

## Study guide suggestions and questions to accompany

"The real power of this book lies in the sheer, gut-punching beauty of the writing" Anne van Gend



# CARAVAN

INCARNATIONAL STORIES SET IN AN  
AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE

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Thank you for purchasing CARAVAN, ABM's latest story/study. We hope you enjoy it and find the stories helpful in re-engaging with the great incarnational narrative.

In the book, you will find general questions (pages 6-8) that encourage you and/or your group to reflect prayerfully and imaginatively with the stories. For many groups or individuals, these questions will be more than you need. For others, the following suggestions might assist to generate discussion or reflection.

### **The Lectio Divina approach**

Lectio Divina is a contemplative way of reading the Bible. It dates back to the early centuries of the Christian Church and was established as a monastic practice by Benedict in the 6th century. It is a way of praying the scriptures that leads us deeper into God's word. We slow down. We read a short passage more than once. We chew it over slowly and carefully. We savour it. Scripture begins to speak to us in a new way. It speaks to us personally and aids that union we have with God through Christ who is himself the Living Word.

Here are links to two short, clear and accessible guides to the approach online.

1. <https://bustedhalo.com/ministry-resources/lectio-divina-beginners-guide>
2. <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf>

The Lectio Divina approach is a way of sinking into the story/text/scripture in a way that allows the reader to see and experience more than a single, straight reading will allow. The recorded stories on our YouTube page ([www.youtube.com/@AnglicanBoardMission/videos](http://www.youtube.com/@AnglicanBoardMission/videos)) allow you to listen again to the complete story or sections of it. What captures your ear, mind and heart? Why? Listen again.

Remember that these stories are all prefaced with the scripture they refer to and that they are interpretations of that scripture. Each story is intended to be a doorway into new understanding of what God has done and is doing for us.

For those who like a list of questions to go with each story, here are some suggestions. You might like to answer one or all of these, or they might simply help you define better questions that suit your group.

Bless you as you travel with CARAVAN and may the living Lord be close to you.

### **Story 1 – Be not afraid**

Q1. Can you remember something that, when you were young, completely changed the course of your life? Did you see God's involvement at the time? How? On reflection, can you see the hand of God at work?

Q2. Why do we often concentrate so much on Mary and so little on Joseph? Share your imaginative pictures of Mary and Joseph and, perhaps, discuss where those pictures have come from.

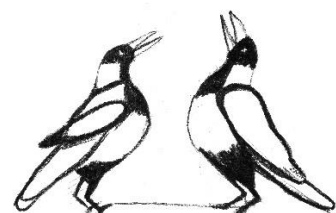
Q3. Have you ever felt so strongly connected to God that you were sure something was going to happen? Did it? Share stories of fulfilment and failures or hope in your life.

Q4. Many of us have faced the prospect of unexpected pregnancy. Others have faced the disappointment of there being no new life growing. How do you think Mary might have felt? What does a child mean to us?

Q5. Do you believe in angels? Listen respectfully to one another, as there can be strongly held views? Must they have a gender? Why might God approach humans through messengers?

Q6. If you truly believed that God had asked you to do something that would dramatically change your life and might heavily impact the way people saw or respected you, would you have the courage to do it?

Q7. Why do you think God chose to be among us in this way - through a baby – rather than through power and glory and strength? What might this say about the way we proclaim the Gospel in our lives and communities?



## **Story 2 – Be careful what you wish for**

Q1. Have you ever felt like Zechariah did at the beginning of this story? Tired, somewhat disillusioned with the church, uncertain where God is? How did you respond– or how are you responding?

Q2. Have you experienced how not having children – or a partner – can influence the way people behave towards you? In our world, more and more young people are choosing not to have children, for all sorts of reasons. What does a child mean these days? What word best describes the way you see a baby?

Q3. Zechariah and Elizabeth are given impossible news. Zechariah laughs and is struck dumb. How would you respond to such news? How many ‘impossible’ things have you witnessed in your life?

Q4. What did the imposition of silence bring to Zechariah? What might it bring to us, should we dare to try it?

Q5. Elizabeth and Zechariah – broken people – opened their home and hearts to Mary – a broken woman. How might we learn to create sanctuary for those who are shunned?

Q6. The power and beauty of the Magnificat is both personal and political. Why do you think Mary chose these words? How powerful have songs been in your life and faith?

