

Week One: God announces a new beginning

- 1. The implication of this passage is that Jesus has a special relationship with God, indeed, he is God's Son. However, if Jesus has always been God's Son, why does the voice proclaim that he has become God's son 'today'? Discuss the idea that only 'the present moment' exists (the past is only a memory, the future is only imagination).**

Different authors of the New Testament link the declaration of Jesus as 'Son of God' to different moments in his life – and the life of the world. Paul suggests that it has a close connection with Jesus' resurrection (Romans 1.4), Mark makes a connection to Jesus' baptism, Luke and Matthew also associate it with Jesus' conception and birth (Luke 1.32) while John's Gospel offers a vision of the eternal Son of God, whose sonship was established before even the creation of the world. It is an important reminder that our Christian Bible allows for diversity as the writers sought to illuminate and share the mystery that had grasped and thrilled them. It is something too big for normal human-limited logic. The Gospel writer here seems to be quoting from the Old Testament Psalm Two which many scholars suggests was originally written for the coronation ritual of the kings of Jerusalem. Though the individual being crowned had, as a member of the royal house, always been in a 'special relationship' to God, his coronation marked the moment when he was committed in a new and special way to working for God's purposes. Perhaps that is the significance of the 'today' in the account of Jesus' baptism. 'Today' was the moment when Jesus was going to set out on a journey, to fulfil God's mission. The waters of baptism that he was now being dipped under symbolised his going down to the darkness of death – the ultimate cost of fulfilling his role as the obedient Son.

- 2. The gospel offers us a fresh start. Is beginning again, or being born again, a one-off experience, or do you think it is possible to 'begin again' every day or, even, every moment?**

'New every morning is the love' is a favourite Christian hymn. Yet we live our lives in the assurance of God's ongoing grace and love. Both statements are true, and rightly we do not spend our time worrying about any seeming contradiction. And if this is true for God's relationship with us, it is also true for our relationship with God. Indeed it is true of any worthwhile relationship. Those who are married, who have deep close friendships or are a member of a religious community know the possibility of new insights, new beginnings, unfolding in the midst of, and even out of, the ongoing relationship. But to begin again need not – indeed should not – deny the validity of the past experience. As a teenager I remember worrying myself about whether I had a sufficiently real relationship with God and wanting to begin again... and again... and again. Ultimately I came to realise that the most important

thing was to trust God, not deny the value of my previous experience, and yet also be excited by the possibility of discovering greater richness than I had first imagined.

3. How does new life emerge? What signs of new life have you seen emerging in your own lives, in your church and in your community? How can this be encouraged?

It might be a good idea to look at some of the resources on the Church of England/Methodist Church *Fresh Expressions* website. Go to <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk> Perhaps the overall message of the site is that new life can spring up in unexpected places – and be nurtured in a considerable variety of ways. Obviously the possible answers to this question vary considerably in different contexts and in many cases will be personal to you. But it might be interesting to ask the group whether the ‘new’ *Common Worship* liturgies, with their range of different and sometimes unexpected symbols and images, have helped them to discover new insights about themselves as a church.

4. There will be people who are beginning new lives in your community having recently arrived, perhaps from other cultures. What could your church do to make these people feel more welcome?

First impressions really do count. And it is worth remembering that in the New Testament – and particularly in the writings of Luke, the author of the Gospel that is being studied in this Lent course, offering (and receiving) appropriate hospitality is considered not simply as a courteous form of behaviour – but is actually a means of mission. It helped to break down the stiff barriers that existed in the New Testament world between Jews and Gentiles. Having worked on the recent Lambeth Conference closely with colleagues from the Anglican Communion Office I am aware how important to the overall process the ‘Hospitality Initiative’ was – whereby bishops from around the world stayed in dioceses in England, Scotland and Wales. It really helped to give a different tone to the 2008 Conference. Many of you will have played significant roles in helping with that initiative. Of course, sadly – but realistically – it is often easier to offer hospitality to people who are going to be with us for a short time. The challenge of helping those joining us for a longer period or permanently is how do we help them to feel that they are not guests but ‘at home.’