

GOOD NEWS

What are we doing here?

IDEAS

1. Books that help answer big questions

I have a number of low-cost John Blanchard books ("Ultimate Questions", Evangelical Press) which I advertise at the end of the talk if people want to explore certain issues (such as Why believe the Bible? Evolution? Suffering? Death? Science/Christianity? etc) further.

ILLUSTRATIONS

(examples of personal illustrations used by leaders of the Christianity Explored course)

1. The wonder of creation

My husband Ally and I love to walk in the mountains. We met three and a half years ago at work and we quickly found that we shared this love of the mountains. Ally was particularly excited to discover that I shared the same passion for the outdoors as he does. In fact he was so excited that his first chat up line to me was: "We've got so much in common". You may laugh, but as Ally would say – it worked! We were married two years ago and you may not be surprised to hear that we spent our honeymoon in the mountains – the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Actually for our honeymoon we trekked through the Atlas Mountains. Now let me just say I know lots of brides who get taken to the Seychelles or Mauritius or the Caribbean for their honeymoon, and stay in luxurious five-star hotels. I married Ally – we trekked the mountains and stayed in a tent.

But seriously, I do find it awesome to be in the mountains, just to sit in the silence and stare at the majesty of those amazing sights. Especially in the evening, I can sit for ages and watch the mountains silhouetted against the night sky as the sun goes down behind them. I find it overwhelming to be surrounded by that sense of nature and it makes me just want to know: "Where does it come from?"

I felt the same sense of wonder last year at the birth of our baby son, Joshua – those little fingers, eyelashes, toenails – everything in its place – where does it come from?

2. Church can seem boring

To be honest, church can seem a bit boring really. I went to church once or twice when I was younger – it was dull. (I'm getting a stern look from my Pastor here – sorry, but it was dull!) Before I became a Christian, if someone invited me to church, I used to think they didn't really like me – seriously. I went out with a guy once who was a trainspotter. I hope I'm not going to offend anyone here – but I don't personally find trainspotting is my idea of fun. So when this guy asked me if I wanted to go spotting with him, I couldn't think of anything I'd less rather do – other than maybe go to church. He could have asked me to do that – I suppose at least I'd have known I wasn't going to die of pneumonia on a freezing train platform! So if boring and dull has been your experience of church so far, well, in some ways I'm not surprised – but I am sorry, I really am, because I don't want you to be left with the impression that Christianity as a whole is boring.

3. Introducing the good news about Jesus Christ

I have a friend called Sarah who called me up a couple of months ago. She had her cousin visiting from America. Now Sarah doesn't yet go to church, but her American cousin does and she's quite a full-on evangelical Christian – you may have met one of these. So they're having lunch and Sarah's cousin says to her: "Sarah, do you know the good news about the gospel of Jesus Christ?" Just like that – drops it right into the middle of the quiche over lunch. So Sarah phones me – apparently I'm her "normal" Christian friend – and she said this: "Joanna, it's not so much that I didn't have an answer that bothers me – it's that I actually didn't understand the question. What good news about Jesus Christ?" And I wonder if that's maybe what you're thinking. I don't know how many of you have children but imagine this: you're at home one day, and you've prepared a lovely tea for your family to be finished off with apple pie and custard. Then over tea your little angel asks you: "Mummy (or daddy), today we learned about the good news about Jesus Christ. Can you help me understand it? Well that's going to curdle the custard, isn't it!

IDENTITY

Who is Jesus?

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Jesus calming the storm

For participants who already have a Bible background the following can be helpful: "Jesus speaks and the creation itself responds to his voice. The disciples must have felt that this was just like Genesis chapter 1, and so they're terrified as they realise who is in the boat with them."

2. The healing of Jairus' daughter

Isn't this a lovely intimate scene? Jesus has put the mockers outside. And Mum and Dad watch as he takes their daughter's hand: "Talitha koum" – Mark must have wanted us to hear the original words.

