically often comes at enormous personal cost or sacrifice
- ★ Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel calls for prophetic action – to care for those on the edges of society.

Follow up Reading ...

If you want to know more about William Wilberforce and the campaign to end slavery, these books might be of interest:

- Stephen Tomkins 'William Wilberforce: A Biography' (2007) Lion Hudson plc
- John Piper 'Amazing Grace in the life of William Wilberforce' (2007) IVP
- Richard S. Reddie 'Abolition: The Struggle to Abolish Slavery in the British Empire' (2007) Lion Hudson plc

You could also look at these websites:

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilberforce_william.shtml
- <http://www.biographyonline.net/politicians/uk/william-wilberforce.html>
- <http://www.theologian.org.uk/churchhistory/wilberforce.html>

Or watch this film:

- Amazing Grace (2006) Director: Michael Apted

If you want to read more about Martin Luther King Jnr, there is a lot of information available. He wrote several books and there is a lot of information online. This website includes a useful bibliography:

- http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html/

Session Seven

The Prophets of Old

Aims of the session:

- ❖ **To explore the Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures**
- ❖ **To reflect on the way in which God communicated through the prophets**
- ❖ **To think about the season of advent and the story of how God has spoken to us through different people**
- ❖ **To think about how the message of the prophets of old is still relevant today.**

Opening Prayer

God of our forebears, of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Rachel,

God of the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel

We praise you that you are the same yesterday and tomorrow; that you always care for the poor and the marginalised, and you always invite us to live according to your values in a kingdom where Christ is known.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Autumn 7**

The stories of their past have always been important to the people of Israel. The legacy of their forebears is an important part of their own sense of identity and the characters through whom God has worked are still revered as great men and women of faith. The prophets whom we meet in the Old Testament are still celebrated and remembered in both the Jewish and Christian faiths.

⇔ **Do you think people from the Old Testament are still important today?**

A large section of the Old Testament is made up of the books of the Prophets. These are divided into major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Daniel and the twelve minor prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

⇔ **What do you think we can learn from them?**

During the season of advent, we focus each week on the story of God at work in the world, leading up to the birth of Jesus. Advent is a period of preparation for Christmas, and a journey through 'salvation history', that is the history of the way in which God has worked to save us from being separated from God. This pattern of recalling this journey each year as preparation for the coming of Jesus is important for our understanding of the Jesus event. The birth of Jesus did not happen out of the blue! It is part of an on-going story about God speaking to His people. The birth of Jesus was the most significant event in a whole list of events in which God interacted with His people. Even more than this, the communications received by the people of Israel and the Prophets, all culminated in the Christ event.

Different traditions mark the weeks of advent in a variety of ways. Some churches focus on hope, love, joy and peace for the four Sundays of advent. Others remember particular characters from the story of God at work in the world. One of the common patterns, represented by lighting a candle each week in the advent wreath, is to focus the four Sundays of Advent on The Patriarchs, The Prophets, John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary and on Christmas Day to light the central candle for Jesus the Christ.

All of these people, patriarchs, prophets, John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary have in different ways prepared the way for the coming of Jesus.

⇔ **Can you think how each of these characters or groups have prepared the way for Jesus?**

Mary, the mother of Jesus plays a crucial part in the story, both by cooperating with God, and also by understanding that the child she carries is Emmanuel, God with us. John the Baptist appears in all of the four Gospels. He is thought to be Jesus' cousin and he also understands who Jesus is. He tells the people about the coming kingdom, and that Jesus is the one who will establish this reign of God. The Patriarchs refers to the Fathers of the Jewish faith, traditionally we have overlooked the mothers of the faith who are so essential in the unfolding story of the people of Israel that we read in the Old Testament. Each of them has in some way followed God

through adversity and difficulty and understood something about what God wants for his people.

Yahweh is the name given to God in the Old Testament. The literal translation from Hebrew (in which there are no distinct vowels) is YHWH, no one knows how this was pronounced as it was considered blasphemous to say the name of God and so was only ever written down. Jehovah comes from the same word.

