

Companions on the Way



Worship Resources

The Gift of Incarnation

Overview

Advent is the season in which we prepare our hearts and minds, our homes and our churches, to welcome the Christ child, God Incarnate, God made flesh.

As one way of preparing ourselves I want to explore with you the gift of incarnation from a range of perspectives, beginning at the beginning with Creation.

Week One: God as Creator

If we understand God as Creator then the divine has always been expressing the divine self in matter – in the waters, in the earth itself that separates the waters, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the creatures upon the earth and in the heavens. The physical world is matter and matters to God, is an expression of God.

Week Two: God as Companion

God has always made God's self known to the people. God has always been reaching out to individual persons and the people in general. We can see all that happened before Jesus as simply a bridge to Jesus or rather as an ongoing desire to be in contact/relationship with those that God created that led ultimately to God choosing to become one of us for our sake.

Week Three: Jesus Christ as an expression of God

Jesus was the most specific and complete expression of God in human form and we believe that his birth, his life and teachings, his death and his resurrection are central to our understanding of the gift life and our relationship with God.

Week Four: Us as the Body of Christ in our Time

While the Christ, the resurrected eternal one, is always with us in spirit the historical Jesus has been and gone and it is now our calling to be his hands and feet, his heart and mind in this time and this place. We are not simply called to believe in him but to grow into his likeness and to become co-creators with him, to make real the kingdom of God in this time and place.

Each week there will be five days of personal readings and reflections and then once a week there are some discussion topics if you want to study together or if you wish to journal and go deeper.

Daily Reflections: Week 1 (God as Creator)

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ...God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good." It is good to remember that everything is an expression of God and that God found everything good.

For those of us who are old enough we may remember what a delightful and radical controversy it was when Matthew Fox reminded us all that we began in a state of Original Blessing rather than original sin. We have sadly wandered far from the innocence and perfect balance and interconnected web of creation that was our beginnings in the Garden of Eden. However awe-filling beauty and power and belonging is still the nature of creation, the first and great expression of God in physical matter.

This knowledge is a good place to begin and to return frequently.

Day One: Creation as the gift of the Creator

Read Genesis 1:1-2:7

When reading the creation story it is hard not to delight in the wonder of creation and it's enormity of scale and detail and variety. Allow yourself to visualise the swirl of galaxies in far flung space and the spiralling of the inner galaxies within each particle that makes up you and I and every other part of creation.

Sometimes it helps us grow in appreciation for the enormity and miraculous nature of the gift of incarnation - of material existence - if we hear it from another perspective. Bill Bryson, in *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (Transworld Publishers, London, 2003) begins with these

words: "Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn't easy, I know. In fact I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize. To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and curiously obliging manner to create you. It's an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, co-operative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally under appreciated state known as existence."

That the material universe exists is amazing. That our particular planet and corner of the galaxy exists is a stunning miracle. That humanity exists is a mind-blowingly extravagant gift. And that we - you and I and those we love - exist is the utter generosity of the Creator and a privilege beyond reckoning.

Sometimes I think it good and necessary to be reminded of the miraculous nature of existence and the generosity of the gift of incarnation in general and in particular before we focus on the detail of what we do with the life we have been given, of how to make meaning, and of asking for help (and let's face it often complaining) with the problem of living the particular life we have.

Instinctively I suspect this is why we love to go outside into the dark (if you are fortunate enough to live or holiday away from city lights) and look at the stars and to see and feel both our utter smallness and unimportance and to know that we are somehow still loved and seen by the Creator of all this.

Take your wonder and gratitude into a time of prayer and thanksgiving. Try and take this wonder with you over the next days so that your eyes and heart might see the generosity of God the Creator as you go about your miraculous life.

And if you wish I encourage you to find and watch: "Cosmic Eye". I am not qualified to say whether it is completely accurate in its representation of the out reaches of space but I find it is a dazzling attempt to portray the amazing beauty of creation and increases wonder and awe within me. I feel only praise for God the Creator when I watch this.

Day Two: Creation as Relationship

Read Genesis 2:4-25

It always strikes me that God's own very nature needed or desired to express god's self in created matter and that God the Creator desired relationship with the Creation. The description of the creation process does not sound like a cool technical engineer or a mad scientist in the dungeon. More like an artist or a gardener. There is play and joy in the process. And desire on the part of the Creator for the growth and flourishing of the Creation. And desire for relationship.

Many of us struggle to believe that we are truly loved rather than just kindly tolerated by God. How much more amazing is the suggestion that we are desired! God seems to have desired us since the beginning!! So much so that God built the desire for relationship into our very nature and make up. God desires our company and not only in blind obedience but in real relationship. And our relationship is not an exclusive two way closed systems. God the Creator saw that the first human was alone and that relationship with God and the other animals did not satisfy entirely so God created an equal mate - an other self. Relationship from the beginning has been between ourselves and God, ourselves and the rest of creation, and among our human selves. We were created for interconnected belonging.

Spend some time in grateful remembering all those who satisfy your desire for relationship. And pray for those you desire relationship with but experience some separation or hindrance in through distance, misunderstanding and hurt, or death and absence. Know that even if separated from you that they too are in the hands of the Creator in life or in death. Commend them into God's keeping.

And if you desire relationship that does not yet exist then give this desire over into the hands and heart of the one who desired you into being.

Day Three: Creation as Process

Read Genesis 1:1-31 again

Read Romans 8:16-23

The creation stories describe a creation as a process that takes time and moves from the cosmic to the human. As we will explore more next week the relationship between God and humanity is a process that unfolds over times and through the generations with the promises and guidelines for living developing down through the ages to Jesus and then to us. Indeed Paul uses the image of creation still groaning in labour and describes us as co-creators and co-heirs with Christ.

The nature of the created universe and us within it is always unfolding in a process. Anyone involved in gardening or farming or breeding pets will know that even in the span of one human life time we can see changes in the characteristics of a cereal grain or a species of flower or a pet breed. Historians tell us that as humans we used to be much shorter than we now are (by measuring the height of knight's armour as one example). We are in an unfolding physical universe.

