

Worship with the Gospels - JOHN

Background: These resources were first produced by Clare Amos for 'Partners in Learning' an ecumenical resource of learning resources for all ages based on the lectionary readings and themes. They have been adapted here as a resource to encourage congregations to bring 'the particular interests, topics and concerns of each gospel writer' into our worship. We would be delighted if you want to use and adapt the material for use in worship or in Christian education. Please can you ensure that Clare and The Bible in the Life of the Church project are credited

Series Introduction

We have four gospels, each of which sheds different light on our portrait of Jesus. In these resources for worship we seek to experience the feel of each of the gospels, enjoying them as we use them to lead us closer to God in worship. The philosophy that undergirds these resources is that there should not be a rigid separation in church life between 'worship' and 'learning' and that ideally worship can be a means and tool for learning about the Christian faith.

The resources explore each of the gospels within the context of worship. It is one of the glories of the Christian faith that the story of Jesus is told in four different gospels - the words of each emphasizing different features of the portrait of Jesus - whose portrait they are all seeking to paint. Way back in the early history of the Christian church Irenaeus, one of the greatest theologians of the second century AD, commented that it was appropriate for the church to have four (*rather than one*) gospels because there are 'four winds' and 'four corners of the earth'. And though today we might put things slightly differently - none the less Irenaeus' words, though quaint, have a ring of truth. The person of Jesus Christ is so multi-faceted and so compelling that no one human author could hope to give us a total picture. We need the different insights of the four gospel writers to fill in the brush strokes and varied hues and colours that would be too great a task for one writer alone.

Taking the gospels into our worship

So each of these four resource outlines takes one of the gospels and looks at the particular interests, topics and concerns of that gospel writer. But we do so in what we believe is a particularly unusual and creative way. We use the topics and interests of that gospel writer to provide the actual structure for worship. As the worship develops we travel with that gospel writer through his presentation of the life of Jesus. In doing this we believe we are being true to the purpose of the gospel writers. They were not interested in writing a narrowly 'historical' life of Jesus. Instead they wanted their readers to soak themselves in the story of Jesus in such a way that they too became part of that story, positioning themselves alongside Jesus' first disciples, and equally so that the life of Jesus did not remain as something in the past, but became present and even future in the living experience and worship of the church.

There is a view held by some biblical scholars that the gospels themselves came to birth through the retelling of the story of Jesus in the weekly worship of the early church. Whether or not this is precisely true (*and it may of course be true for some but not for others*) the structure of the gospels does resonate with the typical pattern of Christian worship: beginning with a call of challenge, they then present the good news of what God has done in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and finally move towards commissioning the disciples to go out and continue the ministry of Jesus in their own lives.



What each writer tells us about the Eucharist

At the heart of our worship, and a model established by Jesus himself, is the service of Communion or the Eucharist. So perhaps it is not surprising that as we explore the gospels through worship we find ourselves led each week towards a celebration of Communion, and have the chance to discover the distinctive insights that the individual gospel writers have to share about this central act of Christian worship.

- **In Mark** we discover that Communion leads us back to remember more deeply the death of Christ and live the marks of the Cross in our own lives.
- **In Luke** we are encouraged to experience Communion as a sign of the hospitality and fellowship that friends of the risen Jesus are called to show to each other.
- **In Matthew** we are helped to understand that Communion also has a forward looking emphasis - it is a foretaste of the heavenly feast with which God will one day feed all people.
- **In John** we see the church's celebration of Communion acts as a link between time and eternity.

The Communion focus of each week is not essential to the resources. Churches that would not wish to celebrate Communion each week can draw from the prayers and readings offered to develop an interesting theme that can teach a great deal about the special concerns of each of the gospel writers. While these resources are primarily about the four gospels churches that wish to explore together more deeply the meaning of Communion could also use them.

Each 'resource file' provides an overview of the way the gospel writer was trying to get his message across; ideas and suggestions for how these ideas might be incorporated into a Communion service; and suggestions for hymns, songs, prayers etc that might be used. As the original writing was for the British churches there may be better material for your context. These outlines are offered with the invitation to adapt them to your situation so that, wherever we are, we might hear Scripture speaking into our context more clearly.

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John - Breakfast on the Beach

Overview of John's Gospel

There is a wonderful comment on the gospel of John made by Tom Wright in his little book 'Following Jesus' (SPCK) 'John takes us up [a]... mountain, and says quietly: "Look - from here, on a clear day, you can see for ever".'