During the second week we remember the Prophets. 'The Prophets' of the Old Testament refers to (mostly) men who were given messages, warnings and teachings by God to share with the people. Two of the prophets mentioned in the Old Testament are woman (Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14 and Noadiah in Nehemiah 6:14) and the word translated as 'wife' in Isaiah 8:3 is the Hebrew for prophetess. The teachings of the prophets were often controversial and not well received by the authorities of the time! The tradition of God speaking in specific ways through those who have a prophetic gift is an important tradition of the Christian religion. There are various themes of the message of the Prophets, many of them were charged to tell the people of their sin, to urge them

to repent and return to God. The people had become unfaithful to God in all sorts of ways; through neglecting the law, having other Gods before Him, and through failing to care for one another.

The main Hebrew word for prophet is *nabi*, the meaning of which has to do with calling or announcing. It's uncertain whether it means 'someone who calls or announces' or 'someone who is called' – indeed, it may even imply both, for both are important aspects of the life of a prophet of Yahweh.

On one level, God's message through the prophets was unchanging: it was always a reminder to the people of the covenant God had made with them. Usually the prophets protested that in one way or another, the people weren't keeping to their side of the agreement, and were drifting away from, or deliberately opposing, God's law. Yet on another level each prophet had a particular message for his own time, place and situation – and sometimes he was given a unique way in which to communicate it.

It is very clear that part of the message of the Prophets, and indeed the charge upon God's people, is to care for the poor, the widows and orphans. There is clear instruction throughout the Old and New Testament's that in order to do God's will, we must be committed to the welfare of those who are poor, oppressed and marginalised. The prophets are the people who understand something about the heart of God and who encourage others to care about the things God cares about.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah 58

The book of Isaiah probably contains material from three different writers. The book contains lengthy prophecies attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem, who wrote the first part of Isaiah (and after whom the book is named), and who lived before the Exile, in the eighth century BC. The book of Isaiah was probably also written by at least two other people at two later periods, possibly between around 540 – 500 BC.. The second part (chapters 40–55) is the source of many Christian images, including the 'suffering servant'; the third part (chapters 56–66) was written after the return from Exile.

There are clear requirements of the people laid out in this passage. These words are addressed to the people of Israel, but particularly, it seems, to those who are in authority of some kind. The call to loose the bonds of wickedness, free the oppressed, share bread with the hungry, share your home with the homeless and clothe the naked is addressed to those who have the power to bring these things about. This is not addressed directly to the poor, but to those who keep them in poverty. Isaiah is clear that only when these requirements are met shall the Lord hear our call and light will shine in our darkness. You may have noticed the similarities between this passage and the verses from Matthew's Gospel that we looked at last week.

The issues of social justice have not changed greatly since the prophet Isaiah spoke these words around seven hundred years before Christ. In our world issues of poverty and oppression may take on slightly different forms, but the general issues remain the same, and our responsibility for the poor and oppressed also remains the same.

'With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6: 6 - 8

⇔ **How would you summarise these passages from Isaiah and Micah?**

⇔ **What situations or behaviours are they challenging?**

The prophet Micah was probably a contemporary of Isaiah's, dating from 750 – 700 BC. The book can be divided into three sections, each of which begins with the word "Hear." Each section contains both foretelling's of doom and expressions of hope. Micah reproaches unjust leaders, defends the rights of the poor against the rich and powerful, and preaches social justice. The prophet looks to a time when peace will reign, under the authority of Israel ruled by a new king of David's line.

The Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, contains material ranging from possibly 1500 years before Christ, to about 300 or so years BC. The books of the prophets do not necessarily appear in the order in which the events happened. It is not always possible to date Old Testament books precisely, but scholars use information from the texts to work out the approximate dates in which they were first written, or the stories were first told. Often the writers talk about historic events, kings or situations which occurred and help us to know both when the book was written and the area that the author lived in.

