

Christmas for all Seasons

Overview

Introduction

Often in the lead up to Christmas things get pretty busy and we don't get to look at the Christmas story in much detail. I have written this resource that can be used at any time during the year to look at the incredible story of Jesus' birth and the surrounding events and what we can learn from it about Jesus, God's salvation story, mission and discipleship. Christmas is the good news story of Jesus incarnate, the Word made flesh, God with us. The Gospel writers, in the way they present Jesus' coming into the world, want to tell us about Jesus: who he is and what he has come to do. The Gospel writers do this in different ways and we will explore this. The series is 6 sessions long.

Notes to the person leading the study

Question means a question to ask the group and discuss together and Response includes some ideas in response to the question. (Not all the questions have written responses, and this is intentional.)

The questions are to guide you through the relevant Bible passages and themes of the passages, and I have provided some suggestions for application or actions after the sessions too. But, of course, there may be other questions or application/actions that will come up.

The characters in the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke help us to think about our own mission and discipleship as we reflect on them. Although I haven't included this in all of the sessions, if you have time and opportunity, perhaps as a quiet and prayerful activity, you could ask people to immerse themselves in the story by putting themselves in the shoes of the characters. This, also, can be an action point on any of the weeks as a way of further engaging with the scriptures.

Series overview

Session 1 Introduction – the Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke

Session 2 The incarnation (Matthew 1)

Session 3 Fulfilment and dreams (Matthew 2)

Session 4 Mary and Luke's long introduction (Luke 1)

Session 5 Mangers, angels and shepherds (Luke 2:1-20)

Session 6 The Word became flesh and Mark's gospel

Further reading recommendations

- *Journey to the Manger* by Paula Gooder
- *Christmas: What the Bible tells us about the Christmas Story (Insights series)* by William Barclay
- *Hidden Christmas* by Timothy Keller
- *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* by Kenneth Bailey (just part 1 of the book, but it is all good)

Christmas for all Seasons

Session 1 | Introduction: The Christmas Stories in Matthew and Luke

Introduction

Explain that this series will take us through the Christmas story, perhaps reading the introduction to the series from above.

In

Discussion

What do you think should be in Christmas dinner/lunch? Can the group agree on a Christmas meal that they would all have together?

Exercise

- Get into pairs (and one three, if necessary).
- Instruct one person in each pair to retell the Christmas story, putting in enough details to make the retelling last two minutes.
- After the retelling, the other person (or two people if you were in a group of three) in the pair comments (positively, this is not a critique!) upon the retelling. For example, was there anything that surprised them about how they told the story or what was included or not included?
- Talk together as a whole group about the retellings and what you noticed.

Up

Pray

Pray together before opening the word, that the Holy Spirit would be guiding you.

Explain

The Christmas story is one that is retold every year through nativity plays and church services. So the chances are we are pretty familiar with retellings of the story. The Christmas story we have is from the Gospels, and often we tell a mixture of the stories that we have in the Bible.

Q: Ask the group about the four Gospels (without looking in Bibles first!). How does each Gospel deal with Jesus' birth in general?

R: Matthew and Luke have narratives surrounding Jesus' birth, John uses an almost poetic 'Word became flesh' description, and Mark doesn't write about it at all.

Exercise/discussion:

Open up your Bibles to Matthew 2 and Luke 1:26-38 & 2:1-20. We are going to look at these chapters in more detail in future sessions, but for the moment just read them

both out and then afterwards spend some time identifying features that are the same, or are different, between the two Gospels.

Some similarities:

- Mary and Joseph are engaged, Mary conceives Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and not by Joseph (Matt 1:18, 20, 23, 25; Luke 1:27, 34-35).
- An angel announces the birth of the child, who is to be called Jesus and is the Saviour (Matt 1:20-23; Luke 1:30-35; 2:11).
- Jesus is born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:1; Luke 2:4-6) but grows up in Nazareth (Matt 2:23; Luke 2:39).
- Joseph is descended from David (Matt 1:16, 20; Luke 1:27, 32; 2:4)

Some differences:

- The two stories contain numerous different events, characters, geographic locations and journeys.
- Matthew's story contains the magi, the star, Herod's deep concern about Jesus' arrival, culminating in the killing of the infants, and the escape to Egypt.
- Luke's story includes Zechariah, Elizabeth and John; the census and the related journey; the shepherds; and the visit to the Temple.
- Matthew's is told with emphasis on Joseph, whereas Luke's emphasises Mary.
- The angels (and dreams) in Matthew's story demand a response and help change circumstances, whereas in Luke's they generally just announce upcoming events.
- Matthew's story contains numerous explicit Old Testament quotations, whereas Luke allows the fulfilment theme to emerge through the way he tells the story (more on this in future sessions).

