

Session 1

WHAT DOES GOD LOOK LIKE?

The way we see God is crucial in shaping our beliefs, our actions, and how we live out our faith in the world. So we begin our series of studies, with a session that explores different images of God, looking particularly at what we learn of God from the life of Jesus.

Key Messages

- a) How we picture God will shape and guide our relating to the world
- b) Different images of God reflect the different ways in which the church has engaged with society over the centuries
- c) Jesus points us towards a life of faith that is very clearly politically engaged

Preparation

You will need

- Flipchart and pens
- Bibles or copies of Mark 1:16 – 3:6
- Pictures of God - You might find copies of pictures in books or by searching on the Internet (try searching google images or the websites of art galleries such as www.nationalgallery.org.uk),
- Pictures of Jesus - Again you will find pictures in books and on the internet. 'The Christ we Share' is a pack available from www.mph.org.uk and contains a large range of pictures.
- Copies of the Session 1 handout: biographies of people and movements
- Copies of the Session 1 handout: Jesus in Scripture (optional)
- Copies of hymn books

WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

As this is the first session, you may need to make sure, both that everyone knows each other, and that everyone understands something of the overall purpose and content of the six sessions as explained in the Introduction

Our God of many faces and names, we praise you for the different ways in which you come to us. Your presence is never far from us. We find you in scripture, glimpse you in the world around us, and encounter you through the community of your people. Most of all, we see you in Jesus, who reveals the mysterious depths of your love that embraces all people everywhere. May we never be content with narrow definitions and limited understandings, but seek always open hearts and minds that allow you to come to us in new and surprising ways. Amen.

INTRODUCTION (10 mins)

ACTIVITY

What different words and images does the Bible use to paint a picture of God? As a group, make a list on a flipchart of as many as you can think of.

Obvious examples might include: King, Lord, Shepherd, Father, Mother, Creator, Liberator, Provider, Light, Ruler, Judge.

Less obvious examples might include: Dark cloud (Exodus 20), Faithful lover (Hosea 2-3), Vineyard owner (Mark 12), Party host (Luke 14).

Question: Which images do you find most helpful? Which are least helpful? Why?

We have to remember, of course, that God is always beyond human concepts and descriptions. God defies our definitions. Yet despite the inevitable limits of our visual and

verbal language, it is all we have to work with! So it is not surprising that the Bible seeks to use many different images to try to help us grasp just a little of who God is and what God is like, even though they will always remain inadequate.

But it is worth reflecting on what kind of images of God tend to dominate, whether in the Bible or in our prayers or in our hymns and songs. What pictures of God are most often used? Do they provide us with a holistic vision of God? Does it matter how we picture God?

PICTURES OF GOD (20 mins)

Art has been treated with much suspicion in the Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith traditions. There has been the fear of idolatry as well as a general suspicion of any attempt to picture God. Within the history of the Church, this has led to the growth of movements that actively resisted the use of art in places of worship, and destroying whatever they could find. Yet at the same time the Church has done much to encourage the arts, seeing pictures as a way of teaching the faith as well as enhancing the beauty of its buildings. Perhaps we need to reckon with the fact that art is dangerous! The way we see shapes our way of thinking. The way we picture God shapes what we believe about God.

ACTIVITY

Show a small selection of pictures of God.

Ask the group to reflect on what they see. What do they like or dislike about the pictures? How might they go about depicting God? Most importantly, what do the pictures tell us about the artist's understanding of God?

Much art in the western tradition pictures God as an authority figure. God is often very evidently male! He might well be sitting on a throne. He is over and above everything, controlling and dominating, exercising power, and perhaps also somewhat remote from the world. It would be surprising if this understanding of God does not appear in at least some of the pictures that the group looks at.

ACTIVITY

Show a selection of pictures of Jesus.

Again, ask the group to reflect on what they see. What do they like or dislike about the pictures? Do any of them tell us something rather different about the God we see in Christ?

Jesus can be pictured in many different ways. Sometimes he is seen by artists as the great and glorious king, reigning in glory, flanked by angels and archangels. But we are also given very different insights. We see pictures of Jesus crucified, suffering pain and anguish. We see him placed within different cultural contexts, perhaps looking Anglo-Saxon, or Indian, or Palestinian. Above all, we are helped to see Jesus as human, one with us, and deeply involved with this world.

The way we see God is fundamental to the ways we then choose to live out our faith. If we see God as no more than an authority figure, distant and unengaged with the affairs of the world, then it is surely likely that our churches will be places of deep reverence and worship, but maybe far less inclined to take seriously the business of social and political engagement. On the other hand, if we allow some of the pictures of Jesus, immersed in the injustices and sufferings of the world and telling us the story of the incarnation, to help shape our understanding of God, then perhaps that will help us develop an understanding of our faith that takes seriously our need to be radically involved with the way our world and our society is ordered and governed.

GOD, THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD (15 mins)

ACTIVITY

Read the sheet of brief biographies. What picture of God do you think these various Christian figures and movements might have had? Discuss the

different views each had of the relationship between faith and politics. Where do your sympathies lie?

Politics is often said to be about 'the art of the possible'. It is not just about theory but about making a difference to the way things are, recognising that this will involve compromise. But Christians have always wrestled with questions about how far to get involved with politics and the state, what the limits to compromise should be, and how the church should act in the world. The biographies offer very different answers to these questions.

SEEING JESUS IN SCRIPTURE (25 mins)

The bible can be read in many different ways. The passages we have read can be interpreted in different ways. But perhaps too often we fail to see the political implications behind Jesus' actions, and the ways in which he continually challenged the status quo.

ACTIVITY

Divide the group into pairs. Then give each of the pairs some verses of Mark 1:16 - 3:6 as follows:

- ***Chapter 1: 16-20; 21-28; 29-39; and 40-45***
- ***Chapter 2: 1-12; 13-22; and 23-28***
- ***Chapter 3: 1-6***

(It doesn't matter if you don't cover every passage – the point is to recognise the whole of Jesus's ministry and teaching had political implications)

Ask the group to try to identify the political dimensions and implications of what is going on in the passage they have read.

The second handout with this session suggests how the political implications of these different passages might be understood. You could use this handout as supplementary leader's notes to guide the feedback on each section, or you could copy it for all group members to take away after the discussion.

Do you see Jesus as a political figure? Do you think we should we see Jesus in this way?

FOR DISCUSSION (10 mins)

It is sometimes said that we learn our theology through the hymns and songs that we sing. Look through whatever music books you have available.

What kind of pictures of God do you find? Are there hymns and songs that speak of a politically engaged faith?

What will you take away from this session?

PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)

Our God, who loved the world so much you came to us in Jesus, teach us to love this world as well. Help us to search for your wisdom within the complexity of international relations, seek your presence amidst the challenges faced by our own society, and see your image in the people we live alongside. So may your kingdom come and your will be done, on this earth as in heaven. Amen.

HOMEWORK

As you read the bible this week, or hear it read in the services you attend, try to identify the social and political dimensions present in each passage.