The following table gives an outline of the kings and prophets active at different times:

Dates BC	Kings/Events	Prophets
1050-1000	King Saul	Samuel
1000-950	King David King Solomon	Nathan
870-840	King Ahab and his descendants	Elijah Elisha
750-700	Fall of Israel (northern kingdom): Judah (southern kingdom) survives – just	Joel Amos & Hosea (north) Isaiah 1, Micah (south)
630-605	Rise of Babylon	Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk
605-570	Fall of Jerusalem (586) Exile and defeat	Jeremiah Ezekiel, Obadiah
540-500	Fall of Babylon (539) Return, and restoration of Jerusalem	Isaiah 2, Isaiah 3 Haggai, Zechariah 1
500-400	Judah as province of Persian Empire	Malachi
400-333	Persian decline; rise of Greece under Alexander the Great	Zechariah 2 Jonah

The early Prophets, such as in the books of Samuel and Kings, were involved in a range of activities including some small miracles in defence of Yahweh. Prophets like Elijah were larger-than-life figures, who worked miracles, travelled the country, and spoke bluntly to kings and people alike. However the prophets of the seventh and eighth centuries – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor Prophets – were interested primarily in the word of God and the way in which they were called to share it with the people. These later prophets communicated God’s word by ‘oracles’, messages from God to the people in a specific situation. They were often written down as poetry, either by the prophet or by one of his followers, and many form books of the Old Testament, known by the prophet’s name. Some of the later prophets were required by God to live out - often at great personal cost - the meanings of God’s message to the people.

God’s purpose in speaking through a prophet was not to tell people about a timetable of future events, although prophets did sometimes make predictions because they were convinced that Yahweh was shaping the course of events leading from the present to the future. Instead the prophets were primarily concerned with the here and now. Their task was to communicate God’s message for now, and to summon the people to respond today. The predictive powers of the Prophets were embraced by Christians who believed that the Prophets pointed the way to the age of salvation and especially to the coming of the Messiah. So it is that the Jesus-event is recorded several times in the New Testament as happening in accordance with the Prophets.

⇔ **What do you think of as ‘prophetic’ behaviour?**

Just as in Old Testament times, the life of a Prophet can be terribly hard! We often have difficulty in recognising and responding to prophetic words. Even though the Old Testament prophets were given messages for their own times and circumstances, their messages are still relevant to us today, and can still be difficult to hear and act upon.

Recap on ... The Prophets of Old:

- ★ Prophets are those who speak up for the voiceless, marginalised or poor, or who call us back to the true message of the Gospel
- ★ Being a prophet, or acting prophetically often comes at enormous personal cost or sacrifice

Follow up Reading ...

- Carolyn J Sharp Old Testament Prophets for Today (2009) Westminster / John Knox Press

Session Eight

The Christmas Story

Aims of the session:

- ❖ To reflect on the different ways in which the Gospels announce the coming of Jesus
- ❖ To explore the significance of the birth narratives
- ❖ To think about the ways in which we tell the Christmas story year by year

Opening Prayer

Lord God we thank you for the first Christmas, for your coming to earth as a baby. We pray that we, with the shepherds, kings and angels, we will celebrate your presence with us and give glory to God. This Christmastime, we pray for all who have not heard the Good News of Jesus, and all who have heard it but not as Good News! We pray that they too will be able to celebrate the news of Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Autumn 8

The 'Birth Narratives' or the stories of Jesus being born, are some of the best known parts of the Bible. In many places, the nativity is still celebrated in school plays, crib scenes, Christmas cards and in a range of other ways. Often the nativity story is a mixture of two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke. This is sometimes done for the very practical reason of trying to get as many kids as possible into the play! It may mean however, that we have forgotten some of the differences between the ways in which the two evangelists tell their stories. It also means that we sometimes don't notice that two of the Gospels, Mark and John, don't tell the story of Jesus being born at all.

⇔ **Can you think of a nativity play you have seen? What sort of animals or characters did it include? Did you notice any other ways in which it seemed to have added to the story of the birth of Jesus?**

The term 'synoptic Gospels' refers to Matthew, Mark and Luke, who tell a lot of the same stories. It is thought that they got some of their stories or information about Jesus from the same place. The common source is often referred to as Q, which stands for the German word 'quelle' which means source (and not for Quartermaster, like Q in James Bond!).

