

Session 1

Transforming Lives: God who comes among us



This week's session is about the 'incarnation' – a subject whole books could be written about. Essentially the incarnation is about the Son of God, fully God and fully man, being born of Mary – and God being with us in our humanity.

Worship

Spirit of God inspire us:
Renew our faith.
Restore our vision.
Revive our love.

Spirit of God inspire us:
Replace our sorrow.
Repair our broken-ness.
Resurrect our deadness.

Spirit of God come:
Refresh.
Redeem.
Restore us.

Introduction

Christmas is coming... Don't panic or yawn! In your group, or with a neighbour, discuss:

- What, for you, makes a good Christmas?

He became like us so we
might become like him.
(Augustine)

Here are some real-life Christmas cards. When looking at the sixth card you need to know that the caption underneath says "Time for a change"!

The full size images in colour should be downloaded and printed from www.wakefield.anglican.org/transforminglives.



Do you send religious or Christian cards at Christmas, or try to avoid them, or send whatever is the cheapest, or the most expensive, or the funniest?! Or maybe you don't send cards...

- Which card for you **best** sums up Christmas? Why?
- Which card is your **least** favourite? Why?

Some Christmas quotes

From heaven you came
helpless babe
entered our world
your glory veiled.
The Servant King, Graham Kendrick

Lord you were rich beyond all splendour,
yet for love's sake, became so poor:
leaving your throne in glad surrender
sapphired-paved courts for stable floor.
Traditional French carol

He came down to earth from heaven
who is God and Lord of all
and his shelter was a stable
and his cradle was a stall.
Once in Royal David's city, C F Alexander

God entered into our world not with the crushing impact of unbearable glory, but in the way of weakness, vulnerability, and need. On a wintry night in an obscure cave, the infant Jesus was a humble, naked, helpless God who allowed us to get close to him.
Brennan Manning, The Relentless Love of Jesus, Hodder & Stoughton, 1986.

What do you think?

- For you, which of these Christmas quotes stands out because it is helpful or challenging? Why?
- Share your own favourite line from a carol or elsewhere that best sums up Christmas.

Humbled and lifted up

You have just been looking at some quotes from Christmas songs and hymns. Here is a reading from one of the earliest Christian hymns, included by St Paul in a letter he wrote to the church in Philippi.

Ask someone in the group to read these verses slowly and without rushing, to give people time to reflect on what is being said.

In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: ⁶who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹

Some questions:

- What difference, if any, does it make to you to know that God has become human (verse 7)?
- What difference if any, does it make to you to know Jesus as God (verse 6)?
- Think about the stories of Jesus in the gospels. Are there stories that are important for you, where you see Jesus' special Godliness or his ordinary humanness?

God in the mess – of this world

A story ²

A Christian policeman was called to a large local church to remove a drunk, homeless man who had walked in, urinated on the floor and asked for the church's help in finding a place to stay. Later he told the policeman that he had wanted someone to communicate to the shelter staff on his behalf. He knew that he smelt bad, was drunk and could not sustain any sort of responsible lifestyle but he had heard about Jesus and how he welcomed people in their deepest time of need so thought that perhaps his followers would help him...

Some questions to explore this story...

- Why do you think this church reacted in the way it did?
- Do you think the drunk was being naïve about what the church would offer?

EITHER (try this...)

People in Jesus' time were amazed, challenged and angered by the way Jesus lived and who he spent time with.

Read these verses from St Mark's gospel, then look at the questions.

While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Mark 2:15-17³

- If Jesus were around today in human form where might you expect to find him?
- The Communion Service reminds us that "We are the Body of Christ". Maybe Jesus is still 'around today in human form' – us! In what way do you think Christians are the Body of Christ today?

OR (try this...)

Read this extract from 'Broken Open', a poem by Jude Simpson, then look at the questions.

Jude is a comic poet and a Christian. This poem was written for use in various Hope08 events. You can see and hear Jude reading the whole poem at www.hopeinfo.co.uk/index.php/Conversation.

Read it as a group, then let it challenge your own values and way of life.

Jesus didn't come for the well, the swell,
the "hell – I've got everything I need"
the nothing's-lacking, the non-cracking up.
He's not interested in courting the sorted,
he came to fill the cup of the thirsty,
the worst, the broken, the burst open,
Jesus came for the sick,
the cracked-up, the packed-up,
the smashed, hopes dashed,
and the picked-on,
the meek, the weak, and the stuttering,
those who blush when they speak
and the walked-out-on.
Jesus came for those left behind,
for the cheats and the cheated,
the ones who crossed the line
and the ones who still don't know
where to begin.

© Jude Simpson, 2007.

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us in the world

EITHER (try this...)

Read the following extract of someone explaining how their thoughts about Jesus and 'the world' have changed over the years.

I was brought up in a rather narrow Christian tradition and was taught to be suspicious of the 'world' and to try as far as possible to be separate from it, in case of 'contamination'! It led to a lot of fear. Over the years I have become more 'incarnational' in my thinking as I've realised that Jesus took on human flesh and was far more likely to be found in 'dubious' places with 'dubious' people than the traditional religious people and buildings. Jesus was there wherever people needed him...

