



God in Jesus: An Incarnational Faith

Theology Statement

Jesus of Nazareth was a first-century Jewish Palestinian. Some people followed him as a teacher and radical social reformer. Others thought of him as a great prophet. Still others believed him to be the Son of God, both fully divine and fully human. They considered him to be the Christ or Messiah, the awaited ‘anointed one’ who would bring salvation to the world. Episcopalians today believe Jesus to be all of these things.

The historical Jesus continues to pose a host of questions concerning his identity, his mission and his significance for our lives of faith. According to the Gospels, the biblical accounts of the life of Jesus, he himself asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” That question remains central for Christians today. While there is no simple answer, this much seems clear when we read the Gospels: those who encountered Jesus believed they were somehow, and in some way, encountering the Divine.

Historically, Anglican Christians have turned frequently to the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation to address these issues: In Jesus God became human—God became one of us. *How* the Incarnation took place has not concerned Anglicans as much as what it means for every aspect of our lives. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II, put it this way: Christianity is the most materialistic of the world’s religions. The Incarnation, in other words, means simply and profoundly that material reality—our bodies and the creation around us—matters in deeply spiritual ways. All that God created was not only good, it was and is deeply cherished and loved, so much so that God desires to be in full communion with what God creates.

This message of unqualified love and acceptance ultimately led to the death of Jesus. The inclusive embrace of God revealed in Jesus cannot readily or easily be tolerated in a world of carefully crafted distinctions, judgments and hierarchies of value. And yet, Christians believe, God would not let the violent act of Jesus’ death stand. As the Gospel writers describe it, God raised Jesus from the dead and poured out the Holy Spirit on Jesus’ disciples to carry out this ministry of inclusive love.

In the Episcopal Church today you will find a wide range of beliefs and opinions about Jesus. This is nothing new. The Bible contains not just one but four accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, each with its own set of images, titles, and claims for Jesus. Likewise, the centuries of theological traditions that followed offer a spectrum of both

complementary and conflicting views about Jesus' identity and his relationship to God. Each of these approaches holds insights for our life of faith today and each is valuable in answering the question Jesus himself posed: Who do you say that I am?

The truth about Jesus cannot be reduced to any one view but continues to be revealed to us through our ongoing conversations with Scripture and with one another. Episcopalians bring this diversity of views to the Eucharistic table, where we gather week by week to hear and consider as one the story of God's own self-giving love, revealed in Jesus. That story continues to shape us, a community of Jesus' followers, to be the Body of Christ in the world today. Enacting that story in our own lives gives us the courage and the confidence to give ourselves away to a world in desperate need of the love, reconciliation, justice and peace Jesus proclaimed and lived.

Take-Home Material for Session Three

The work of the Gospel calls us to go out into the world, to take the learning, prayer, and spirit of the community to the people of God who are not gathered in our community. This week, as you reflect on your experience, here are some resources to focus your meditation, prayer, and study. You may have time to do all of these things during your week. You may only have time for some of the suggestions. Whatever you do, please keep the members of your small group in your thoughts as you carry out your work.

From *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* by Marcus Borg; Harper, San Francisco, 1995

Belief did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings; in both Greek and Latin its roots mean “to give one’s heart to.” The “heart” is the self at its deepest level. Believing, therefore, does not consist of giving one’s mental assent to something, but involves a much deeper level of one’s self. Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. Rather, it means to give one’s heart, one’s self at its deepest level, to the post-Easter Jesus who is the living Lord, the side of God turned toward us, the face of God, the Lord who is also the Spirit. Believing in Jesus. In the sense of giving one’s heart to Jesus in the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ.

Prayer for the Week (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 252)

For the Incarnation

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Scripture for the Week

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. **Matthew 16:13-17** (New Revised Standard Version)

Journaling

Journaling is a good way for adults to pay attention to their faith lives. You are encouraged to journal so that you can consider the questions that develop during our time together. Like with other prayer disciplines, it often helps to pick a time to write in your journal each day, setting it aside in some way. The question to think about as you write this week appears below.

Reflection for the Week

The Rev. Winnie Varghese, one of the participants in the video for this session, reminds us that when we put our own stories alongside the stories about Jesus in the Bible we can encounter Jesus on our path. We are called to seek Christ in others and to see Christ in our own lives. What are the ways that you encounter Jesus in your life? What are some ways that you see Jesus in yourself and in others?