The gospel of John is lit throughout with the radiance of eternity. John reminds us, in ways that are both subtle and direct, that the human Jesus whom we meet in the pages of this book, is also the eternally creative Word of God, to whom cosmos and time itself owe their existence. It is desperately, literally crucially, important to John, that Jesus was a real human being who lived at a particular point of time, in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. His great statement 'The Word became flesh... and we have seen his glory'... is an assertion that encountering the particular and the physical Jesus is a way, the way above all others, for human beings to draw near to God.

It follows from this that for John basic human needs can 'symbolise' the divine. So in John's gospel we hear of light and darkness, of living water and bread, of life itself. All these are somehow linked to and summed up in Jesus Christ in the great 'I Am' sayings where he both proclaims his divinity and offers himself to meet the wants and desires of human beings. In Jesus Christ humanity and divinity, time and eternity, meet as they have never quite done before or since. It is no accident that when the church of the fourth and fifth century strove to articulate its doctrine of the Trinity it was the gospel of John that it used as its main biblical resource.

John's gospel was probably one of the last parts of the New Testament to be written down. (This is particularly true of John 21 that may be a marginally later addition to an already published John 1-20.) By the time the gospel appeared in its final form most of Jesus' original disciples, the eyewitnesses of his ministry, had died. It may well be that the 'beloved disciple' who was associated in some way with the telling of the story in this gospel actually died between the writing of John 20 and John 21 (See eg 21.22-23).

So the church needed to find ways of 'linking' itself to the human Jesus who had ministered sixty or so years ago that did not depend on the availability of human eye-witnesses to his ministry. As a result this gospel writer suggests that the normal elements used by these Christians of the second and third generation in their everyday life and their worship can join us to the life and ministry of Jesus himself. For example, take 'water'. We hear in this gospel of water which meets the human needs of a thirsty Jesus and others during his Palestinian ministry, life-giving water that springs from Jesus' crucified side, water linked to the coming of the Spirit, water which is the vehicle of baptism, which would have been experienced by those members of the Christian community for whom this gospel was written. (*This image of living water is picked up in our worship this week.*)

What is intriguing about John's gospel is that two key incidents are missing from the story of Jesus as this writer tells it. Nowhere does he mention that Jesus was baptised by John, and nowhere does he mention that Jesus instituted Holy Communion during the Last Supper. (*Look very carefully at John 1.29-34 and 13.1-5*). These omissions are almost certainly deliberate - what is the reason for them? In Christian tradition these two stories were the 'foundation stones' for the two central sacraments of church life, Baptism and Holy Communion. But by the time that John's gospel was written it seems that some Christians were treating these



sacraments almost as though they were 'magic pep pills', a view that John wanted to contest. He seeks instead to show us how these sacraments are related not simply to one particular moment in the life of Christ, but to his whole self-giving life and ministry, summed up in his sacrificial death. So, for example, instead of linking Holy Communion to some words spoken at the Last Supper, John seeks to show how it is linked to the way Jesus 'fed' people throughout his ministry, such as in the story told in John 6. Perhaps he is trying to show us how the whole of life can be sacramental, that everything can be transformed by love. It is no accident that 'love' is an word that appears prominently in this gospel: its source is the mutual love between Jesus and the Father, which must be mirrored and shared within the church.

To return to eternity. John's gospel has been cherished by the church throughout history precisely because it is a gospel written for those who were not the immediate eye-witnesses of the life of Jesus, nor their contemporaries. From his 'high mountain' John can see things in a perspective that makes sense to our generation for whom Jesus has been the lynch-pin of history.

Taking John into our worship – some suggestions

Our core gospel reading is John 21, the story of the breakfast on the beach, a resurrection story whose symbolism conveys how Jesus has now inaugurated a new creation; the world originally willed into being by the Word of God (John 1) has now through the resurrection of that same Word been born anew. Communion as understood through John's eyes is an expression of this process of new creation.

There isn't as much 'story' in this worship as there has been in some of the other gospels. That perhaps reflects the ethos of John. But we suggest that you might include a stately dance: for at the heart of his gospel is the dance of love of the Trinity, a dance into whose harmonies we are being irresistibly drawn. The use of slides could also enhance people's understanding of this gospel in which 'light' is such a key motif. And you might wish to display today the exquisite Icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev.

At the beginning

Have a large shallow container filled with water where people will be able to see it. The church is darkened as much as possible. Encourage a sense of peace and quiet.

Opening hymn

Before the World began (Heaven Shall Not Wait)

Bible Reading

Voice 1: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

And God said Let there be light, and there was light.