- Is this sort of story true for some people in your group?

OR (try this...)

Read the following story:

"As a teenager I went to a disco in a church hall. During the evening we noticed a figure of Christ on the cross hanging on the wall. This seemed almost incongruous in the middle of the throbbing music and flashing lights. But why should a crucifix be out of place at a dance? Wasn't Christ there too?"⁴

- Have you ever had a similar experience when you have suddenly realised that Christ has been in a situation with you?
- Do people in your group have a sense that God is with them in the ordinary and unlikely? How?

Humbled and lifted up – so what?

We are getting near the end of this week's session. Hopefully you and your group will have had an opportunity to think about God, about God with us, and about how we live as Christians who follow and serve Jesus.

Earlier we looked at an early Christian hymn – Philippians 2:5-11. Immediately following those words St Paul wrote this.

Notice the first word: "Therefore"...

Therefore, dear friends... Keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation, because God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose.

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may be innocent and pure as God's perfect children, who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people. You must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, as you offer them the message of life.

Philippians 2:12-16a⁵

- Some people imagine God to be far away and distant. Some feel God to be very personal and intimate. Where is God for people in your group – near, or far, or both, or neither?
- How can we recognise God in the ordinary situations of life? For example, at work or when on the bus? Do people in your group have any hints or tips to share?

Action

Christmas is coming.

As a group talk about ways you could help each other, and those outside church, be more aware that God is with them this Christmas.

Worship

A prayer of thanksgiving

Is the Father with us?

He is!

Is Christ among us?

He is!

Is the Spirit here?

He is!

This is our God.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We are his people.

We are the Body of Christ.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord!

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

From heaven you came

Sing, or read together, the hymn 'From heaven you came'.
Pause to reflect on the words, then share your thoughts within your group.
Don't debate the small-print about whether the song's words are proper theology – explore the meaning of this song-poem.

A prayer

Blessed art thou,
O Christmas Christ,
that thy cradle was so low
that shepherds,
poorest and simplest of earthly folk,
could yet kneel beside it,
and look level-eyed into the face of God.⁶

God in our mess

Place a tray in the middle of the room. Create a display of rubbish and litter on the tray. You will need a candle and some paper to write on with pens.

Candles are often used in prayer vigils on the streets or in church. Candles are used on the Advent wreath as a sign of hope.

In our prayers, let us search for Jesus who comes and meets with us during the most difficult, worrying and rubbish parts of our life. Use the pens and paper to write a word or symbol on the paper. Make this an offering of prayer for Jesus to help parts of life that are relevant to you – parts that are difficult, worrying or messy. Screw up the piece of paper and add it to the pile of rubbish on the tray.

Light the candle in a safe and stable place near the rubbish. Reflect on the image of the reality of Jesus bringing light in to the situation that you pray about. Have a moment of silence. Perhaps listen to or sing the song 'Servant King' and conclude with this prayer⁷:

Prayer

God who said: "Let light shine out of darkness"
Has caused his light to shine within us
To give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God
Revealed in the face of Jesus Christ.
We have this treasure in earthen vessels
To show that the power belongs to God.

Take Away

Either use the spiritual exercise printed on page 3 at the start of these Autumn notes, or the exercise on the next page.

TAKE AWAY – God in our mess

Earlier we read these verses from Philippians 2:12-13:

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act to fulfil his good purpose.

Find some space to read this quote from Mike Yaconelli, and then ponder the questions.

“For a period of time my parents were lucky enough to have a cleaner. She would come in once a week to dust, vacuum and clean every little out-of-the-way corner of the house. My parents dreaded the day the cleaner came, and they would spend all morning *cleaning the house for the cleaner!* They didn’t want the house to be dirty, or what would the cleaner think!

We act the same way with God. We talk our way out of the spiritual life by refusing to come to God as we are. Instead, we decide to wait until we are ready to come to God as we aren’t. We decide that the way we lived yesterday, last week or last year makes us ‘damaged’ goods, and that until we start living ‘right’ we’re not ‘God material’. Some of us actually believe that until we choose the correct way to live, we aren’t choose-able; until we clean up the mess, Jesus won’t have anything to do with us. The opposite is true. *Until we admit we are a mess* Jesus won’t have anything to do with us. Once we admit how unlovely we are, how unattractive we are, how lost we are, Jesus shows up unexpectedly.”⁸

- Ask God the Spirit to speak to you, not to condemn you, but to help you see yourself as God sees you. Remember God loves you wonderfully and completely! You are chosen and precious to him. Nothing in you will be a surprise to God!
- Then ask: Are there parts of my life that I shut off from God?
- And ask: Are there parts of my life that I think are too messy or difficult even for God to get involved?
- Pray that God “will be at work in you to will and to act to fulfil his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13).
Ask God what you might do to be holy and given to him.
Perhaps share your thoughts and prayers with a trusted Christian friend, or a spiritual director or your priest.