And when we look at God's companioning presence with humanity we will see that there has been a slow process of change or progress with understandings of forgiveness and justice. But we also can recognise ourselves in the ancient stories of the Hebrew Bible. Who among us has not identified with Sarah and Abraham, or Jacob, or King David, or Ruth, or one of the Mary's of Jesus time? While we are separated by thousands of years, languages and cultures, we still recognise enough of the common human dilemma and the life giving wisdom and grace of the divine to find our place in those stories. So whatever process we are part of there is both change and a strongly reoccurring pattern.

In a curious way the seasons of the church help us feel that balance and creative tension. We go through the same "process" or pattern of study and worship every week, every year, every three years as the prayer book, the church calendar, and the lectionary guide us through Sunday to Saturday, Advent to Christ the King until we do it all again but according to a different set of readings until we come again to the season of the gospel according to Matthew, or Mark, or Luke. There is both movement and repetition.

There are also longer or broader seasons or processes in life. The seventh day of every week is a day of rest. The seventh year is a time of rest for the land, and seven times seven year cycles of accumulation and redistribution, cycle their way to the year of Jubilee, or the Lord's favour when land is rested and redeemed. (Leviticus chapter 25).

Rather than a straight line running through the history of the incarnate universe I suspect that a spiral is a better image of movement and change but yet still being in familiar physical and spiritual territory. Process seems to loop and fold back on itself, burst forth and then lie fallow, even break down, and then to emerge like a new blade springing up green.

What are the processes and the cycles you can identify in your life?

Day Four: Are we the pinnacle of creation or a gem in the web?

For a long time we have regarded humans as the pinnacle of creation. We can understand why we reached that conclusion given the order in which the different steps of creation story one is described in Genesis. We were also instructed to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth and all that is in it, and have dominion at the end of the second version of the creation story. But in the last several generations we see the terribly negative consequences of an unexamined interpretation of what being fruitful, subduing and dominating have had. As human population grows rapidly and our impact on the environment teeters dangerously close to tipping points that lead to destruction of other species and maybe even our own.

Firstly there is nothing in the Genesis stories that indicates we should interpret our position as top of a pyramid rather than as a much loved gem within a web of creation: that is, our uniqueness and belovedness does not indicate that others species are not also unique and beloved. There is certainly nothing in the Genesis story that says that being fruitful and multiplying was to be forever exponential or without limits (as we are now beginning to experience in some western countries one can still be fruitful and multiply but at levels that do not increase the overall population!). And there is nothing that says subduing and dominating is the same as having no care for the wellbeing of our environment and those species we dominate directly and indirectly! The images from the creation stories (especially the second story that has humanity created before the animals) speaks in terms of loving care of the garden by God and the instruction to Adam and Eve is to till the garden and to take care of the animals. Even an anthropomorphic (humans at the centre) reading of the stories still has humanity charged by God to care for the created world. It is our blessing and our responsibility. It is in our interest and an expression of our gratitude to God and our awareness of kinship with the earth (of which we are made) and all the creatures which swim, crawl, walk or fly.

And the amount of detail that exists in later Scriptures about resting the field, pruning the vineyard, tending the fig tree and giving it time to flourish, all emphasise that call to care for the world being at the centre of our nature and responsibility as God's faithful people.

When we reflect on the gift and meaning of Incarnation we are brought into a deeper, more humble, and more delighting and caring relationship with the rest of creation.

Day Five: The Difference between understanding creation as backdrop to the human drama or as the expression of God-ness.

It is only in recent years that I have come to realise to what an extent I have regarded the rest of creation as a backdrop to my human existence and my dramas. As a photographer I love beautiful sunrises, afternoon light striking the trees, clouds forming mystifying shapes and sky-scapes, flowers blazing colours across the page, and the glow of sunset reflected in still waters. Nature is beautiful and many of us desire to capture that beauty through various forms of art and appreciation. But we need to be careful that we do not merely treat the rest of creation as backdrop to the image of us living our human life.

The first time I truly realised my arrogance and my ignorance (despite being raised on a farm with animals and thousands of acres of dirt) was when I travelled alone into the northern landscape of Western Australia and encountered the thousands of square miles of red dirt, yellow spinifex and the wide deep blue skies that so excited and humbled me. To pull off the road and walk a short distance into the landscape and to hear, see and feel the vastness. To know that most of this land had not ever been walked by human feet even though lived in for many thousands of years by the first peoples (who lived so lightly and respectfully upon the land that they understand themselves to belong to country rather than own it); to know that most flowers that blossom are never viewed by human eyes; and to know that although almost empty of humans that this land is rich in diverse creatures. I had to confess that God loved creation before and beyond creating a playground for me and other humans.

While of necessity, and with much pleasure and gratitude a lot of the time, I live as though I am more important than other creatures (indeed other humans), I seek to surrender from time to time in the humble awareness that I am but a collection of dust particles given the privilege of breath and sentient being, and that I am grateful to have a momentary part to play in a drama so much greater, more complex, and more dazzling than I can ever comprehend.

That God desired us into being, and lovingly companions us through the journey, and loves us without stinting, I am utterly convicted of. But God is God and there is no need for us to image that God is limited in God's ability to love. We cling to the understanding that God can love us and those we love and pray for. If we are brave we dare to realise that God loves our enemies with the same love God loves us. Why not that God loves the rest of creation with passion and tenderness as well? And therefore that God desires us to be in loving, joyous and respectful

relationship with our fellow creatures and indeed with those elements of creation we deign to declare not living?

Centuries ago St Francis penned the words that sought to describe our place within the beloved web of being in the canticle of Brother Sun, Sister Moon.

“Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord, All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessings.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong, and no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.

Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,

Who is the day through whom You give us light.

And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,

Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,

In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,

And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,

by which You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,

So useful, humble, precious and pure.

Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,

through whom You light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,

Mother Earth

who sustains and governs us,

producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praise be You my Lord through those who grant pardon for love of You and bear sickness and trial.

Blessed are those who endure in peace, By You Most High, they will be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death,

from whom no-one living can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.

No second death can do them harm. Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,

And serve Him with great humility.”

Group Discussion Week One

Note to Group leaders: Group members are encouraged to participate in daily devotions as a way of engaging deeply with the readings underpinning the season of Advent and thereby to 'warmed' up to the topic of each group session.