The differences between the four Gospels highlight some of the distinctive characters of each of the books. Although the Gospels have a lot in common, they each bring a different focus to the way in which they tell the story of Jesus and explain why it is Good News (that is what 'Gospel' means) for the people hearing the story.

Mark's Gospel begins with the words "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (Mark 1:1). Although he doesn't go into any detail, in a way Mark is summarising what Matthew and Luke are explaining through their accounts of the birth of Jesus:

1. That this is good news
2. That it matters!
3. Jesus is the Christ, or the Messiah, this means the anointed one, and in Jewish tradition meant both that he could be their expected and longed for saviour, and also that he was specially chosen in the way that the Kings, such as David were in the Old Testament.
4. Jesus is not just any ordinary person
5. Jesus is the Son of God

Mark conveys all of this in one sentence! Matthew and Luke use far more detail, imagery and ideas to convey their versions of the same message.

As you read through the accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke, think about how the passages reveal just how important the birth of Jesus is, and how unexpected the circumstances of his birth are.

Matthew	Luke
<p>1: 18: Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."</p> <p>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God</p>	<p>1: 26: In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!"</p> <p>But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.</p> <p>And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.</p> <p>And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."</p> <p>And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this</p>

<p>with us).</p> <p>When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus.</p>	<p>be, since I have no husband?"</p> <p>And the angel said to her, "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 called holy, the Son of God.</p> <p>And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible."</p> <p>And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her...</p>
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↔ **What do you notice about the way in which Mary responds in the two passages?**

↔ **What about Joseph?**

Both Mary and Joseph cooperate with God's plan! For much of Christian history Mary has been regarded as a model of obedience. When God requested something of her she did as was asked. This passive understanding of Mary's action may undermine the active part she plays in the story. Mary participates in God's plan of salvation, she joins in with God's project. As does Joseph. Despite his initial intention to leave Mary, he too responds to the messenger of God and participates in God's plan.

Matthew's Gospel focuses on Joseph, and on explaining how these events fulfilled the words of the Old Testament Prophet, Isaiah. Luke is more interested in Mary, and the range of responses and emotions that she experiences as she contemplates what is being asked of her.

Luke

2:1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrolment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered.

And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

This section only appears in Luke’s Gospel, but is the description of the circumstances of the birth of Jesus that forms the basis of many nativity plays. Luke is careful to give very specific information about when this historical event took place – when Quirinius was governor of Syria and Caesar Augustus was the Roman Emperor. Locating the events in this way is part of Luke’s aim to show that the story he is telling is true. Although Luke is a gentile writer, he identifies Joseph with the line of David, which was very important to the Jews. The details Luke gives about Mary laying her new baby in a manger because there was no room at the inn have captured the imagination of generations of people who recognise that there is something unique about this story.

Matthew	Luke
<p>2:1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."</p> <p>When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;</p> <p>and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:</p> <p>‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'"</p> <p>Then Herod summoned the wise men</p>	<p>2:8 And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people;</p> <p>for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.</p> <p>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,</p> <p>"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"</p> <p>When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one</p>

secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

⇔ **What do the wise men, shepherds and Herod add to the story? What do we learn or understand through these characters?**

The visitors from the East represent an important strand in Matthew's Gospel which is generally accepted to have been written for a very Jewish community. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the Old Testament prophets are quoted and there is a heavy emphasis on Jesus as the fulfilment of the Jews expectation of a messiah. The wise men, the first people to visit Jesus came from foreign lands and in a very Jewish Gospel provide a powerful statement that this birth is not just of significance to Israel, but to the whole world.

The shepherds fit very closely with the emphasis in Luke's Gospel on the inclusion of outsiders, the poor and marginalised. The idea that angels with important news should deliver their message to shepherds would have been ludicrous to first century hearers. Shepherds often lived with their herds on the edge of towns and cities. They were known to be rough and smelly and were not regarded as pillars of society! That these are the people to whom the Good News is

announced, just like the visit of the wise men, is an important statement about who Jesus has come for. In this case those who have not been thought of as important take centre stage.

Herod is the king in the region in which Jesus was born and the wise men assume that his palace is where they will find this new king they are seeking. Everything about the king Jesus, is opposite to King Herod! He is born in the lowliest of conditions without power or wealth or status. Herod represents those who are invested in society as it is, who use their power and status for their own ends.