Notice also that it isn't just details that make a story different, but the way it is told. We will see this over the coming weeks. But for now, note that in Luke everything seems happy and joyous, whereas in Matthew there is serious threat and danger. Luke's Christmas story is like a romantic comedy whereas Matthew is like a thriller/horror!

Q: How do you feel about the fact that there are lots of differences between the "Matthew Christmas Story" and the "Luke Christmas Story", and were you aware they were so different?

R: Different Gospel writers want to bring out different emphases and tell their story to reveal who Jesus is. Think of crime dramas – detectives are always suspicious when stories are exactly the same!

Q: In our retellings of the Christmas story what do you think... should we mix up the stories from Matthew and Luke, or should we try and retell "Luke's Christmas Story" or "Matthew's Christmas Story?"

R: The Gospel writers are all telling us about the one Jesus. They wrote their good news (that is what the word 'gospel' means) stories about Jesus to tell us about him. Perhaps by merging narratives we lose some of the distinctive portraits of Jesus the Gospel writers are painting? But we also have multiple Gospels to help us have a fuller understanding of who Jesus is (which even in the Christmas stories is being revealed). Tatian wrote the Diatessaron, which aimed to combine the four Gospels into one, but the early church rejected it.

Out

Storytelling is a really powerful tool in evangelism and Jesus was a master storyteller himself. The four Gospel writers are called 'evangelists', and they wrote their good news stories about Jesus so that we might believe (see, for example, John 20:30-31; Luke 1:3-4).

Talk about how you can use stories of God at work in your life to witness to others. Is this something you do already? These stories can be short, such as God answering a prayer request, or bringing healing to an area of your life. These stories can also be longer. With people you know well, have you ever told them about how you became a Christian or what difference Jesus has made to your life? If you haven't, you could ask people if they would like to hear your story, or part of your story.

Pray for each other that you might have open doors to share stories of God at work, and boldness to share.

Application/actions

Pray for opportunities (open doors) to tell stories of God at work in your life and see what God does. Look for opportunities that God might give you and boldly take them, knowing that the Holy Spirit is at work in you.

Tell stories of God at work (sensitively) to anyone who will listen, and see how people respond. You can also do this on social media.

Draw a picture of the nativity scene, deciding whether you will use elements just from Luke, just from Matthew, or both. Keep it somewhere safe for later in the series. Draw a picture of the nativity scene, deciding whether you will use elements just from Luke, just from Matthew, or both. Keep it somewhere safe for later in the series.

Christmas for all Seasons

Session 2 | The Incarnation: Matthew 1

Introduction

Recap

Last week we looked at the beginning of Matthew and Luke and noticed how their Christmas stories had many overlaps, but many differences too. The way the stories are told is significant, and our stories are significant too. We also discussed how important we felt it was to keep the stories apart or merge them together. This time we will focus in on Matthew chapter 1.

In

Share

First, any testimonies of God at work through the application/actions from last time? (Remind people of what they were if necessary!)

Exercise

Draw your family tree of a few generations and share it with the group.

Up

Pray

That the Holy Spirit would be guiding you.

Explain

Matthew chapter 1 splits nicely into two sections (verses 1-17 and 18-25). We'll take each section in turn before looking at them together afterwards.

Verses 1-17

Find someone brave (or a few people!) to read out verses 1-17. Before reading it aloud say that this is part of Jesus' family tree and by reading it we hear lots of names that are part of God's salvation history. Ask people to make a mental note of some names they recognise. After hearing the genealogy, discuss the following questions.

Question

What names stood out to you in the genealogy and why?