You might like to set up the room in which you are meeting with an altar like focal point. The traditional circle of chairs with a low table in the centre. Maybe an Advent wreath and a simple ritual of lighting the candle for each week with a simple prayer.

As you have revisited your understanding of God as Creator and your place in the web of being, what has brought you delight? And what, if anything, has brought you disturbance?

Has thinking of creation from a cosmic broad brushstroke perspective led you to feel more blessed or some other feeling?

How has thinking of creation as an ongoing process impacted on your sense of your place in creation and your relationship with the Creator?

How do you understand the commandment to be fruitful and multiply; to subdue creation; and to have dominion over creation?

How might you take with you any insights and challenges you have received this week forward into your relationship with God the creator and the rest of creation? (You might like to keep these ideas ready for the making of New Year resolutions in a little while?!)

Daily Reflections: Week 2 (Companion God)

God has always made God's self known to humanity. God has always been reaching out to individual persons and people in general. We can see all that happened before Jesus as simply a bridge to Jesus or rather as an ongoing desire to be in relationship with those that God created and that led ultimately to God choosing to become one of us for our sake.

This week I want to explore with you, or refresh your memory, about the broad sweep of God's companioning presence with humanity from the naive innocence of the Garden up to the time of Jesus. An ambitious task that will mean leaving more out than we can include.

From our position of looking back it is impossible not to impose a sense of order on events that the characters would not have felt at the time. That is we tend to see everything that happened before as leading to Jesus while for Abraham and Sarah, for Moses, for David and Bathsheba, their engagement with God was complete in and of itself in their own lives. Somehow I want to keep both focal points: that God's loving companioning of humanity was always important in the moment and has led and unfolded toward the life, death and new life of Jesus and those of us who have followed since.

Day One: The God of New Beginnings

Read Genesis 6:5-8, 9:8-17

Last week we left Adam and Eve, wet with the newness of creation, in the Garden. We know that things did not stay sweet and innocent for long. However we understand the story of the forbidden fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil we know that this marks the point of change and the beginning of struggle. Some in the Christian tradition understand this story as the Fall and the original sin. Others of us see this as a moment of increasing complexity in human development and in many ways inevitable. Either way there was no going back to that innocent naive instinctual time of creation and walking in the Garden with God in the cool of the evening. Once their eyes were opened life became more complex and often times knowledge of good and evil did not lead to good behaviour or outcomes.

And according to the stories in Genesis things in the human family only got more complex and fraught and we recognise in the stories of Cain and Abel, and the generations that followed, the sort of problems we know only too well from our own families, communities and nation states.

Very quickly we read that things had become so bad, so corrupt and violent, that God regretted having created humanity and decided to make an end to the world as it was. Except Noah found favour with God and so God planned to save some in the ark and to begin again. We know the story of animals two by two into the arch and being afloat for forty days and forty nights. When the earth was dry enough Noah and his family and the animals left the ark. The first thing Noah did was make an offering to the Lord. God's response was to make a promise that never again would he seek to destroy the whole earth or its creatures.

This promise, or covenant, symbolised by the rainbow, is an essential aspect of understanding our relationship with God. From this point on we can understand and be encouraged by the promise that the whole of creation and God are in an everlasting covenant. God the Creator is also the God of new beginnings and renewal. No matter how bad things get, how bad we are,

we belong. As does everyone else and everything else! This is both good news and challenging news. Everything matters to God and therefore should matter to us.

The rainbow for many of us has come to mean inclusion, renewal and hope even when life is hard. Have you ever looked up and seen a rainbow and felt reminded of the promises of God? Where have you experienced renewal and new beginnings when you feared that everything might be over?

Day Two: God of Promises and Blessings

Read Genesis 12:1-8, 21:1-7, and 22:1-1; Romans 4:1-13

The story of Abram and Sari, who became Abraham and Sarah, is core to the understanding of a chosen people who would lead to blessing for the whole world. Except this was a couple who were old and without child! Their faith in God and the scandalously generous promises of God led to not only their personal blessing, but the blessing to the people who become known as the Chosen People and through them to us and the whole world.

We get a sense of how essential that promise and the faithful response to that promise was in the writing of St Paul. We too can understand Abraham and Sarah to be our forebears in faith.

It is always stirring and encouraging to me that the promise was first made to old and less than successful people. Most of us love Abraham being taken outside to look up at the night sky and hear that his descendants will be this plentiful, and Sarah laughing behind her hand when she overhears the messenger suggesting that she will be with child.

So for all of us who ever feel left out, left behind, overlooked or just struggling to bring up the rear of the flock, this is a covenant promise for us: that we are seen, cared for, of value, included, essential to the outworking of God's good purposes, and a conduit of blessing to others, if we just trust and continue in the way of faith. Not that every longing or hope will be fulfilled in the way we want or imagine but that our lives are part of the web of love and purpose and bigger and more important than we can possibly imagine. How does this covenant speak to you?

Day Three: God of Deliverance

Read Exodus 12:21-28

The story of Moses is amazing and filled with highs and lows. If you are not very familiar it is almost worth reading a child's version (as in a Children's Bible) to get the overarching story and then to dive deep into the adult version of key moments.

Moses is born in captivity to Hebrew parents enslaved in Egypt. The midwife and his mother keep his existence secret for a while but soon he is too old to hide so his mother makes a basket and sets him afloat in the rushes where the daughter of a high Egyptian family finds him and adopts him as her own. He is then raised in privilege. As a young man he observes an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and he strikes the man killing him. Moses thus becomes a fugitive and escapes Egypt to the land of Midian where he marries and tends his father-in-laws flocks of sheep. It is during this time in the wilderness that Moses sees the bush that burns but is not consumed and drawing near to see better encounters God, the great I Am. Moses is given his mission in life and although quite reluctant he goes back to Egypt to lead his people to freedom and the promised land.

It is in preparation for the tenth and final plague, the death of the first born child of each family and the first born of all livestock, that God tells Moses how to spare the Hebrew people. They are each to take a lamb and kill it. The meat is to be eaten in haste to give the people sustenance for the journey they are about to commence and the blood is to be daubed on the door post of every Hebrew house so that the angel of death will Passover them. Thus this meal is both strengthening for the journey from slavery to liberty and is to be marked as God's own and spared.