⇔ **What else strikes you about the birth narratives?**

The stories of Jesus birth in Matthew and Luke are very rich narratives full of symbols and imagery demonstrating the significance and uniqueness of the birth of Jesus. Although Jesus' birth is clearly tied in to Jewish history, and maybe compared to the births of other significant characters in history, this is an event different to any other. There is no simple way for the evangelists to say all the things about Jesus' birth that they convey through these narratives.

Christmas is very important in our culture, and in different ways we tell the Christmas story over and over again. Many of our telling's however, do not contain anything like the complexity that Matthew and Luke seemed to intend through their accounts. One of the main ways in which we share the Christmas story is through the singing of carols. The traditional carols familiar to us may well be very moving or have the ability to make us feel "Christmassy". However, our traditional carols don't always do well at conveying the sort of ideas about the birth of Jesus that Matthew and Luke try so hard to do. Indeed, from some of the carols you would think it was more important to know that Jesus was a well-behaved baby who didn't cry, than that he overturned the hierarchies of the world and came to establish a new kingdom!

Away in a Manger was first published in the late nineteenth century and came out of the Lutheran church. For this reason, a tradition developed that it was written by the Reformer Martin Luther, but this is unlikely. The carol is often taught to children and is one Christmas hymn that many people know.

For lots of people, singing Away in a Manger is a strongly nostalgic or emotional experience, and indeed it can be a beautiful carol which stirs up feelings of Christmas past and present. All of this is important, but if we look at the words, what are we actually passing on about the Christmas story? The words create a picture of a very peaceful scenario: a quiet baby nestling in the hay surrounded by cows gently purring! It then moves on to asking Jesus to be near us through the night and forever. This may well have more to do with concerns over child

immortality and sentimentality about children which became common in the Victorian period, than it does with the Christmas story!

This carol, like many others presents a very sanitised and domesticated account of the birth of Jesus. Although it may be a song of Good News, it is very different than the radical nature of the Good News of the Gospel accounts. We have created an important place for such carols in our Christmas services and celebrations, but on their own, they are not sufficient to proclaim the earth-shattering, cosmic significance of the birth of Jesus narrated in the Gospels.

*Away in a manger no crib for His bed
The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head
The stars in the sky look down where He lay
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.*

*The cattle are lowing the Baby awakes
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes
I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my side 'Til morning is nigh.*

*Be near me, Lord Jesus I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care
And take us to Heaven to live with Thee there.*

Recap on ... The Christmas Story:

- ★ Each of the four Gospels introduces Jesus differently. Only Matthew and Luke tell stories of Jesus' birth.
- ★ Both of the birth narratives are rich in detail and imagery about who Jesus is and what his coming means.
- ★ In many of our tellings of the Christmas story, we tell only a small part of this story and often overlook the radicalness of this event

Follow up Reading ...

- Raymond E Brown *The Birth of the Messiah* (2007) Yale University Press
- Conrad Hyers 'The Nativity as Divine Comedy' *Christian Century* available at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/the-nativity-as-divine-comedy-luke-151-52-rsv/>
- Nigel G Wright *The Real Godsend: Preaching the Birth Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (2009) The Bible Reading Fellowship

The following two articles are written in reference to each other and represent two different approaches to understanding the birth narratives.

- N.T. Wright 'God's way of Acting' *Christian Century* available at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/gods-way-of-acting/>
- Marcus Borg 'The Light in the Darkness' *Christian Century* available at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/the-light-in-the-darkness/>

Session Nine

Celebrating Incarnation

Aims of the session:

- ❖ **To reflect on God becoming human in Jesus**
- ❖ **To consider the difference this makes to us and to the world**
- ❖ **To think about the meaning of 'incarnation'**
- ❖ **To reflect on who Jesus is**

Opening Prayer

Gracious and all-powerful God, who chose to become human as we are, we thank you that you entered your world as a baby. Help us to understand what it means that you took on flesh and came alongside us. Help us to celebrate your coming into the world and rejoice in the knowledge that through that first Christmas, we can know you - the human Christ and the eternal God.