Response

Jesus is a descendent of the 'Patriarchs' (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob); Jesus is a descendent of the royal line (King David etc.) there are women included (unusual for Jesus' time).

Discuss

Briefly look at Gen 38 (Tamar), Joshua 2 & 6 (Rahab), the book of Ruth (Ruth!), 2 Samuel 11-12 (Bathsheba) and their back stories, or just have a quick recap/reminder about them, seeing what people know about them. The women highlight dubious unions, Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews), justice and courage, amongst other things. Perhaps they are included to show that God uses a variety of people in his

salvation plan. Genealogies almost always did not include women in Jesus' time. So the inclusion of the 5 women, Tamar (1:3), Rahab, Ruth (1:5), Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah) (1:6) and Mary (1:16), is of particular note and helps us to see these things. Furthermore, they might serve as a reminder that God sometimes works in odd and unexpected ways, like an unmarried virgin called Mary!

Explain

Explain the numerical symbolism in the conclusion in verse 17. First, after each group of fourteen, something massively significant happens. Matthew is telling us Jesus' birth is highly significant! Secondly, seven is symbolically the 'number of perfection' in Scripture, so Jesus begins the seventh seven, bringing the story of Israel to its destination

Question

The genealogy shows that God can use a whole variety of different people, some seemingly unlikely, for his purposes. Do you sometimes discount yourself (or others) from God using you (or others)? If so, what are those reasons?

Verses 18-25

Read out the passage and then discuss the following questions.

Question

Who is the main character, or the character in focus, in this section of Matthew's story: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the Holy Spirit or the angel?

Response

Open to debate! But notice how Joseph is more in the central frame than Mary, and Joseph's actions help to protect Jesus (consider the culture of the time and how socially and economically devastating it would have been for Mary to be unmarried and with child).

Question

Imagine yourself as Joseph in the story. How would you feel? How would you act? What would your response to the angel and dream be?

Question

What do you think about Joseph's character and actions in this passage?

Response

Matthew describes Joseph as being righteous, and that was about fulfilling the law for a Jew. Joseph could have divorced Mary, or even had her stoned, according to the law (Deut 24:1, 22:23-24). Joseph could have taken Mary to court and made the divorce a public matter, but seemingly was opting for the quiet divorce option, the option less socially harmful for Mary. However, Joseph accepts the angel and the dream and shows courage.

Question

What are the titles given to Jesus in this passage and what do they communicate?

Response

Messiah (or Christ, meaning Anointed One) (v18), Emmanuel, meaning God with us (v23) and Jesus' name itself, which is related to the salvation he brings.

Question

Reflect on how these titles of Jesus (from the previous question) connect with you personally: what do they mean to you?

Question

How does Matthew chapter 1, considering both sections, communicate to us about who Jesus is?

Response

Notice that Matthew presents Jesus as having “two origins”. The first, genealogy one, is a very human one – he is a Jewish human. But in the second, Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit and is ‘God with us’. Also, in verse 1 and verse 18, unfortunately lost in translation, two very similar Greek words are used, the word ‘genesis’ (genealogy, verse 1) and ‘gennēsis’ (birth, verse 18). Genesis means origin or beginning, and by using this word it seems that Matthew is communicating a “recreation” through Jesus, a new era. But by these two adjacent sections of Scripture it also looks like Matthew is communicating to us that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, right in his opening chapter.

The incarnation is an incredible miracle, that Matthew has presented to us through the first chapter of his Gospel. Take some time to reflect and consider this together as a group.

Out

Explain

With the genealogy (a type of family tree), and also the new family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus in this passage, it is a good opportunity to think about family. Family is very important to many at Christmas, and Christmas can be a lonely time for those who don't have much family, or are estranged from their family.

Response

Spend some time briefly sharing about your families and prayer requests for them, but try and focus your prayers in a missional way. For example, if family members don't know Jesus, pray for them to come to know Jesus. If they are Christians already, pray for them to be empowered by the Holy Spirit for witness to others and to grow in their faith. Also, where appropriate, pray for reconciliation in families, which is part of God's missional purposes (Jesus came to reconcile us to God).

You can also pray for families around where you live too, or those known to you, who are challenging circumstances.