Q7. Zechariah and Elizabeth are receding at the start of the story but, by the end, they are joyous and exultant. Objectively, a baby late in life might not seem a reason for this change. Can you explain it?



### **Story 3 – What do you get when you fall in love?**

Q1. Joseph's story is a story of heartbreak. The heartbreak of a good, young man who feels he has been betrayed. We tend to skip over this to the bit where it's all fixed up, but heartbreak lingers. Many of us have felt it – especially as young people. Can you remember that feeling and how long it lingered?

Q2. The question Joseph had to ask himself was, "Can betrayal be forgiven?" This is a question that God has faced throughout human history, not least at the cross. Christians are called to radical levels of forgiveness. How do you feel about that? How well have we done at the tricky business of forgiveness?

Q3. Was the angel's interaction with Joseph an order to obey or an invitation to participate? How does God choose to act?

Q4. We all meet situations where 'understanding' can't get us any further. Sometimes we simply must accept what is. Are you good at this?

### **Story 4 – It could have been here**

Q1. How are you going with the Australian context? Do you see how it might have happened here and now? Does it matter where and when these things happened?

Q2. This story brings many threads together and is the one that could be read as a Christmas sermon. What images from this story resonate most with you?

Q3. Can you remember having to make a trip that was both unwanted and uncomfortable? How were you feeling at the end? This story isn't triumphant. It's really about a couple of tired people in difficult circumstances, taking what is offered - and then being surprised by joy (that classic C S Lewis phrase). Have you ever been surprised by joy?

Q4. Ever since the Resurrection, people have been drawn to Christian community as a place of companionship, comfort and safety. It all starts with the gathering at the birth of Christ. What is it about the Gospel message that encourages this? How is your church or community communicating the Gospel to those who might be drawn into community? Is there one change you could make that might have an impact?

## Story 5 – Fireworks

Q1. God has a long history of using fringe-dwellers to bring about God's chosen plans. What Bible stories can you remember in which outsiders make the difference?

Q2. It is not unusual for churches to be full of reasonably well-educated and fairly conservative people. Not all churches, but many. It can be tempting to think that God only works through the middle-class, but that's not the record of scripture. Deep spiritual longing and genuine wisdom do not belong in one social sphere. Where – and in whom – have you unexpectedly encountered genuine faith and deep spirituality?

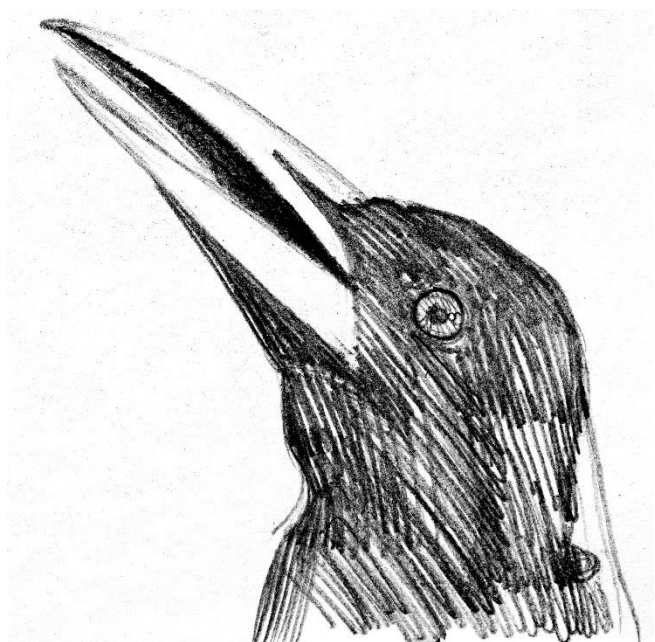
Q3. Has anyone seen min-min lights?

Q4. What do you imagine the music of heaven might sound like?

Q5. For Skid and Flax, acceptance and affirmation have a huge impact. Would you say church communities are good at these things? Why? Why not?

Q6. How do we usually go about the business of evangelism? Do we tell stories or make propositional statements? Or both? What is the balance? Most societies in human history have kept their religious and cultural identity strong through storytelling. Why might we have forgotten the power of story?

Q7. Do you believe this story? What does it mean to 'believe'?