Amen

When the disciples were walking with Jesus to the village of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked them who people said that he was. Then he asked the Disciples, "and you, who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27—29) This is also the question that Jesus asks each one of us, and over the centuries there have been many different answers.

⇔ **Who do you say that Jesus is?**

Many people who do not consider themselves to be Christians would acknowledge Jesus as a good man, a teacher, a sage. Muslims regard Jesus as a prophet and respect his teaching. It may be that the way we would answer this question changes over the course of our life time.

The people who knew Jesus during his earthly ministry struggled to find the right ways to express exactly who they thought Jesus was. Those who tell the story of Jesus use images and stories and drama to try and show who Jesus is, because it is so hard to explain in words. Some of the ways the disciples describe Jesus are:

Messiah (this is Peter's answer when Jesus asks the question)

King

Lord

Rabbi (Teacher)

Prophet

Master

⇔ **Do you find any of these helpful descriptions of Jesus?**

⇔ **Has the answer you would give changed over time, or recently?**

Each of the Gospel writers try to explain who Jesus is and why that matters. As we saw last week, Matthew and Luke both show how important Jesus is with the stories they tell of his birth. The Gospel of John is slightly different.

The first part of John's Gospel (verses 1-18) is often referred to as 'the prologue'. This is because in these verses, the evangelist John explains all of the important themes that are going to come up in the rest of his account of the Good News of Jesus Christ. John wants his hearer or reader to understand who Jesus is and why he matters.

In the first five verses, John links the creation with the continuing work of God in the world – the light shining in the darkness. One of the themes found throughout John's Gospel is that of light and darkness, blindness and sight. The prologue also includes words of hope – that the darkness has not overcome the light (1:5) – words which are triumphantly fulfilled in the cross. Yet Jesus himself is not mentioned by name until verse 17 of chapter 1. Instead of introducing us to the person Jesus straight away, John the evangelist paints a picture on a huge canvas – the story of Jesus is part of a story which started with creation, and which continues even today. From the very beginning of time, the light has shone in darkness, and the darkness has tried to extinguish

An evangelist is a person who speaks Good News – who tells the story of Jesus. The Gospel writers are referred to as evangelists because they told the story of Jesus. In the church today, we might use that term about people who have a particular gift for speaking to others about Jesus.

it. Yet the light shines on through those who, by believing in the true light, become children of God.

The language of John's prologue is quite complex as it packs some deep philosophical and theological ideas into a short text. Traditional Carol Services which take the form of Nine Lessons (Bible Readings) and Carols always have as the final reading the beginning of John's Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John 1:1-14

John is different from the other three gospels. Most scholars agree that it was the last to be written, probably around 90 AD, so almost two generations after the death of Jesus. The Gospel is often described as sophisticated, both in terms of literature and theology. It is built around seven 'signs' or miracles which reveal who Jesus is. These are matched by seven "I am" sayings in which Jesus explains who he is.

St John starts with a philosophical or ideological statement about who Jesus is. He refers to Jesus as the Word, the Greek word that he uses is Logos. This word isn't used again in the Gospel, but the words of Jesus are important in the Gospel.

John is trying to convey the idea that Jesus is the incarnation of God, the Word made flesh. This is one of the central beliefs of Christianity, that Jesus is God in embodied, human form. We use all kinds of words and phrases to try and express this: Son of God, divine and human, God-man, for example.

None of these words or phrases are, of course, quite up to the job. It is difficult to describe what Jesus is like because there is no one else in the same category!

⇔ **How might you put what John is trying to express into your own words?**

⇔ **What are the most important themes of that passage?**

In the early Church, the followers of Jesus struggled to explain how they could proclaim that 'Jesus is Lord' and also remain faithful to the declaration 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One' (Deuteronomy 6:4). If the first Christians talked about Jesus as Lord, or God, did it mean that they were saying there are two gods? The God of Israel, who in the Old Testament is often called Yahweh, and Jesus? They did not believe there were two gods, but of course it was very difficult to find language to talk about Jesus as the incarnate God.