Play a spotlight on the container of the water. A slide of sunrise can also be shown if wished.

And God saw the light, that it was good.

And God said, let us make humankind in our own image, in the image of God let us make them.

And God made humankind in God's image, after God's likeness God made them, both male and female, and God blessed them.



Play the light on members of the congregation for a few moments and/or switch lights on.

Voice 2: (*contrasting voice*) But human beings turned away from God. The image became blurred, the shadow grew dark, creation was spoiled.

Lights dim, and cease to illuminate people. The sound of a bell tolling softly begins, and is punctuated by several of the following statements, read by voices scattered around the church.

- The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
- There was a man from God, whose name was John. He was not the light...
- The true light, which enlightens all people, was coming into the world...
- Nicodemus came to him by night...
- The darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.
- Whoever says, I am in the light, while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.

The tolling bell speeds up and increases volume as the last sentences are read:

- This is the judgement that the light has come into the world and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light so that their deeds may not be exposed.

Pause for recollection of sins

Prayer of confession

Leader: You were sent to preach the good news of light in the darkness of the world:

People: **Jesus, Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.**

Leader: You were sent to plant in our hearts the seed of eternal life:

People: **Jesus, Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us**

Leader: You were sent to reconcile us to yourself by the shedding of your blood:

People: **Jesus, Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.**

Word of assurance

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Those who do what is right come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (*Lights back on*)

In Jesus Christ God has given the world the gift of a new creation.

Response

(The following sequence could be read by three voices. It is intended to convey the way that Christ links our today with the events of creation.)

1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
2. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God.
3. In the present and the future God continues to speak to us.
4. In the beginning the Spirit of God was brooding over the face of the waters.
5. John the Baptist said, 'I have come baptizing with water. But I have seen one on whom the Spirit descends and remains. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit.
6. Throughout all the ages the Spirit will remain.
7. In the beginning God said, 'Let there be light.'



8. Jesus said, 'I am the Light of the World' .
9. The true light that enlightens all people was coming into the world, and still comes to us today.
10. In the beginning human beings were made in the image and likeness of God.
11. We have seen his glory, the glory of the Son of Man, the glory as of the only Son from the Father.
12. Unless you love your brother or your sister whom you have seen, how can you love God?

Activity

Have an activity that involves making something physical. There might be several activities offered, linked with various symbols in John eg

- Modelling in clay
- Making a candle or a lamp
- Making something that could be fixed to a window
- Making bread
- Using water
- Making hand prints using paint
- Creating a shape and painting it

Intercessions (Between each prayer you could show an appropriate slide or tell a very brief story)

Leader: We pray to Jesus who is present with us to eternity, saying

People: Jesus, Lord of life, in your mercy hear us.

Picture, slide or story

Silence

Leader: Jesus said: I Am the Light of the world.

Jesus, light of the world,
bring the light and peace of your gospel to the nations...

**People: Jesus, Lord of life,
in your mercy hear us.**

Picture, slide or story

Silence

Leader: Jesus said: I Am the bread of life.

Jesus, bread of life,
give food to the hungry...
and nourish all with your word

**People: Jesus, Lord of life,
in your mercy hear us**

Picture, slide or story

Silence



Leader: Jesus said: I Am the way, the truth and the life.

Jesus, our way, our truth, our life,
be with us and all who follow you in the way...
deepen our appreciation of your truth,
and fill us with your life.

**People: Jesus, Lord of life,
in your mercy hear us**

Picture, slide or story

Silence

Leader: Jesus said; I Am the Good Shepherd.

Jesus, good shepherd who gave your life for the sheep,
recover the straggler, bind up the injured,
strengthen the sick
and lead the healthy and strong to play.

**People: Jesus, Lord of life,
in your mercy hear us.**

Picture, slide or story

Silence

Leader: Jesus said: I Am the resurrection and the life.

Jesus, the resurrection and the life,
we give you thanks
for all who have lived and believed in you...
raise us with them to eternal life

**People: Jesus, Lord of Life,
In your mercy, hear us,
accept our prayers,
and be with us always.**

Amen.