And her eyes open. She gets up! And Jesus says: "Get her a Pizza". No wonder they were "completely astonished". Wouldn't you be?

3. The new creation

At some point, either in the talk if there's time or in the discussion afterwards, I usually say: "Just think what the world would be like if these things we've seen Jesus doing were universalised. If all around the world there were no tsunamis, no earthquakes, no sickness, no death, we all listened to God's word, and sin was out of the way. Then extend the duration from about three years (the length of Jesus' ministry) to all of eternity. What sort of environment would that be? The new creation."

SIN

Why did Jesus come?

IDEAS

1. The concept of sin

I find people ready and willing to admit they are not always good, so they are sometimes bad, but they will not admit that they are sinners. I am finding increasingly that this needs more careful explaining not only to non-Christians but sometimes to Christians!

When I teach *Christianity Explored*, I tend to spend a long time explaining sin. Admittedly, I do this repeatedly over subsequent weeks. There is good material for this in Jonathan Aitken's biography (he leans heavily on C S Lewis).

2. The concept of hell

Some people joke that they'd rather be in hell than heaven because all their friends will be there. They're wrong – there will be no friendship in hell. But hell is much more than not being with our friends. What is so painful about hell is the lack of loving relationship and free grace of God. The inability to make peace with God is so much more serious than not being with our friends. When we preach this to unbelievers who view their friends higher than God, we may be tempted to illustrate it in terms of friendship, but I think we need to be really clear on the full impact of hell in terms of their relationship with God first. The impact on their relationship with God is hopefully why they are at *Christianity Explored*.

3. Questions about suffering

When people are asked in Session 1: "If you could ask God one question...", invariably there are questions about suffering. More often than not I have answered this question in Session 3 – after people have engaged with the issue that we all have a sin problem, which leads on to causes of suffering in the world.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Why it's better to know about something rotten now than when it's too late to do anything about it.

When Ally and I met, nearly 5 years ago now, I was a very fit, active, thirty-something with loads of energy, plenty of friends, who always had something to be doing or somewhere to be going. I was young, free and single – living in London and loving it! The last thing on my mind was loads of responsibility and cosy nights in with a cup of Horlicks....

None of you knew me then of course and you might well be wondering what happened! Well, Ally and I went out for a while and we were both pretty besotted. But you might be surprised to know that I was the more assertive of us – so what that really means is that whatever I wanted to do, we basically did! Its not that Ally was a pushover. It's just that he is such a giving, easy-going person that he kept up with me running around, meeting friends, playing sport – basically being young, free and single together.

But shortly after we got married I had to face up to some pretty unpleasant truths about myself. I don't know if any others who are married recognise that marriage is a great place to realise how completely selfish we can be? What I realised was that actually I was just expecting Ally to fit in with my life, and to do what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it. But he's a different person. Ally prefers to have quiet time in his life. He prefers to move at a dif-

ferent pace, not planning everything and filling every moment with activity and noise, but just relaxing more and leaving room to do things spontaneously. You can see how we were different, and so after a couple of months of marriage we started to argue. I don't know if anyone else who's married does that but it was a real shock to me – I didn't think we had much to argue about! And I had to realise that I couldn't just tell Ally what to do when I wanted to and get cross if he didn't agree. I was horrified at how easily my words could hurt him. And so we started a time of talking things through, understanding differences, and realising that we only had two choices – we could either be happily married or we could be unhappily married. But if we were going to be happily married, I had a lot of changing to do to be more considerate and less selfish. And since then, I have listened to Ally lovingly and kindly tell me a lot about myself that I would rather not have known. But those tough talks have been such a blessing to our marriage and such a gift to me. And tonight's talk will I hope be a bit like that for you – ultimately it is a gift, given out of love and compassion, but it doesn't make comfortable listening and it may well contain some things that you may not want to hear about yourself.

2. An illustration of sin

You could give the example of a white room. You are covered in dirt, so you can't be in the white room otherwise it would become dirty. Or think about light and dark. Try and get lightness and darkness to mix (it's impossible). God and sin don't mix. We have sinned, so we are separated from God.