## Story 6 – Not just another day on the job

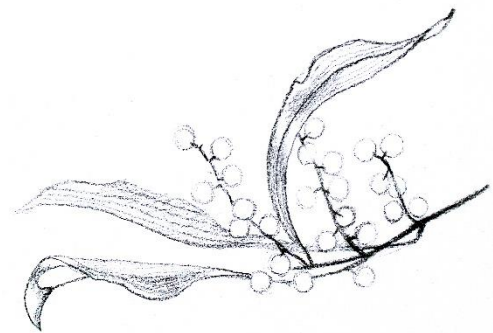
Q1. Do you relate to Simeon and Anna? Many of us have been waiting on God to ‘do’ something for many years. Have you lost hope or does the fire still burn within?

Q2. This story is told by a security guard. Often, we can ignore those people who act as functionaries in the places we frequent. But they are noticing things all the time. They have opinions and make judgements. What do you think a ‘watcher’ would see if they watched you?

Q3. Why might this story be in the Bible? Do you see it as an affirmation of those who wait patiently on God? Of elders? How does that make you feel? What might we be waiting for?

Q4. Mary and Joseph came to fulfill the law and left with some powerful words of prophecy. How do you think this encounter might have impacted on them? Why would God have had Simeon and Anna prepared and waiting for so long to announce who Jesus was?

Q5. Some of Simeon’s last recorded words are, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace”. What does he mean? Is there something you are waiting for to complete what you know God has asked of you?



## Story 7 – Innocents

Q1. This is the hardest of all the stories to hear. It is very violent and brutal. How do you respond to the idea that this was part of the Incarnational story?

Q2. There were never, ‘three kings’ – just wise men from the East. Here we have wise people from the West! Artists and mystics have been part of God’s plan from the very start. How have the arts influenced your faith journey? Are you comfortable with mystery?

Q3. The picture that scripture paints of Herod is not pretty. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Can you imagine the type of violence enacted in this story happening in our world today? Where? To whom?

Q4. Can you see how the people around Bethlehem might have had trouble seeing the birth of Jesus as ‘Good News’? Why do you think God

allowed this to happen? Does it help to try and think of a reason? Can good come from the horror we experience?

Q5. The gifts given to the baby Jesus have symbolic importance. If you were one of the Magi and this story was part of your life, what would you have given Jesus. Why?

Q6. The Magi were definitely not Christians, yet they were instrumental in God's plan to save Jesus' family and see Jesus recognised as significant. How might we learn to see God at work in places we do not understand – or even fear?

Q7. The end of this story sees Mary, Joseph and Jesus fleeing for their lives and the mothers of the town weeping by the river. Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas! Why do you think we have sanitised the story so completely. What difference would it make if Christmas celebrations were allowed to include the real elements of the Incarnational narrative?

Q8. Have there been tragedies in your life that still lead you to question God? What do you do with these questions?



## **Story 8 – The brat**

Q1. Are you brave?

Q2. The story leads us through Nicodemus getting to know Jesus. It is possible he was there at the Temple when Jesus visited as a child. One



interesting thing about Nicodemus is that he was clearly drawn to Jesus, but – for whatever reason – chose to be very careful about believing. What do you think may have been the reasons for that caution? Are there areas of faith that you are cautious about?

Q3. Despite Nicodemus saying that he's not a brave man, he speaks up for Jesus against the prevailing attitude of his group or community. Have you ever experienced doing something similar? What were the results?

Q4. Scripture indicates that there were very many miracles attributed to Jesus (and the disciples) that are not fully recorded – or even mentioned. The story of the young girl is conjecture, but many similar events must have happened to many people. What do you think would be the response of those who received a miraculous healing? Do you think that experiencing a miracle would necessarily make someone believe in Jesus? Why or why not?

Q5. Jesus' action in the Temple was shocking and bound to produce a response. Why do you think he did what he did to the moneychangers? His words also seem to have had a profound impact on the guards, who defend him before the Temple Council. Discuss what you think Jesus might have been like? There are no right or wrong answers, but we will all have a picture in our hearts and minds.

Q6. Are you keen to keep telling the story of Jesus? How will you do this? Where will you do this?

### **And so....**

ABM would be interested to hear feedback, encouragement or critique from you and/or your group. Has CARAVAN been of use to you? Did you enjoy it? Does the Australian context help you see the story differently? Would you recommend it to others? Do you have suggestions?

Please feel free to send any comments to the author at:

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Please keep all feedback polite and constructive.

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