

Why and Who

In early September as the four Synod Vision4Life Advocates we met in Whittlesford to put ideas together for local churches to work with during Advent 2008. Firstly we had to decide upon a passage and none of us had ever been part of a study of the prologue of John's Gospel during Advent. These seemed appropriate verses for the start of Bible Year and our thinking flowed from this point.

We have tried to produce a resource that can be used for personal or group use and hope you will find it a helpful companion through the Advent season as we prepare for the coming of the Light of the World, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We would appreciate feedback on how this resource was received so please offer your comments to Peter Ball at the Synod Office.

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Eastern Synod

Alongside the stories of Christ's birth in Matthew and Luke lies the 'same but different' Christmas story in John's Gospel. Here there are neither shepherds, wise men, nor bewildered parents yet God is still present in our world, powerfully and 'full of grace and truth', in the person of Jesus.

Our hope is that by approaching an over-familiar story from a less familiar angle we shall find fresh wonder and understanding. Let this booklet be your guide as, accompanied by cards, carols and children's nativity plays, once more we 'go up to Bethlehem to see this thing which has happened there'.

Thinking it through

My family, my church, my country, my ... Think about or discuss the ways "my" means it belongs to you and the ways it means you belong to it.

There have been changes in society concerning the roles of men and women, racial attitudes and religious beliefs. To what extent do you think God finds this acceptable?

What should a church do to produce acceptable worship this Christmas – acceptable to God and acceptable to potential worshippers?

Prayer prompts ...

Think of something you have made, developed or grown and the skills you used. Remember the part others played or how they have benefited. Thank God for the gifts that made this possible. Pray for the people who came into your mind.

Read a newspaper or watch or listen to the news. Note the occasions when people refuse to accept another person or group of people. Pray for these people and situations that they may practice and receive acceptance, just as God has accepted us.

As you write or receive a Christmas card pray that you and the other person(s) will not have your minds or hearts closed to Jesus because of Christmas pressures.

Prayer

*Generous God, help me to accept, to value and use the good things that are mine. May I never close my mind or heart to you, to your Word or to any of your people. **Amen.***

Week 4
***'He came to what was His own....'
closed minds and hearts***

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

My home, family, friends, team, church, country, world – these are things over which people feel authority or ownership. Yet our hold upon them is fragile, dependent upon the decisions of others. Will a mortgage lender accept us in the midst of a credit crunch? Will family members continue to acknowledge us throughout the ups and downs of our relationship? Will our team still be ours if new owners regard it only as a financial opportunity? Or, to put things the other way around, will we accept that person as part of our church even though they want to worship in a different style or believe differently about things we hold dear? Who will we accept as fellow citizens? What will we accept as the price of safeguarding the planet for future generations?

You think it would be different with God but it is not. As Advent draws towards its close, as Christmas comes up over the horizon, as Jesus Christ, the Word, enters into our world it is just the same. Rather than force divine authority upon us God chooses to take the human route; not ordering but seeking our acceptance. God comes to the world but human beings, his own creation, do not accept him. Many minds and hearts remain closed to Jesus. This is no surprise because accepting Jesus challenges the priority we give to finance, family and friends. Jesus' proclamation of God's desire to accept us, however, opens up our hearts and minds not only in these matters but in who we accept as our fellow church members, citizens, and world inhabitants.

Setting the Scene
John 1: 1-14
The Word Became Flesh

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.

Week 1

'In the beginning was the word.....' truth deception integrity

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

With the contradictory voices of false witnesses ringing in his ears and the accused, a man of self-evident honesty before him, Pilate traded personal integrity for political expediency and declared: 'What is truth?'

It's a good question and it is posed much more frequently than we might at first realise. Whenever a plumber promises to 'be round next week', yet fails to appear, or a terminally ill person is jollied along by well-meaning relatives - 'Come along Grandpa, you'll soon be kicking a ball about with the kids...' – truth, as a reliable basis for living, is elbowed out of the way in favour of a short term fix which serves only self-interest and does not address the real issue. Time is bought, the family escape the embarrassment of the hospital ward, leaving the tap still dripping, and the patient facing the fearful mystery of death more alone than ever.

Our Bible reading tells us that in this now familiar atmosphere of white lies, wishful thinking and calculated deception – not to mention the extravagant claims of advertising or the tabloid press – the Word, 'full of grace and truth', who is with God and is the same as God, is found to be present. In the midst of all that is fake and unreliable this core of truth about the universe and each human life stands, eternal and unassailable, yet at a great cost. Truth, it seems, is rarely cheap. The plumber risks losing a client if he is honest; the patient's family face difficult conversations in unfamiliar territory and many tears. In the birth and passion stories of Jesus the risk and the cost, likewise, are immense. However, the potential gains in terms of right relationships, honest work, personal integrity, and the world wrenched back onto the course set by the Creator are immeasurable.

How do the words "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not put it out" affect your outlook on life?

Prayer prompts-----

Spend some time thinking about people known to you who are finding themselves in dark places. Offer them in prayer and also spend some time thinking about ways in which you may be a light bearer.