3. Another illustration of sin

Another explanation for sin is: Imagine your favourite item of clothing. Imagine it new and perfect (it represents a sinless world). Now sin is a depravity of that which is good, ie: a hole in your t-shirt (it is not created). This works well visually if you bring a new t-shirt and put a hole in it at the right point.

This answers the question: "If God is perfect and made every thing perfect, why did he MAKE sin?" He didn't. Sin takes something great and puts a hole in it. For example, you could say: "God made sex, which is a great thing. But sin puts a hole in sex – promiscuity, adultery, etc."

THE CROSS

Why did Jesus die?

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The DVD/book illustration

The illustration on pages 180-181 of the Leader's Guide uses a DVD, but can also be given using a book (not a Bible!). I use my Filofax diary, which is indeed a record of my life, and is also very thick with lots of extra sheets of paper tucked into it.

Another *Christianity Explored* leader says: I prefer to use a book, there's a certain weightiness about it. I open it and say: "There are some pages in here that I wouldn't want any of you to see" (and I know that they are all thinking the same about themselves). I slam the book closed again dramatically. I then explain that God can't sweep this sin under the carpet. Because God is just, he has to deal with it.

If I try to resolve the problem myself:

1. I wouldn't be able to live without sinning. I'd be riddled with feelings of guilt.
2. Even if I could stop sinning, the book would simply remain the same size. It wouldn't be removed, and so I would front-up to God with this enormous problem.

RESURRECTION

Why did Jesus rise?

IDEAS

1. The concept of resurrection

While talking about Jesus rising from the dead, it may be worth a line to distinguish resurrection, resuscitation and re-incarnation. There are so many vague ideas in people's heads, false ideas of karma etc.

2. An illustration of resurrection

You may find it helpful to explain the difference between Jesus and someone who was brought back to life but eventually died again (eg: Jairus' daughter). This can be illustrated by holding up a "box of death". Show visually that Jairus' daughter entered it; then Jesus pulled her back out of it the same way she came in; only to die again later. But when Jesus died, he entered it and went out through the other side into eternal life - the first full and true resurrection. This highlights both the uniqueness and the trailblazingness (!) of Christ.

6: GRACE

How can God accept us?

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The rich young man

We see that this man was wrong in believing that he was fully keeping God's laws. He was thinking about how he treated others – so he looked good to everyone. But he wasn't thinking about how he treated God. That's not always so easy for people to see – but God still knows!

2. A free gift

Offer each participant a free gift (eg: a chocolate bar, a bookmark, a mini Bible timeline, a voucher for the church bookstall...). The group will probably think you're not really going to give them anything for free – they think they are going to need to do something for it. The shock is it is just a gift, for no reason, requiring no qualification. As long as you do give them the gift, there's no need to give long explanations – the gift will have plenty of impact simply for being free.

COME AND DIE

What does it mean to follow Jesus?

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The old/young woman

If the suggested picture of an old/young woman isn't suitable for your group and/or they have seen it before, you can find plenty of other examples online. Try searching for "double illusion pictures".

2. An illustration of repentance

If your group have sufficient Bible-background to know the parable of the prodigal son, you could use him as an example of what it means to repent. The prodigal son didn't just "feel" sorry – he also acted by turning away from his wrong way of life and returning to his father. Alternatively, you or a co-leader may be able to give a real-life story of what repentance means.

3. An illustration of Satan wanting us to focus on the temporary rather than the eternal

There's a wonderful lady at my workplace who brings in delicious homemade cakes whenever it's anyone's birthday. We have a large team, so that means lots of cakes! I know that too much cake will lead to too much stomach – but they're so enticing. It's much easier to enjoy a delicious slice and tell myself that I'll think about a diet another day.

Satan does something like this, but far worse. He's not worried about cream cakes or large stomachs! He wants us to forget about the future – and about our eternal soul – and to focus instead on the here and now.