This is the central and great meaning making story for the Hebrew people and Jesus declares himself this meal, the renewal of this covenant, on his last night.

The God who made god's own self known to Moses in the burning of the bush now responds to the cry of the people by leading them out of slavery toward freedom and a home of their own. Freedom is not achieved in the Passover meal rather the Passover meal strengthens the people for the demanding journey (forty years they wonder) ahead.

It is worth noting that the Commandments were not given until later. Deliverance and liberation were not and are not a reward for attaining some level of moral performance. Rather the people were led out of slavery because their cries had been heard. And then as a people seeking liberation they were called to live in a state of ethical and just relationships with one another.

Day Four: God as Companion of the Flawed yet Faithful

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13

We first meet King David as a ruddy faced boy, whose father would have overlooked him but the Lord saw his heart and chose him. Through all his adventures and misadventures, all his mighty deeds and his appalling failures of character, the Lord God stays true to his word with David and names him the father of his royal lineage. God is not deceived by David's failures, and there are consequences for his behaviour (especially for his children), and yet God continues to work through David and the line of David no matter how human David or Solomon or any of the kings prove to be. God is able to work in and through the imperfection of David and this is important to us.

My first crisis of faith as theology student was when I sat down to study the difference between the neat and tidy account of David's life in 1 Chronicles and the more realistic and less flattering account in 1 and 2 Samuel. I was shocked and angry that God would use such an imperfect and flawed man to have as the one who Jesus would be descended from! Until upon reflection I started to laugh as I realised that there are no other sorts of humans – other than flawed!!

The powerful message to us is that God seeing our hearts knows our strengths and weaknesses and that we still have our place in the kingdom. When we look at the genogram of Jesus, his lineage, we shall see many names of dubious and imperfect forebears that are included rather than excluded from the list of grandparents there is hope for us all. Our mistakes and failures need not stop the flow of God's love to us and through us.

What imperfect forebears are you aware of and grateful to for their gift of life to you? And what blessings have flowed through you despite your humanity?

Day Five: God who speaks through the Prophets

Read Isaiah 40:1-11

God is a persistent companion not only seeking our attention in the good times but coming to us in the clothing and the language of the prophets to speak words of warning, words of consolation, words of encouragement so that we might continue on the journey and not lose heart or our way for too long.

Every Advent we hear from at least Isaiah. Some of the prophecies shake our very foundations in the confronting language and images used such as heavens tearing open, mountains

quaking, and the brushwood kindled with fire. Other prophecies speak balm to our fears and wounds with their tender promises of being fed by the shepherd, gathered up like lambs and carried, and those who are mothers being led gently.

I want to share briefly with you some of what we mean by labelling someone a prophet, and it is not the same as being a fortune or future teller! I am very grateful to Father Richard Rohr, who in his daily reflections in September 2017, wrote about John Dear and his insights.

Firstly, John said, a prophet listens attentively to the word of God and takes what they hear into the world and fearlessly speaks God's message. Secondly in sticking to God's message rather than their own they tell the rest of us who God is and what God wants.

Thirdly a prophet interprets the signs of the times in which they live. My Old Testament lecturer used to say that we should not imagine that the prophets of old thought they were talking about Jesus, rather they were speaking into the situation of their own time, and we – all this time later – see the relevance of what they said as applying to Jesus. (And I would add that is the wisdom and spiritual truth of Scripture that it can be complete in its own time and still speak truth to us in a different time and place. One does not exclude the other!) Fourth a prophet takes sides with the poor and powerless. Because fifthly all the prophets of old are concerned with issues of justice and peace.

And sixth prophets simultaneously announce and denounce. That is they announce that God will reign in justice and peace and therefore they denounce any leadership and behaviour by the people that is not just and peaceful. (Signs of a Prophet, by Father Richard Rohr, <https://cac.org/signs-of-a-prophet-2017-09-14> reflecting on the work of John Dear, "The Beatitudes of Peace: Meditations on the Beatitudes, Peacemaking and the Spiritual Life", Twenty Third Publications, 2016)

I often think of the prophet/s Isaiah (it is thought by some scholars that two or three different prophets over time wrote under the banner of Isaiah) alternate between in one chapter announcing hope for the struggling and then the next chapter denouncing our bad behaviour and failure to be followed by another chapter encouraging and lifting us up! In this way the prophets can encourage and challenge. Both are part of our preparation for the advent of our Lord, of preparing our hearts for communion with our divine Beloved, and preparing us to be a blessing to those around us.

What are your favourite portions of Isaiah? What images speak to you? I am always touched that in a time of a male dominated world view the prophet understood God to be concerned with the young lambs in the flock who needed carrying and their mothers who needed to be led gently.

And what portions challenge and unsettle you? I both long for cleansing fire and fear it (as someone who lives among ancient tall trees in a fire prone part of the world!

Group Discussion Week Two

Note to Group leaders: Group members are encouraged to participate in daily devotions as a way of engaging deeply with the readings underpinning the season of Advent and thereby to 'warmed' up to the topic of each group session.

You might like to set up the room in which you are meeting with an altar like focal point. The traditional circle of chairs with a low table in the centre. Maybe an Advent wreath and a simple ritual of lighting the candle for each week with a simple prayer.

I believe that the witness of Scripture and tradition is that God has always been a companion to humanity and at each stage of human struggle and development there has been a revelation to the faithful. We see it in the stories of our great forebears in faith, in the covenants announced over time, and the various festivals and rituals and laws or guidelines added to the tradition over time. And we who are Christian see Jesus as the most perfect and complete revelation of the nature of God in human form.

Have you ever looked at a rainbow and remembered God's promise to Noah and all of us to never abandon and punish all humanity again and felt consolation and a sense of new beginnings being possible?

What does the story of Abraham and Sarah say to you about faithfulness and promise?

How do you engage with the story of Moses and the journey of the Hebrew people from enslavement to liberty? What of that story is still relevant to you and to us?

What in the David story do you delight in and what if anything disturbs or perplexes you? And how do you understand the prophets of long ago? And what voices and images do you find prophetic in our time?

Daily Reflections: Week 3 (Jesus Christ as an Expression of God)

And now for the part of the story that we have been waiting for – the Advent of Jesus the Christ! In many ways this is the easy part of the story in that we know it well and it is the human and visible part of the story of how God expresses god's own self in flesh, in matter.