Application/actions

Pray

Pray for those in your family: to know Jesus or to know him more. How can you serve and love your family this week?

Pray for families known to you, that they would be at peace with each other and they may know Jesus, or know him more. Look for opportunities to serve these families too.

Christmas for all Seasons

Session 3 | Fulfilment and Dreams: Matthew 2

Introduction

Recap

We have looked at the significance of story and the importance of it missionally and evangelistically. The Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke tell us about who Jesus is, and our stories are important too. Last week we focussed on Matthew chapter 1 and how Jesus is presented as both human and divine, and we thought about family.

In

Share

First, any testimonies of God at work through the application/actions from last time? (Remind people of what they were if necessary!)

Discussion

Do you regularly remember your dreams at night? If so, what kind of dreams do you have? Can you remember a recent one to share with the group?

Up

Pray

That the Holy Spirit would be guiding you.

Read

Matthew chapter 2.

Question

What are the themes that stand out to you?

Response

(i) Fulfilment of Old Testament: “this was to fulfil...” and similar in verses 5, 15, 17 and 23. (ii) Danger: Jesus’ life is under threat (iii) God’s guidance: through the star and through dreams. N.B. There are other themes, but these are the ones we are going to focus on.

Fulfilment

Question

Why do you think Matthew uses so many Old Testament quotes in this chapter?

Response

Matthew is showing how Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament. Jesus is where the whole story of the Bible has been heading.

Question

What do Moses and Jesus (looking at this chapter) have in common?

R: Both are in danger as infants, with their lives threatened by a wicked ruler who instigates the slaughter of youngsters, there is the fleeing to another land for safety, only to return after the death of a ruler, as well as early life being spent in Egypt. Note also that Jesus liberates and saves people. Messianic expectation was not just for someone in the line of David, but also that God would send someone like Moses (Deut 18:18). Of course, Jesus is greater than Moses!

Question

There are many general promises for us in Scripture that are fulfilled (such as the gift of the Holy Spirit, God being with us etc.). Are there any promises that are particularly important to you?

Question

Has God made you any specific and personal promises, either that have already been fulfilled or are yet to be fulfilled? How do you deal with the time between delivery of the promise and awaiting fulfilment?

Danger, guidance & dreams

Question

Look at Joseph, the Magi and Herod in the story. How do they respond to God/Jesus?

Response

Joseph is obedient to God's direction through dreams and is painted in a positive light. The magi are diligently seeking out Jesus to worship him and give him gifts, and again, through a dream, respond to God's guidance. Herod is clearly not receptive to Jesus at all, and goes to extreme measures to try and get rid of him. Also, notice that King Herod and Jerusalem (verse 3) are frightened by the news of Jesus, but it is the Gentiles (the Magi) who are coming to seek Jesus.

Question

Look at the dreams in the chapter and discuss them. What impact do they have?

Response

There are four dreams in this chapter (verses 12, 13, 19 & 22). There is also the dream in Matthew 1:20. Dreams are really significant in Matthew's Christmas story because they really impact things by directing the characters to achieve God's purposes and ensure Jesus' safety.

Question

Talk about how you hear from Jesus and respond to what he communicates with you.

Question

Do you ever have dreams that you think are from God?

Out

Explain

Matthew's story shows us how different characters respond to Jesus/God in different ways. Some are hostile (Herod), some come to worship (the Magi), some are obedient (Joseph and the Magi).

Discuss

Talk about your journey in coming to know Jesus, your "responding to him". Who or what helped you on the way? Why do you think some people are hostile towards Jesus (and Christians or the church)?

Dreams are a very significant way of God communicating in the Bible, and according to Peter's Pentecost Preach, dreams are a sign of the Holy Spirit being poured out (Acts 2:17). Would you like God to communicate to you more in dreams?

Pray

Pray together for dreams, and not just dreams for your own benefit, but to help others too. Furthermore, pray for people who do not know Jesus to have dreams of him.

Application/actions

Pray

Ask God to remind you of his promises this week. Perhaps you could learn a verse of Scripture about one of his promises to you.

Pray for dreams from God for yourself and see what happens! Each night before you go to bed you could ask God to speak to you in the night through your dreams. If you do remember any dreams when you wake up, write them down soon after waking so you can reflect on them (and remember them!) later.