As mentioned in Week 1 prayer needs to be an honest relationship with God. Spend time thinking about how you feel about life at the moment. Having done this offer your thoughts to God in prayer.

Pray about the church's role in responding to lost hope and peoples darkest days

Prayer

*Lord may your light penetrate our darkest areas and keep us close to you all the days of our lives. **Amen***

Week 3

***“The light shines in the darkness-----“
Facing lost hope and impenetrable darkness***

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

For much of the time life seems to travel along in a fairly routine manner for the majority of us. However there comes a time in most of our lives when we find ourselves faced with darkness. It can come upon us in a variety of ways. Perhaps the loss of a partner, parent or child. Depression, dementia or unemployment. In fact there are a surprisingly long list of situations where we can find ourselves asking the question “Where can I find God in this situation?”

It is a good question to ask as at times life can appear anything but fair and the darkness can feel overwhelming. Our Bible reading is at odds with much that the world tells us. The papers and news bulletins would have us believe that there are many hopeless situations and yet our reading reminds us that no amount of darkness will ever destroy the light that is God incarnate in Christ. We may never be able to understand all of the trials that befall us but the knowledge that our God is a faithful God who enters the darkness with us and stays with us until his light can shine more brightly is a truth and comfort worth holding onto.

Thinking it through-----

As you think back over testing times you or those known to you have faced how was God a support? Was it through friends, church or a sensing of God’s presence?

What is the church’s role in supporting those who face a loss of hope?

Thinking it through...

Using a couple of newspapers, recently viewed TV programmes, or a collection of junk mail, consider how often we are presented with ‘truths’ which may not be as reliable as they pretend to be.

Make a list of common stereotypes and their supposed characteristics e.g. Scots = mean: Muslim = terrorist: man = macho. Consider particular members of such groups known to you – do the stereotypes hold up? What happens to truth when such stereotypes are applied?

What is the real cost for a politician or abused person to speak the truth about their situation?

How do you use such awareness of truth as God gives you?

Prayer prompts ...

Prayer is only real when it is an honest exchange between a person and God. Try praying before a mirror – look into your own eyes and ‘hear’ God asking you, ‘Well, -----, how is life with you’?

Take time over the conversation.

What does it matter if truth is ‘fluid’? Spend some time considering the victims of unfulfilled promises or distorted versions of events – workers who are promised wage rises or better conditions which never happen; children who are abused or used as pawns between separated parents. Add others to these suggestions and hold them before God in prayer.

Pray for today’s successors to Pilate who strive to weave an honest path between the real demands of human need, party policy, state secrets, and keeping in office.

Prayer

God made known in Jesus, keep me close to your Word of truth whatever the cost, that the lives I touch and my own life may reveal your presence, power and peace. Amen

Week 2

'All things came into being through Him....' seeing through the eyes of the creator

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

I am not the most able and creative person, but I try and have often been delighted with my efforts, but equally at other times disappointed, even angry. Looking back I am generally pleased that I have given things a try. This is me – Gods creation.

God in putting everything together must have had great fun; the idea of it, the ingenuity of it all so amazing.

Making things happen, adding shape, size, colour, variety, and such excitement in the creator as everything took shape and took its place in His plan for things.

But! a hard thought – is He disappointed – does He weep with what He sees has gone wrong with this wonderful creation. The more we 'discover' about the intricacies of the body, the world in which we live, and space which surrounds us, the more we can wonder about the God who we believe has put it altogether.

I wonder at a baby born very early, with complications, minute, weighing less than a bag of sugar, in every way perfectly formed, who has grown into a strong child and we cry with delight.

I wonder too of another whose life is lost and we cry with sadness.

I wonder at a mountain, fields, rivers and animals and I am excited by it all.

I wonder at a huge sea and storms, but I see the effect of wind and flood.

God sees it all, that which He has made, intimately knows loves, takes a delight in and weeps over. Psalm 139

Thinking it through

What things have you made or had made for you,
What do you think and feel about them?

What is the biggest, what is the smallest of anything you can think of? Wonder at the details of both.

What colour is God – could you paint that?

What are the difficult questions you have about God, his world, write or draw one?

How can we help each other with our difficult questions?

on the Synod V4Life website

Read the Genesis story of creation from the Street Bible Rob Lacy

Read Lord of the Dance – Trevor Dennis

What do the stories make you think of?

What do you think God was thinking of?

Having listened to the story – think about it while you e.g.- paint, model clay,

Prayer prompts

Use Newspapers, Christian Aid, Tear Fund, Mercy Ships or other agencies to identify needs of people and countries.

Tell God honestly how you think and feel about situations,

But move on from your anxiety and ask for help in your struggle to pray for situations in which we seem so helpless.

Pray for people you know who are struggling.

Pray for people who are involved in 'Aid Work' of any kind.

Words might fail us – know God hears our silence – inner cry.

Light a candle, a reminder of the light of creation and the world. Have some small coloured glass beads available. Let a bead be taken and held and then placed as a symbol of a person, place or situation around the candle.

Prayer

Use the words of St Augustine: - Lord you are great, and greatly to be praised. Awaken us to delight in your praises, for you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you. Amen