This week I will focus in on the meaning to us of the Jesus event: of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, as an expression of God and God's relationship with us. Inevitably this will mean leaving out more than I can include and I will presume that you who are attracted to this course have an existing appreciation of the story of Jesus and a relationship with him.

Day One: The Beginnings of the Story

Read Mark 1:1-9 and John 1:1-18

How a story begins is very important as it sets the scene and introduces the characters to us the audience. The four gospels are very different in their introductions to Jesus although once his ministry begins there is a high degree of agreement about the events and words taught.

Mark's gospel is thought to be the earliest to have been written down and Mark's account does not comment on the birth or the first thirty years! We start by hearing John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness and then Jesus, fully formed, walks into the scene, is declared Beloved, and his ministry begins. This suggests that Mark either knew nothing of the birth stories or did not think them unusual or important enough to include. To me this suggests that Mark understood Jesus to have been fully human to such an extent that his early experiences were in the realm of the ordinary. His divinity was revealed at the right time at his baptism and the divine declaration that he was Beloved Son. Certainly the writer of Mark's gospel did not seem to think that a birth narrative was essential to understanding the importance and good news of the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. And even the resurrection is hinted at rather than explored. For Mark the significance of Jesus as an expression of God is in his life and teachings and his death.

On the other hand the gospel of John is thought to have been written down last and this is possibly why it has such a highly developed Christology or emphasis on the divinity of Jesus. The author and the community who gathered around this account had had a lot of time to come to

understand the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and with the passing of so much time had experienced life as followers of the risen divine one.

While John's gospel does not talk explicitly about the birth and childhood of Jesus he does spend time drawing the connection between the expression of God Incarnate in the Creation and the expression of God Incarnate in Jesus. The divinity of Jesus is seen as pre-existing the birth and life of Jesus and to be nothing less than cosmic. These two accounts do not contradict one another so much as announce very different focuses or angles of light falling on the same events. If you had to characterise the different gospel accounts of Jesus how would you describe in a few words the focus of Mark's gospel and the gospel according to John?

Day Two: The Birth of Jesus according to Matthew

Read Matthew 1:1-17

Matthew's account begins with the genealogy of Jesus – that is, who begat whom in order to bring him to birth. There are several amazing things about this line of begetting!

At first read it is all the fathers through time. But on a closer read some are missed (possibly in order to have neat groups of fourteen generations) and some, but not many, women are mentioned. And the women who are mentioned are, well, a bit dubious?! And they are all dubious in sexual or reproductive terms!

Four women are mentioned by name but they are not the most likely candidates (such as Sarah, or Rebekah, or Rachael). They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah – Bathsheba. Tamar was a childless widow who posed as a prostitute at the side of the road in order to seduce her father-in-law Judah to take up his responsibility and continue his son's, her husband's, line. (Genesis 38).

Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who sheltered the Israelite spies as they made their way to the Promised Land. In return she and her family are offered safety. (Joshua 2:1-21)

Ruth was a young Moabite (or foreign) woman who widowed and childless stays with her mother-in-law Naomi rather than return to her own people. She eventually secures a wealthy husband Boaz and a child after obeying her mother-in-law and crawling under his blanket and spending the night on the threshing floor with him. There is the suggestion of possible trickery and putting him in a position of obligation in order to gain security and restore the family line of Naomi. (Book of Ruth)

David was declared the one through whom the covenant was established and whose line would lead to the Messiah. His son Solomon, the wise one and the one who built the temple, was the child of David and Bathsheba. Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, the captain of David's army, and she was taken by David at his desire (and with or without her consent?) and when she became pregnant David conspired to have Uriah killed on the battle field so that he could marry her. (2 Samuel 11:1-27)

While there are various theories as to what theme links the stories of these four women among themselves and then to Mary, it is clear that all of these women were on the outer edge of the patriarchal society and that they had to make brave and dubious decisions to be included and to contribute to the lineage that led to Jesus. In this they have a connection with Mary who by becoming pregnant before her marriage became on the outer and was placed at risk by this. (I am deeply grateful for the above to Elizabeth A. Johnson's book "Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture and her chapter 'In the Company of the Unconventional Foremothers', Continuum Publishers, New York, 2004)

For our purposes, exploring how the life of Jesus is an expression of God Incarnate (that is God made flesh), it is clear that God did not only 'not abhor the virgin's womb' but did not abhor or hate the outsiders, the dubious, and the desperate, for God chose not only human flesh but a lineage that was flawed and chaotic. (Is there any other sort of lineage if we look close enough?) We might say that God chose a very ordinary family into which to be born: one just like ours with forebears born out of wedlock, forebears from dubious backgrounds, and forebears from different cultural backgrounds alien to contemporary mainstream. I find this utterly humbling and hope filled. Jesus not only came to someone like me but came from people like me.

Mathew's gospel account of the birth of Jesus also has resonances with the Moses story and indeed with the other Joseph and his dreams. And the lineage although interesting for all the other reasons does also emphasise the line of David. For all these reasons Matthew's account manages to trace the hopes for a Messiah to the birth of Jesus and also to include the ordinary troubled line of humanity. In doing both these things Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is both fully human and fully the longed for divine one.

Day Three: The Birth of Jesus according to Luke

Read Luke 1:5-17, 26-80

Luke's account has a core narrative that is similar to Matthew in the specifics of Mary, Joseph and the birth of Jesus but the background that is focused on is quite different. Luke begins the story with the background of the parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah of John and the parallel with Mary. Both of these stories have resonances with Hannah the elderly barren woman of faith who gives birth to the prophet Samuel.

In this way the birth stories of John and Jesus follow a biblical pattern that points to the activity of God in human affairs in order that God's hand can be seen at work. It is meant to alert us to the power of God even in human situations where it seems futile and infertile, the intention of God to do a new and loving thing in our midst, and the partnership between God and the faithful people of God. These are significant and life giving themes to be imbedded in the birth story. They are beyond sweet and innocent. They are life and world changing.

There is also an emphasis on the good news to the poor and the downtrodden that the birth and life of Jesus will be. We hear that particularly in the "speeches" of Elizabeth to Mary and Mary herself as the women declare the significance of their unborn children to the world.