Pray that others who do not yet know Jesus would have dreams of him: that God will reveal himself to people whilst they sleep.

Christmas for all Seasons

Session 4 | Mary and Luke's long introduction: Luke 1

Introduction

Recap

Over the last few sessions we have looked at the significance of story (both about Jesus in the Gospels and our own stories), and we have been exploring Matthew chapter 1 & 2. In this session we turn to Luke's Gospel.

In

Share

First, any testimonies of God at work through the application/actions from last time? (Remind people of what they were if necessary!)

Discuss

Does your Christmas day have a normal shape to it? Share together as a group.

Up

Pray

That the Holy Spirit would be guiding you.

Discuss

Before looking at Luke, discuss some of the themes and storyline that came out from Matthew's Christmas story. For example, the threat from Herod; Joseph being a significant character who responded to God's guidance through dreams; the Magi coming to worship Jesus; Jesus being fully human and divine etc.

Read

Read the whole of Luke chapter 1. Before reading it ask people to pay attention to the themes. It is a long chapter, so ask people to read out different sections.

Question

Try to not focus on details in this long narrative, but what is the feel of the story, and what are some of the themes that come out? (I expect this will be a lengthy discussion)

Response

The feel is quite joyful (definitely in comparison to Matthew's Christmas story!). People are bursting into songs of praise or prophecy.

It has a slightly Old Testament feel to it in the way the story is told, but also links with childless couples with the promise of a child. Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 16 onwards) as well as Samson's parents (Judges 13) and Samuel's parents (1 Samuel 1) are all stories that have similarities.

Fulfilment is a theme that comes out through Mary's song, Zechariah's prophecy, the introduction (note verse 1) and through events that are promised by the angel and then come to pass within the chapter.

The Holy Spirit is another theme (verse 15, 35, 41, 67)

Salvation is a further theme, through Mary's song and Zechariah's prophecy

The characters in the story all respond well to what God is doing (apart from Zechariah, who doubts the message of the angel)

Parallel between John the Baptist and Jesus

Angels delivering messages

Question

What does the feel and themes of Luke's story communicate to us about the arrival of Jesus?

Response

Joy of the fulfilment of God's salvation plan, coming about through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember, although there are lots of characters in Luke's Christmas story, everything revolves around Jesus!

Question

Let's focus in on Mary: reread Luke 1:26-38 and also read Luke 2:19. How does Luke's story present Mary and her character?

Response

A deep thinker (1:29, 2:19). Initially greatly troubled or perplexed (1:29), then bewildered (1:34) then accepting what is happening (1:38). Mary responds to the angel and what God is asking of her. Generally, Mary is presented in positive light. We, like Mary, are "servants of the Lord" (1:38) in the sense that as disciples of Jesus we are to listen to him and respond. In the last session we explored how we hear God and how we respond to him.

Question

Immerse yourself in the story and imagine yourself as Elizabeth, Mary or Zechariah. What emotions would you have? How would you respond to what is happening?

Out

Explain

Luke's story places emphasis on the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit that inspires us in our words and praise. Because of the Holy Spirit at work in us, we should expect to speak Spirit inspired words. These might be, for example, words of knowledge about someone, where the Spirit reveals something about someone to us and we can speak it out. This shows how much God cares for that person, as well as displaying the miraculous.

Pray

Pray together that the Holy Spirit would inspire and free and focus our tongues to speak Spirit inspired words for his missional purposes.

Explain

We can ask the Holy Spirit questions, and listen. Sometimes it might seem bewildering or perplexing, or even troubling to follow what the Spirit is leading us into.

Pray

Pray together that you might listen and respond more to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Application/actions

Pray

Continue to pray into and put into practise that which is above in the 'Out' section about having Spirit inspired words and actions. Try asking the Holy Spirit questions throughout the day like "how should I respond to this situation?" or "what should I say to that person?" or "who would you like me to send a text message to today and tell them I'm praying for them?".

Christmas for all Seasons

Session 5 | Mangers, Angels and Shepherds: Luke 2:1-20

Introduction

Recap

We have been looking at the Christmas stories from Matthew and Luke, and drawing out themes from them. Last time we looked at Luke chapter 1, this time we are looking at Luke chapter 2:1-20.