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Dance – *Devise a simple circle dance that depicts the interweaving of love. A suitable accompaniment would be 'Ubi caritas' (Taize) or 'Love changes everything' (Andrew Lloyd Webber). While the dance is in progress the following words can be read out over the music, by a series of voices:*

- Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end. *(John 13.2)*
- As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love. *(John 15.9)*
- This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's own life for one's friends. *(John 15.12-13)*
- Father I desire that these my friends also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, I have made your name known to these my disciples, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have



loved me may be in them, and I in them. (*John 17.24-26*)

- Jesus having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end. (*John 13.2*)

(Dance and music should stop at this point)

- When Jesus had received the wine, he said 'It is ended'. Then he bowed his head and gave up the spirit.

Pause - and silence.

Prayer

Lord God, whose Son is the true vine and the source of life,
ever giving himself that the world might live,
may we so receive within ourselves
the power of his death and passion,
that, in the cup of his life,
we may share his glory and be made perfect in his love;
for he is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
now and for ever. **Amen.**

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Share the peace.

Hymn - Lord of the Dance (*Sung gently, beginning softly and getting louder as it continues*)

Bible reading - John 21.1-14

Use several voices as appropriate, perhaps standing near the bowl of water, to emphasise the connection with the original creation. The reading could also begin with lights dimmed, to be switched on as verse 4 is reached.

Depending on whether this is a Communion service there would be a prayer of consecration at this point. Otherwise there could be a simple sharing of bread.

Communion prayer written for this theme.

Minister: Let us call to mind, with wonder
the universe in which we find our home,
the vast expanse of space,
with the galaxies, suns, stars, and planets in their courses,
and let us rejoice in the miracle of life, known to us on earth.

Pause

All: We wonder and give thanks

(Silence)

Minister: Let us greet the God
who is within us and beyond us :
Creator Spirit, brooding over the formless deeps,
wings outstretched in the darkness,



calling forth all that is and shall be,
be present with us to renew and recreate.

Pause

All: We wonder and give thanks

(Silence)

Minister: Let us celebrate the way of the Spirit
revealed to us by Jesus, God's eternal Son:
God's everlasting and persuasive love,
the love that has striven through countless ages with the human race,
the love in Jesus seen by us, made known to us at last.

Pause

All: We wonder and give thanks

(Silence)

Minister: So now let us take the fruits of the earth,
the bread which nourishes us,
the wine which speaks to us of joy and delight,
and follow the example of Jesus himself.
May we may know the presence
of the Creator Spirit,
transfiguring our flesh and blood
to a glory that may be known to us now only in part,
but which is more real than the fabric of our daily selves.

Now Jesus had always loved his own who were in the world,
and he loved them to the end.
And so on the night before he was betrayed,
he took bread, gave thanks, broke it
and gave it to his disciples and said,
Take eat, this is my Body
which is given for you;
do this to remember me.

In the same way after supper
He took a cup of wine, gave thanks,
And gave it to them and said,
Drink of this, all of you
this is my Blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you and for many
for the forgiveness of sins :
do this, as often as you drink it,

to remember me.
(Alan Amos)

The communion follows.

After Communion



Read John 21.15-19.

Minister: Jesus said: Do you love me?

People: **Lord Jesus in your love you invite us to be your friends**

Minister: Jesus said: Do you love me?

People: **Lord Jesus in your joy you choose us to go out and bear fruit**

Minister: Jesus said: Do you love me?

People: **Lord Jesus, in your power you send us to be your faithful witnesses.**

You might read as a reflection at the end of the service:

An extract from 'The Voyage of the Dawn Treader' by CS Lewis. Beginning: 'The children got out of the boat and waded through the lilies... the great Bridge Builder.' (p.186 of the Collins, Lions edition)

Or the following reflection by Tom Wright:

The Word became flesh

The word became flesh, said St John, and the Church has turned the flesh back into words: words of good advice, words of comfort, words of wisdom and encouragement, yes, but what changes the world is flesh, words with skin on them, words that hug you and cry with you and play with you and love you and rebuke you and build houses with you and teach your children in school.

...So Peter there is work for you to do. You are going to leave the fish business, which you know so much about; you're going to leave it for good, and you're going into the sheep business instead, which at the moment you know precious little about. I want you to feed my lambs. I want you to look after my sheep. I want you to be you, because I love you and have redeemed you; and I want you to work for me, because out there there are other people that I love, and I want you to be my word-become-flesh, my love sitting with them, praying with them, crying with them, celebrating with them. And how can you do it?... Peter, don't just tell them in words. Turn the words into flesh once more. Tell them by the marks of the nails in your hands. Tell them by your silent sharing of their grief, by your powerful and risky advocacy of them when they have nobody else to speak up for them. Tell them by giving up your life for them, so that when they find you they will find me. And Peter, remember: follow me.'

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