We need to remember as we make our houses and churches pretty, as we arrange the nativity scene, that the birth story of Jesus according to Luke is intimate **and** cosmic. Intimate to the point of an inner perspective (one cannot be much more intimate than being invited into the realm of the unborn children in their mother's wombs); and cosmic as in having the power to overthrow the existing world order.

Luke is able to tell these two stories simultaneously and we should not try so hard to keep them separate. The intimate experience of faith is not separate from the desire of God that the world as we see it should become the kingdom of God here and now, that is be turned upside down and inside out until justice and mercy reign.

Day Four: Jesus' Teaching about the Nature of God

Read Luke 15:11-31 and Matthew 22:1-14

It is strange to write about Jesus and not spend a lot of time talking about his healing ministry, his argument with religious authority, and of course the meaning of his death and resurrection. But our purpose here is about Incarnation, about God becoming flesh, so this will stay our focus.

Jesus did not often speak directly about the nature of God, especially not in the three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. What Jesus did do was a lot of was demonstrating his own nature, which we presume in his divinity was also the nature of God; and a lot of teaching in parables about the character of God.

Jesus spent a lot of his time with those on the edge of proper society. This is particularly evident in his table fellowship, that is, who he ate with. With a few exceptions when the well to do often came by the dark of night to spend time with him, Jesus seems to have eaten with the dubious – tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners in general. Given the emphasis in Matthew’s genealogy and Luke’s hymns of heralding a new order of justice and mercy by inclusion, we should not be surprised that Jesus spent his time with those who had previously been left out or undervalued by the religious and social systems. In this regard, Jesus enfleshed the preference of God for the poor and outcast; Jesus made real the desire of God to companion those in need and distress; and Jesus made visible God’s intention to provide the banquet ingredients to all who would respond to the invitation to join in.

And in his teaching through parables Jesus taught radical and disquieting images of God as a father and land owner who was foolishly generous, forgiving, and inclusive. In maybe the best known parable in Luke’s gospel Jesus portrays God as a father and landowner so desperate for his son’s return that he stands waiting and scanning the horizon for the errant offspring, and welcomes the foolish child with arms wide open, and throws a ridiculously generous celebration for the prodigal son’s return. This was and is still such a radically inclusive and non judgmental view of the character of God that we still struggle to incorporate the implications of Jesus’ own description of God. Like the older son we are not always sure that we want to celebrate the inclusion of fools and those who have made different choices to ourselves. Even though most of us know that in some ways we too are the prodigal child.

Not all parables are this simply positive in their image of God. Matthew reports a series of parables that announce they are going to tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like, that is, what it will be like to live in a world in which God’s characteristics reign. One of those about the invitation to the wedding banquet is “spoiled” or at least made more complicated by the fate of the inappropriately dressed guest. In this parable there is the clear urgency of the host to have the wedding feast filled to capacity and the invitation goes out to all the usual suspects and then to everyone else as well when some of the invited fail to come. In this way it is similar to the generous and inclusive nature of God as revealed in Luke’s prodigal son parable.

But in Matthew's account there is the difficult matter of one of the guests not being properly attired and then being thrown out and punished for this. This raises for us the issue that while Jesus' stories reveal a God whose nature is to desire our company and to be utterly generous and forgiving, Jesus understands God to require some response on our part. In the parable of the prodigal son the errant child of God must come to realise their plight and desire to return home. In the parable of the wedding banquet the guest must clothe themselves appropriately, that is they must adopt a right attitude and approach to God and life in God. (The prophet Isaiah spoke of being clothed in garments of salvation, Paul speaks of being clothed in the life and death of Jesus in order that we might be part of his resurrection life).

So while the character of God would seem to be radically inclusive it would seem that God also requires of us a contrite heart and a taking up of the holy and the whole of what is offered. This is not necessarily about rules and payment but the spiritual truth that one cannot be open to the gift of God without making room in one's heart and whole being for God to take up residence (which is one way of understanding Advent – the preparing of our hearts for the coming of God).

The beginning place of our journey into God and life in God is utterly simple and available. And it is a journey that will completely overcome us and remake us.

Day Five: Death as part of Incarnation

Read Matthew 26:1-2, 17-29 and Luke 22:7-8, 14-22

When God chose human flesh God was always choosing death as well because it is the way of all flesh to die. But what sort of death? For Jesus did not die of a blessed old age as did his forebears in faith. Jesus died a cruel and early death at the hands of the Roman empire and with the complicity of the religious leaders of his own faith.

St Paul wrote more about the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus than almost anyone else and he could not narrow it down to a single meaning. St Paul uses a range of concepts: atonement, justification, sanctification, salvation, redemption, and reconciliation. Paul believed that through our becoming part of the death and resurrection of Jesus that we became children of God, a new creation, and were transformed and glorified. (Christopher J Monaghan, CP writes a very succinct and helpful overview of Paul's theology at

https://www.repository.edu.au/1765/1/Death_of_Jesus_in_Paul.pdf)

Jesus did not say very much about his death. While he seems to predict that he is to die and indeed rise again he only directly comments twice on the meaning of his death. In John's gospel he explains to some Greeks that unless a grain of wheat dies it remains just one grain but that in dying it becomes many. And all the synoptic gospels record Jesus partaking of the Passover meal and declaring himself the bread and the wine, the new or renewed covenant.

Remember in the second week we touched upon Moses and the first Passover as the meal eaten in haste to sustain the people of God on their long journey from enslavement to liberation, and for the blood of the lamb to be daubed on the doorposts and to protect those who lived under the sign from death.

For me this is the primary understanding of the meaning and benefit of Jesus' incarnation – of his birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection: Jesus as the new Passover meal, as the one who sustains us in the long journey to liberation, and whose life, death and resurrection has won a freedom from death eternal.

I do not have an argument with Paul that concepts of atonement, justification, sanctification, salvation, redemption, and reconciliation – and all the Hebrew understandings behind these words – all add depth and breadth and purpose to the meaning of the death of Jesus. I most certainly understand the life and death of Jesus to have been self giving and sacrificial. And I certainly believe that the gift of his life and death and resurrection is salvific for me and has had a salvific benefit for relationships between the divine and humanity in a more general and cosmic way. But for me the primary meaning is that given by Jesus himself, in the timing and location of his last meal and conversations with his followers, with the emphasis on deliverance from physical, social and spiritual enslavement and oppression, and consequent freedom from the destructive nature of sin.

