

# **Incarnation in the Christian Tradition**

## **Christian belief and thinking: the Bible**

The birth stories of the gospels give two stories that cover the same event (Matthew 1:18 – 2:12; Luke 2:1-20)

The Bible teaches that Jesus life and death are a gift of God that is, in some way, for us (Mark 10:45; Romans 8:32)

This involved a cosmic action which is depicted in John 1:1-18. Here John writes about Jesus using the term “word”. At the time this gospel was written that term was full of meaning and, then as now, one vital one is the idea of a word as an expression – God putting it into word.

In Philippians 2:1-11 Paul presents the idea of the ‘emptying’ that took place in the incarnation. This was not about God turning into a human being. Christians believe that, in the incarnation God was encountered in human form.

## **Incarnation: Staff engagement**

Think of your image of Christ – how do you picture Jesus? Why does that image particularly draw you?

In the first chapter of John, the coming of Jesus begins with the idea of God sending God’s ‘word’ to become flesh. Think of that notion of a word: what do words do? In what ways are words like the Jesus of the gospels?

The image of God becoming a servant of people is one of great humility. What do we think of the word ‘humility’? Does it conjure up Uriah Heap? The Christian faith took this word and gave it a new direction. New Testament scholar, Marcus Bockmuehl, tells us this word wasn’t used in a positive light before Christianity It was seen as ‘servile weakness, obsequious grovelling or on the other hand mean-spiritedness’ (The Epistle to the Philippians p.110) In Jesus, humility was shown to be something of strength and dignity, as in the washing of the disciples’ feet (John 13:1-11) and his own words on servanthood (Mark 9:33-37)

The incarnation affirms being human, being a person. There is no split between the sacred and the secular – human life is affirmed as precious and something to celebrate. Reflect on the goodness of life – possibly drawing a timeline and marking the best things that have happened.

## **Through the school**

### **Whole school**

Reflection on the incarnation could promote an opportunity for the whole school to think through the different stories they know about Jesus, widening from the Christmas and Easter stories and including miracles like the healing of the paralysed man (Mark 2:1-12) and a story like (Matthew 13:45-46)

Think of the ways in which something represents something else – a picture as a representation of an object, a school councillor as representative of their class

## **Worship**

Depict the idea of incarnation in art form either through a simple picture of Jesus in a story from the gospels or through some more dynamic image. Children could use colour, shape and imaginative images and give a short explanation of their chosen imagery.

Select a few gospel passages that could be read during the months ahead to affirm the schools ethos and experience. Passages such as the pearl (Matthew 13:45-46) affirm the action of prioritising what really matters in life. The two roads (Matthew 7:13-14) give an image that applies to so much of life choice.

The sower (Mark 4: 1-9) gives a brilliant picture of learning.

Or what about that picture of serving one another (Mark 9:33-37)

## **In class**

Children could listen to some of the stories of Jesus or watch clips from a resource such as 'The Miracle Maker' and give their thoughts on the two simple questions: what did Jesus do? what is Jesus like?

Children could search online or in school resources for artists depictions of Jesus. Its important to be clear no-one knows what Jesus looked like. However, different images may encourage different reflections.

## **Church links**

Christmas will bring various opportunities for church involvement. You may want to consider holding a special gathering, possibly in church, at the start of advent. This can involve seeing the church's advent crown and also reflecting on the expectation of advent – that God's people at the time of Jesus were expecting God to come and do something special amongst them.

## **Staff reflection**

A school staff don't just tell children lessons – the people themselves are lessons. You may want to reflect on this notion of incarnation, in which Jesus shows us what God is like. We, as staff, represent many things to children: how to respect others, how to talk to each other, how much fun life can be. Reflect on what we embody for our children and how we embody it.

If you are minded to take this to a spiritual reflection you might want to reflect on what you embody of God, or of good life, in the lives of the children amongst whom you work.

## **Resources**

The Christ we Share: Resource Pack from USPG

The Miracle Maker - DVD

Rowan Williams "He will come" – a poem staff may find useful in reflection

# Incarnation: Thinking theologically

**Fully human:** Jesus was 100% human, and the word 'Incarnation' contains that root 'carne' ('meat', as in 'carnivore'). In the early church there were some misguided teachers who taught the Son of God was never really human, but just appeared to be so. This is clearly refuted in words such as the Gospel of John's insistence that "the word became flesh". This is important because, if God is working amongst people through a person then that person needs to really be human. One early church teacher wrote "That which he has not assumed, he has not healed" (Gregory of Nazianus) making the point that, to save us, Jesus needed to be one of us.

**God was in Christ:** In Christ, God was doing something to heal the rift between people and God (2 Corinthians 5:19). However, it's worth noting that in seeing Jesus as God we gain an enhanced view of what God is like. Here we have the image of one who serves and forgives.

It means that, in Jesus, we get to see what God is like – "This is our God, the servant King" (Graham Kendrick). We also get to see what God isn't like. We see humility as an essential characteristic of God.

This means that, in Jesus, we have a starting point for our understanding of, and relationship with, God.

"The Incarnation says, 'Begin with Jesus'" (Michael Lloyd, Café Theology, p.141)

**It's a risky business:** Quite aside from the tyrant, Herod, and a cow shed, this is risky. In the incarnation God entrusts everything to a human person in history. Many debates have resulted about the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ we believe in (and a few sensational novels and films, too)

The incarnation shows God's commitment to the world.

It also challenges the powers that be. The words of the Christmas story are, in their setting, daring. Declaring "He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones" in a Roman Empire is a highly charged political act. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar isn't - and folks within the church have applied that through history to other tyrants and fashions, and also to those forces that would enslave individuals. Powerful stuff!

**It's a bit like chameleons:** God has become present in Christ, and this act leads to a diversity of responses. Already, within the New Testament, we encounter a range of responses to the person of Christ, including four gospels with their different points of view and letters that interpret him in diverse ways.

**A mystery:** people have tried to explain or codify the connection between God and humanity, in Jesus. As the church progressed there were various councils and creeds that tried to set down the meaning of this mystery. Problem is, that's just what it is – a mystery. The word often used is 'paradox'. All attempts at explanation ultimately flounder. However, the historic creeds provide various ways of wording this mystery:

"God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one being with the Father."

The theologian Karl Rahner once described creeds as being, not the final word on such matters, but more a point of departure in exploring them.