In

Share

First, any testimonies of God at work through the application/actions from last time? (Remind people of what they were if necessary!)

Discuss

What is your favourite Christmas Carol and why?

Response

Play the Christmas Carol “Hark the Herald Angles Sing” (or look at the words together). What kind of feelings and thoughts does it provoke in you?

Up

Pray

That the Holy Spirit would be guiding you.

Explain

After Luke’s long first chapter, we finally get to the birth of Jesus! Luke chapter 2 probably contains the most familiar of Christmas story readings from the Bible.

Read

Luke 2:1-7.

Explain

Verse 7 has given rise to the idea of innkeepers and stables, but I believe this is due to outdated translation and a misunderstanding of the housing in Jesus’ time and part of the world.

The updated NIV text of verse 7 is good: “She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” Notice this translation does not have the word “inn” within it.

The word translated as ‘inn’ in Greek is *kataluma*, only used once elsewhere by Luke for the guest room to be used for the Passover meal, a ‘large room upstairs’ (22:11). The word for a commercial inn in Greek is *pandocheion*, used by Luke in the story of the Good Samaritan (10:34). Inns would have generally been on trade routes, such as

in the story of the Good Samaritan, rather in small towns such as Bethlelehem, where they were not necessary due to the culture of hospitality.

Housing in villages such as Bethlehem would essentially be just one room, containing a lower and upper level, with a guest room attached either on the end, or the roof, of the house. The lower level contained the animals overnight, beneficial for warmth for the family and for the animals' safety, whereas the upper level was the family living area. Mangers were found within the house: either on the lower level, or dug into the end of the upper level for larger animals.

Seemingly, because the guest room was full, Joseph and Mary were offered great hospitality and welcomed into the family living space.

Question

Reflecting on the above information... is this new to you? Are you convinced? How does this sit against the tradition of the innkeeper and inns and stables and how does that make you feel? How does this impact the way we might view the story or retell it?

Shepherds and Angels

Read

Luke 2:8-20

Explain

We have come across lots of angels in both Matthew and Luke so far. And here we have a whole heap more. The word for angel means 'messenger' in the Bible. So, angels can be supernatural beings sent by God, or humans like, for example, John the Baptist.

Question

Have you ever had an experience of an angel, by which I mean messenger (a supernatural being or a human), who has given you a message from God?

Question

Look again at the shepherds in the story. How do they respond to the message from the angels and what do they do?

Response

Initial terror (verse 9), then intrigue and quickly searching out Jesus (verses 15-16), they spread what had happened to others (verse 17) and then glorify and praise God (verse 20)

Discuss

Imagine your group on the field at night with the shepherds and immerse yourself in the story as a group and be creative together. What would it have been like to see and receive the message from the angels? How would you have felt? Would you have responded in the same way? How would you have communicated what had happened? How would you have found Jesus?

Out

Discuss

Reflecting on the shepherds, they seem to me to be 'enthusiastic evangelists'. They share the good news of Jesus with others. Would you, or others, describe you as an 'enthusiastic evangelist'? If the answer is 'yes', then share with the group about your experience of this to inspire the others. If the answer is 'no', what barriers are there to you being an 'enthusiastic evangelist'? How might you overcome them?

Pray

That the Holy Spirit would grow us and work in us to become 'enthusiastic evangelists'.

Application/actions

Sometimes we ourselves can be "angels" to other people by praying for each other and asking God what he wants to say to them. Take some time this week to ask what he might want to say to someone else in the group and message them what you hear. Remember the principles of 'strengthening, encouraging and comfort' from 1 Corinthians 14:3.

Try and do at least one thing which would make you be described as an enthusiastic evangelist. Remember to do it with gentleness and respect too (1 Peter 3:15).

Christmas for all Seasons

Session 6 | The Word Became Flesh and Mark's Gospel

Introduction

Recap

Over the previous sessions we've looked at the two Christmas stories presented in Matthew and Luke. Although the stories are very different, they have lots of overlapping themes and details. Clearly Matthew and Luke are communicating to us how significant and crucial Jesus is in God's salvation story.