This has very real implications for my understanding of faith and what it means to have an incarnational theology. Yes my faith is about my own spiritual journey but it is also about the needs of my community and world. What is required of me as a person of faith is not so much about payment for sin but sharing of the blessings. Salvation for me is about my relationship with God being so transformed and enlivened that I desire and will work toward the transformation of the whole world until we are a new creation together. A new and right relationship with God leads me to seek a new and right relationship with my neighbour and our shared neighbourhood – the world.

Group Discussion Week Three

Note to Group leaders: Group members are encouraged to participate in daily devotions as a way of engaging deeply with the readings underpinning the season of Advent and thereby to 'warmed' up to the topic of each group session.

You might like to set up the room in which you are meeting with an altar like focal point. The traditional circle of chairs with a low table in the centre. Maybe an Advent wreath and a simple ritual of lighting the candle for each week with a simple prayer.

As we have focused in on the birth narratives how have you identified with the different themes?

Had you ever noticed before the particularities of the lineage of Jesus before? How do you read the implications of the "dubious" forebears of Jesus? Do you feel included in the family of God no matter how dubious you or your forebears are?

And what of Luke's focus on the poor and the upheaval in the social order?

What do you believe are the characteristics of God as revealed in Jesus' behaviour and teaching? What are your favourite parables about the character of God and the nature of the kingdom?

And what meaning do you believe Jesus put on his approaching death?

How does the valuing of physical life as shown in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus impact on your beliefs about the importance and belovedness of all life?

Daily Reflections: Week 4 (Us as the Body of Christ)

Advent leads to but does not end with Christmas and Christmas does not end with only the celebration of the birth of a historical baby (although that is a delightful part of the process and an entry point for many of us).

We who are the faithful are called to live our life not simply worshiping Jesus but in embodying his spirit and teachings in our time and place. The image that most of us know best is St Paul's language and metaphor of becoming the body of Christ.

Day One: Jesus Breathes his Spirit into us

Read John 20:19-23 and 21:14-19

On the day of his resurrection Jesus is first seen and experienced by Mary Magdalene in the early morning and then Jesus appears to all the gathered disciples (other than Thomas) that evening. He greets them with words of peace and then breathes on them and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Jesus imparts the Spirit to his disciples before he truly leaves them and empowers them to be a source of blessing and forgiveness in their world. Remember that forgiving people is one of the radical and healing things Jesus did in his earthly ministry that so disturbed the religious authorities. He is now commissioning and empowering his followers to do likewise. He is equipping his followers to also be teachers and healers, companions of those in need, and living presences of the good news. The spirit is not given just so that the disciples can continue a private love-in with Jesus but so that they can become living sources (or incarnations) of his on-going loving presence in the world.

If there is any doubt about the spirit being given in order to empower them for their ministry in the world then the story of Jesus' third appearance to the disciples after his resurrection makes it clear. In a question and answer conversation between Jesus and Peter (who is always our archetypal Christian in Scripture – that is he is the typical stand in for us) Jesus leads Peter deeper and deeper into his declarations of love and commitment to enacting that love. "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep."

If we say that we love Jesus then we too are commissioned to feed and tend those that Jesus cares for.

Day Two: Commissioned to be a welcoming community

Read Matthew 28:16-20 and 25:31-46

Known as the great commissioning Matthew's gospel ends almost abruptly with the promise of authority and a command to make disciples of all nations (the Gentiles as well as the chosen people of Israel) and to baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This can be read as a passing of the mantle from the one to the many. It is worth unpacking it a little. Firstly it means, as do the other gospel accounts, that Jesus is empowering his disciples

(rabble that they are) to be his living reminder on earth and to continue his sacred work of expressing God's love in the physical or incarnate domain. While it is the Spirit of the living God that empowers the work that the disciples are called to, that work is very much in this world.

Secondly this is the moment when the mission of Jesus shifts gears and focus from only to the children of David to include the Gentile nations, all the world. This was foreshadowed by Luke's account of the speeches of Elizabeth and Mary about Jesus, and Jesus' own occasional encounter with those not of Israel.

Thirdly what might at first seem like offering initiation into a private religion (we in later generations have often interpreted baptism and Christianity in this way) is actually radically inclusive and expansive. Both because it extended to those beyond Israel and because the basis for initiation and inclusion is to be grace and desire for inclusion rather than the keeping of the detail of the law. Now we have a commission that is exciting, encouraging and utterly challenging in what it offers us and asks of us.

And if there is any doubt that inclusion is central to Matthew's understanding of the great commission then his reporting of Jesus' words about doing to him whatever we do, or fail to do, for the least makes it clear that Jesus was insisting before he went that everyone, even those regarded as unimportant, were essentially important and included in the kingdom. The words of Jesus challenge us to not stop with nice ideas only but to live in ways that make real the inclusive love of God for all.

Day Three: Empowered as a Community on Fire with Love

Read Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 2:1-42

In Luke's account the gifting of the Spirit did not come until the day of the Pentecost. Here the gifting of the Spirit is very evidently for the whole community of the faithful in order that the community may grow and include others. The gifts of the spirit are to be practiced in such a way that love both powerful and practical be outpoured and save their community and generation.

For us, I believe, the take home lesson is that the gift of the spirit is not a private arrangement between us and God as a sign of personal salvation but for the sake of, and in the context of, the community. Our personal relationship with God through Jesus is terribly important but it is not a private covenant rather it is about our inclusion in the community or kingdom and comes

with the commission to go find others who need the love and fruits of the Spirit and include them too. Community cannot be stagnant for any length of time or it stifles the movement of the Spirit at the expense of those on the inside and those who would desire inclusion in the community.

As an introverted believer who has been on the path for some time now I understand the pleasure and the temptation of focusing on my personal relationship with God through Jesus the Christ and letting the rest of the world fade away. How wonderful it can be to spend time alone with Christ.

But as a priest and faithful member of the church I also know the pain of being in a community that knows little growth and movement. And as a member of a family, a community, a society, and a world I know the anguish of knowing that something, someone who gives my life meaning and purpose is not yet known and experienced by others.