The first few centuries of Christianity were caught up in this debate until a group of Church Leaders from all over the world met for a meeting in Turkey. This was called the Council of Nicaea and was called by the Emperor Constantine in 325 BC. At this meeting the church leaders agreed that Jesus is God incarnate, not a different god, and not a created being who happened to be extra special. They agreed on a specific set of words to express this. Words which we still say in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in ... one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which is in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the living and the dead.

This creed, and the decision reached at the Council about the appropriate Christian understanding of the nature of Christ, was the result of a ferocious debate. People disagreed both about what it was they were trying to say, and what were appropriate ways in which to say it! The language that they did use was understood in particular ways by people of that time, meanings that we may not share in a different place and time. So now we have a double language problem! Not only do we struggle to put into words our understandings of God in the first place, but now we have the additional problem of trying to work out how people in the fourth century were using language as well.

⇔ **What do you think of the way in which the Nicene Creed explains who Jesus is?**

⇔ **Do you find it helpful to recite the same creeds that have been used by Christians across the world for centuries?**

By affirming that Jesus is God, we are not denying that he is also a human person, indeed the Christian claim is that Jesus is the only being who ever lived who is both God (as God is) and human (as we are). This is undeniably a complicated claim and much of Christian history has seen believers trying to defend, explain, and work out the implications of this belief.

St John in his prologue is trying to explain this belief using the philosophical language of his time. We have to do a bit of work to understand it, as it is language we are no longer familiar with. But when we do this, we see that John's explanation of God is not only poetic, but a very profound account of the way in which God has chosen to make Himself known in the world.

The reason that Christians have spent so long and invested so much in explaining who Jesus is, is because it really matters. The heart of the Christian faith depends on an understanding of God who has 'taken on' our humanness and shared that experience with us – in all its joy, pain and uncertainty. The same Jesus is also fully God and therefore not only takes on our humanity but changes it. Through the incarnation, the taking on of human flesh, we are redeemed.

The words of the Nicene Creed and of John's Prologue may sound complex to us, or may not mean an awful lot, we may even find them dry and dull. But those who were involved in preparing the creed, and John in his Gospel were full of joy at the coming of Christ. They were so excited about this earth-shattering event, of God becoming man, that they wanted to find ways to explain it to others. They wanted to make sure future generations would have a chance to understand the enormity of the Jesus-event and to celebrate incarnation; God taking on flesh and dwelling among us.

Recap on... Celebrating Incarnation:

- ★ There have been many attempts to explain who Jesus is, and it is difficult to find the right words to talk about Jesus.
- ★ Traditional Christian teaching states that Jesus is fully God and fully human
- ★ Incarnation is God taking on human flesh, becoming human as we are
- ★ The Gospel of John introduces Jesus by talking about the Word which becomes flesh and dwells among us.
- ★ Although it is difficult to explain incarnation, this is the core of the Good News of the Jesus event, and therefore Christians continue to try and find ways to convey this.

Follow up Reading ...

- David Willis Clues to the Nicene Creed: A Brief Outline of the Faith (2005) Eerdmans
- Tom Wright John for Everyone (2010) SPCK

Session Ten

Group Meal and Faith-Life Conversations

Aims of this session:

- ❖ **To share time together as a group and reflect on what you have done this term**
- ❖ **To get to know members of the group better**
- ❖ **To have space to talk about issues which may have come up for you over the last couple of months**
- ❖ **To share any questions you might have about faith and life.**

Prayer

Thank you God for all that you have given us. We thank you for our family and friends and all that is good in our lives.

We thank you for what we have experienced during this term; for the time we have spent together sharing, debating and trying to understand more about ourselves, the world and more about you. We pray that you would help each of us on our journey and bring us closer to you. Help us to recognise the grace that you give us, that means we don't struggle alone, but walk with you as forgiven and free beings.

We ask your blessing upon this group and upon this meal. We think of those who do not have enough to eat and pray that this time will be a blessing not just to us, but to others whose lives we will touch in the coming days and weeks.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

As you share food together, you could go around the group and give everyone a chance to share something they have learned during this module, a question they haven't had answered, or something that is going on in their life.