This time we are going to be looking at the start of John's Gospel, and briefly at Mark too.

In

Share

First, any testimonies of God at work through the application/actions from last time? (Remind people of what they were if necessary!)

Game

Now we've looked at the Christmas stories, we're going to play a game to see how much we remember.

I'll read out a statement and you have to make a sign with your hands (think the YMCA dance, but with an M or an L) about whether you think it is from Matthew or Luke's Christmas story.

Shepherds come to visit Jesus (*Luke*)

Magi come to visit Jesus (*Matthew*)

Herod is trying to get rid of Jesus (*Matthew*)

Mary and Joseph travel because of a census (*Luke*)

God guides characters in the story using dreams (*Matthew*)

Mary visits her relative Elizabeth (*Luke*)

An angel announces that Jesus will be born. (*Matthew and Luke. In Matthew it is to Joseph in a dream. In Luke it is to Mary, and also to the shepherds*)

Up

Pray

That the Holy Spirit would be guiding you.

Read

John 1:1-18

This is a well-known passage at Christmas. It is poetic, and serves as a prologue to the Gospel, introducing many of the themes that John will revisit again and again.

Question

John's "Christmas Story" is very different to what we find in Matthew and Luke. Why do you think John has started his Gospel in this way?

Response

(i) John is thought to be the last Gospel written, perhaps he assumed his readers were familiar with the other Gospels and wanted to write something different (ii) John's Gospel is very different in style to Matthew, Mark and John, so maybe it is not a surprise that he starts it in a different way.

Question

What titles/words does John use to talk about Jesus and what do they reveal about who Jesus is and what he has come to do?

Response

Word – the communication of who God is and what he is like

Light – prevailing against darkness, someone for people to see and follow

Power to become children of God (verse 12) – Jesus is creating a family, God's family, a place of belonging and purpose

Glory (verse 14) – amazing, brilliance, God's presence

Grace and truth (verse 17) – kindness and favour (grace), and Jesus being the truth, trustworthy and real

Question

Reflecting on the above question, what do these titles/words mean personally about who Jesus is to you. Do any leap out to you or connect with you, and why?

Read

Turn to Mark Chapter 1 and notice how the Gospel starts very differently, read out Mark 1:1-11.

Question

Why do you think Mark doesn't include a Christmas story?

Response

(i) Mark is widely regarded as the first of the Gospels to be written. Perhaps Mark does not include an infancy narrative because his Gospel reflected early Christian preaching (which initially focussed on Jesus' death and resurrection) the witness of the apostles (Mark essentially contains Jesus' public ministry), and the understanding of Jesus at the time (Jesus' identity being primarily proclaimed through his resurrection). (ii) Mark chooses a succinct method to introduce Jesus' identity, mission and who will join that mission in his opening twenty verses. It is a short, snappy gospel, with no time for preliminaries such as Jesus' birth. (iii) Ancient biographies were less interested in the childhood details of the subject

Discuss

Discuss together what you have learnt about the Christmas story (stories) through this whole series and how it has impacted your understanding of Scripture and Jesus, and how it has impacted your discipleship. What have you found interesting or challenging?

Out

Discuss

Thinking of the Gospels as biographies of Jesus, what would you include about his birth and the related events? How would you start your “good news” (Gospel) story about Jesus if you were to write one?

Discuss

John 1:14 talks about Jesus becoming flesh and living among us, the well-known “incarnation” verse. How do you live as a follower of Jesus in the places where you are (e.g., home, work/voluntary place, gym etc.) and be “incarnational”? What can you do to witness to those around you in your day-to-day life in word and action? As it has often been said, your life might be the only Bible someone ever reads.

Application/actions

Action

When it gets to Christmas (however far away that is!) tell people the meaning behind Christmas is Jesus, tell them the Christmas story, and invite them to MSC and church events at Christmas.

Be intentional in whatever place you are as a follower of Jesus. Be aware that the Holy Spirit is with you and that his presence is in you. Grow in being “incarnational”.

Activity

Revisit the nativity picture you drew several weeks ago and reflect on it after going through this series. Perhaps draw another picture reflecting what has struck you and stayed with you through this series.