I do not feel a need to force Jesus on anyone but I do deeply believe that the Spirit of the living God, who was so fully present in Jesus, desires to bring life and love and flourishing to all people and situations in our world. And I believe that it is part of my belonging, part of my membership in the kingdom, that equips me and requires me to share that conviction with others.

Day Four: The Body of Christ

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-31

St Paul wrote that followers of the risen Christ were to be like a body in several of his pastoral letters. The most comprehensive description is the one above in one of the letters to the church at Corinth.

We are so familiar with the image of the believers being the body of Christ that we probably never ponder what other image Paul might have used and therefore how powerful the image of body really is. Paul might have described the group of new believers to have been like the Temple in Jerusalem with strength and beauty and pillars and a roof and an inner sanctum etc. Or like the greatest of the temples of the Roman Empire. Or like an Empirical army. Or a court room. Or another (lost) tribe of Israel. Or a choir of heavenly angels.

While we cannot fully know why Paul chose the image of a body - of a living, breathing, growing, changing human body - we can speculate and consider the implications. No doubt the metaphor of a human body held resonances of the first human made from the dust of creation

and divine breath and of a people who were now followers, incorporated members, of the new Adam. And the image of being the body of Christ emphasises that we are to carry on the loving work of Jesus who had once been a physical body.

The image of course also allows, indeed demands, that differences of gift and function be held in tension with unity of being and purpose. From the beginning it seems that the followers of the risen Jesus the Christ were at best in quite separate communities and at worst in quite separated factions. I suspect Paul wanted an image that would help and challenge his various faith communities to see themselves as valued in their differences but bound together with those they did not know or particularly care for personally.

The discussion of the various parts of the body remind us now, as it would have then, that the experience of faith and being gifted by the Spirit of God does not necessarily look the same in every person or group. And even more than accepting difference we need to be quite humble in our self assessment and honouring and protective in considering the value and inclusion of others who we might be tempted to think less than ourselves. We can certainly feel challenged as to how we value or judge various gifts, perspectives and tasks.

Maybe as much as anything the metaphor of body reminds us that we are bound together with all others, that belonging to Christ, even the resurrected Jesus Christ, does not actually take us out of this world! That the best image of what it means to follow the resurrected one is not an image of disembodied spirit but a body in all its physicality and beauty and vulnerability.

The image of the body also raises the difficult matter that we are bound in belonging with some people whose beliefs and behaviours are not only different to us but repugnant. Morally we may sometimes wish to divorce ourselves from those whose behaviours are not what we believe are Christian beliefs and behaviours. While it is not for me here to explore how we accommodate, correct or excommunicate those who differ in significant ways I think that the image of body does acknowledge that we are bound to and affected by negative differences just as we are in a diseased body. This is true as well when we think of ourselves as part of the body of the earth or the web of creation. We do not understand or like all aspects of creation. Indeed we increasingly understand that we are often part of the problem as the impact of our behaviours land upon more vulnerable creatures. The image of being the body of Christ is challenging.

Day Five: Companions on the way

Read Luke 24:13-35

Early in Christian history followers of the risen Jesus the Christ were described as followers of the way. I have always found this enticing and encouraging. And I have always associated that knowledge with this story of the Emmaus walk. For me it holds in perfect tension the individual nature of the walk of faith and the communal or shared experience; the intellectual need to develop theologically and the knowing that comes from experiencing the sacraments and the mystical; the ebb and flow of walking with our Lord feeling one moment intense connection and then experiencing aloneness; and most of all I love the sense of my Spirit burning within me as the wisdom of God falls upon my ears and eyes in the midst of life.

The two who were walking along the road were already followers of Jesus and were in despair at the knowledge of his death. When the resurrected one falls in beside them they respond to the stranger with surprise and passion and yet it was not until the breaking of the bread that they 'knew' who he was.

I, who love books and learning and conversation, am reminded that it is not only by book or head learning but experiencing the mystical that leads to knowing. Indeed I love that in my part of the Christian tradition equal weight is given to the word and the sacraments. There is also a lovely sense in which Jesus joins in the conversation the two were having. Any of us who have been in spiritual direction will know this experience of two people talking and then finding a holy third presence in the conversation.

Also for me this story speaks to that difficult truth that in a long life of faithful walking on the way there are both times of profound encounter with Christ and others and there are times of being left apparently alone. Sometimes this aloneness is almost a relief and at others it can feel quite devastating and bleak. The journey is not smooth and constant but rather the humble process so like this Emmaus walk.

And maybe most of all I identify with the burning within when our spirit recognises the divine in a situation. This life, with all its material limitations and constraints, is still so rich and bursting with spirit. Part of the gift of incarnation is to know that matter and spirit are not separate, that God is more than what we see in creation but not absent from creation, and that Jesus although no longer physically present continues to choose to companion us who are flesh and blood.

What a wonderful gift that continues to unfold within the heart of our lives.

Group Discussion Week Four

Note to Group leaders: Group members are encouraged to participate in daily devotions as a way of engaging deeply with the readings underpinning the season of Advent and thereby to 'warmed' up to the topic of each group session.

You might like to set up the room in which you are meeting with an altar like focal point. The traditional circle of chairs with a low table in the centre. Maybe an Advent wreath and a simple ritual of lighting the candle for each week with a simple prayer.

As we draw to a close this particular study and conversation what do you think are the most important aspects of the call to be the body of Christ in our time and place?

Do you sometimes wish that you could just worship Jesus and not be told to "be" his body?

How do you find a balance between your private relationship with Jesus and your belonging to the community of believers?

How do you reconcile that some other members of the body behave and believe in ways that do not seem Christ-like to you? How do you belong even while not always agreeing or approving?

How has focusing on the incarnational, or enfleshed, physical, expression of God's love in creation, in loving companioning of the faithful over the ages, and in the life of Jesus, affirmed or challenged your perception of what is important and the value of your life, and how you live it, right here and now?

As you prepare for celebrating Christmas I pray that you know what a precious and unique expression you are of God's creativity and that you belong and are beloved. As is everyone and everything you encounter.

Every blessing,

Reverend Sue Lodge-Calvert