

# main course

## remembering him

### INTRODUCTION

The session introduces the way in which the story of Jesus has been handed on to us and encourages people to reflect about how they hand it on now. Those leading the session need to make sure a safe space is created, where everyone feels comfortable. The focus must begin with the Gospel stories themselves, progressing to the way we are bearers of these stories today and how we re-tell them in the light of what happens to us. There are suggested timings for each section but the pace and length of the study will be different in each setting and vary according to how many people take part. This material should be adapted to suit what the group will enjoy and get most out of.

### AIM

The aim of this session is to help people to engage with Gospel traditions of Jesus and show how significant memories of Jesus and his followers have been carried and adapted, and how they might be remembered among us. The group will

- remember a Gospel story
- reflect on the significance of what has been remembered and forgotten
- think and pray about what we choose to remember as faithful followers of Jesus.

### YOU WILL NEED

- some large sheets of paper, marker pens, and a way to display the sheets
- copies of Mark 14: 3-9, Matthew 26: 6-13, Luke 7:36-50 and John 12: 1-8
- enough postcard sized pieces of card for everyone to have one

### REMEMBERING A STORY

(10 minutes)

Begin by making sure that all Bibles are put away. Emphasise that people are not going to look at written texts for the first part of the session.

Ask people to form threes or fours. Tell them that they will be working with the story of the woman who anointed Jesus as he was at table with some friends. Say no more than that about the story at this stage.

It would be good to make sure that at least two people in each group have some memory of the story, however vague, but also to say that some people may never have heard of this story at all.

Introduce the idea that most of us carry a version of this story within us, possibly at a deep level. In the small groups we want to retrieve these versions and explore them. We are not looking for a 'correct' story but for the one people have stored away. These will certainly vary and nobody needs to worry about the differences uncovered.

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Ask the small groups to pool everything they can remember from this story and to cover:

- what happens
- who are the characters
- who does what
- what is said
- what key words or phrases they remember

### PUTTING THE STORY TOGETHER (15 minutes)

Invite the groups to report back what they have found and, using a flip chart or smart board, see if you can put the story together. Some people may remember there are different versions of this story. Write everything up and see what you get.

They might remember:

- the woman was a prostitute
- was Mary Magdalene
- expensive ointment and hair were involved
- there was talk about ointment being wasted
- a suggestion the ointment be sold and the proceeds given to the poor
- a hymn, painting or film about the story

When this is complete, ask the group to reflect on any contradictions or arguments uncovered by what they have pieced together and to explore what might be going on. Reassure them about having a number of versions.

### LOOKING AT THE TEXT (15 minutes)

Ask people to form four groups. Give one a copy of Mark 14: 3-9, another Matthew 26: 6-13, a third group Luke 7:36-50 and the fourth group John 12: 1-8.

Encourage each group to look at their version closely and consider:

- how does this written text compare with the version the whole group put together?
- is there anything unexpected about it?
- do they notice anything else about it?

### TELLING EACH OTHER THE STORY (10 minutes)

Invite each group in turn to tell the whole group their version of the story.

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### THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

(15 minutes)

Invite the whole group to reflect together on what has happened to this story as it has been told and retold:

- what is different in each version of the story?
- what may have happened to this story as it's been told?
- why are the versions so different?
- are these differing versions of the same story or distinct stories altogether?
- what's going on?

### BACKGROUND

At the end of conversation you might explain some of this background information.

Mark's version is probably the oldest. Mark and Matthew tell the story of an unnamed woman who appears in Bethany at the house of Simon. She pours expensive ointment on Jesus' head, as a prophet might have done, preparing for his death.

Luke tells it differently, mentioning Simon but not Bethany. The woman anoints Jesus' feet, weeps on them, and wipes them with her hair. She's a sinner who has been forgiven.

John sets the story in Bethany, in the house of Jesus' friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Mary anoints Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair and preparing him for burial but there's no suggestion that she is more of a sinner than anyone else.

Later tradition attached Mary Magdalene to the story - in poetry and images - so Martha could end up oddly with Mary Magdalene as her sister. The traditions and memories around this story became confused. One medieval picture even shows a woman anointing the head of Jesus, and another his feet, at the same time. The existence of these four Bible versions suggests this story has changed as people have remembered it differently. We shouldn't be surprised that a story told again and again over a few decades got altered before it was written down, and even afterwards. Stories always change as they pass from hand to hand or mouth to mouth. Some would see significance, for example, in the changing of a story about one woman's bold prophetic act into the story of a fallen woman.

Because of our different experiences and the needs of our times we notice particular things about a story and highlight those as we retell it. Sometimes we might want to hide what we don't like in a story. Sometimes we might want to 'bend it' to fit the immediate questions we face or the prejudices we have. This is natural and it's what happens, even with Gospel stories. Some people call us back to an 'original' or first version, or even to 'what actually happened'. Others say that God can be as much in the later retelling as in the earliest version.

Invite everyone to ask themselves:

- If you had to choose one Gospel account of this story which one would it be and why?
- Does your choice suggest anything to you about the people who first told this story and the Gospel writers who passed it on?

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### REMEMBERING A WOMAN

(5 minutes)

Read Mark 14.9 to the group, when Jesus says: 'Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.'

Ask the group to discuss these questions together:

- if the woman could come and speak to our church now what might she say to us?
- would she be glad that her story is still being told?
- might she be angry that she's sometimes been remembered as a 'sinner'?

### REMEMBERING OUR STORY

(5 minutes)

Invite people to think quietly on their own about these questions:

- how would you want to be remembered?
- is there a story you would want to be told 'in remembrance' of you?

### REMEMBERING JESUS

(5 minutes)

Remind the group that there are also themes of remembering among the stories we tell about Jesus. The words said about the woman in this story might remind us that Jesus said, at another table, 'Do this in remembrance of me'.

Ask the group to consider:

- what do you think Jesus wanted us to remember about him?
- what does this particular Gospel story of the woman who anointed him help us to remember about Jesus?
- how would he want us to tell his story so it could be remembered 'in the whole world'?

### CLOSING PRAYER

(5 minutes)

Give everyone a blank postcard. Invite people to write on their card something they would like the whole world to remember about Jesus (e.g. he died on a cross, he brought peace not a sword, he loved sinners....)

If it seems appropriate, people might share these thoughts aloud with one another and offer them to God. Then close the session with prayer.

### EVALUATION

(5 minutes)

At the end of the session ask participants the following questions:

- what did you enjoy or like most about this material?
- what did you find most difficult or challenging?
- what would you like to do next?