

What are humans?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

New Year 2021 (27 December - 30 January)



2021.

Writing those four numerals in late 2020 as this theme is developed feels surreal. Who knows what things will look like in a few days, let alone when the calendar rolls around to a new year? The world has been thrown off kilter by a global health crisis and the accompanying economic and social turmoil left in its wake.

Everything is on its head as we seek to rebuild a better world.

At the start of this new year we are going to go back to basics and ask — *what are humans?* On a physical, cultural and spiritual level what does it mean to be human?

Who are we called to be and what are we called to do?

How can we come together in this strange turbulent time to live up to our humanity?

We will consider the cosmos, gold, worms and how utterly precious we are...

The following discussion questions are designed to accompany and adapt the monthly theme material (see the [What Are Humans? Resource Pack](#)) for small group work. They are divided into 5 parts to correspond with the 5 weeks of the Daily Worship theme.

These questions are just a guideline and there is no need to go through all the given questions in a single session, or in the following sequence. Feel free to pick and choose, or adapt to what interests your group.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Part 1: Stardust children of God

Conversation starter:

Over this month at Sanctuary First we are going to be exploring the questions: *What are humans? Who are we called to be and what are we called to do?*

So — what makes us different from animals or robots or angels? If you were to pick three traits or characteristics that define what it means to be human what would they be?

Read Psalm 148

"Praise him all you shining stars..."

Most of the things that make up a human body are elements that were originally made in stars. You could say — alongside the rest of the created world — we are a constellation of worship! Paul urges us in Philippians 2:15 to "shine like stars in the world" (NRSVA translation).

How does it feel to know that most of what makes up your body came from outer-space?

How does it make you feel about God?

Read Galatians 4: 4-7

"Abba!" There is a cry within us: *Abba* which means "Dad!" Humans are not slaves or robots that are meant to mechanically serve God — but rather we are precious children beloved of the Father.

What does it mean to be God's heirs?

Read Numbers 6: 22-27

2020 has been very strange and much of it very hard — but there have also been beautiful moments, dawning realisations and profound insights offered.

This reading contains a timeless blessing to start the year. Despite the difficulty what do you want to treasure about this past year and carry into the new one? What are the things that we stardust children of God are wanting to bless and keep hold of as we go on from here?

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Part 2: Screw ups, comeback kids, utterly precious?

Read Jeremiah 31: 7-14

These words offer a timeless vision of return and renewal. Looking through history we humans (both as individuals and as groups) have a tendency from time to time to screw things up. We get lost, we get in over our heads, we get carried away. And yet we also have an uncanny ability to survive, to make it back again to tell the tale. The powerful stories that come up again and again in the Bible (and throughout global culture) of homecoming speak both of our desire to explore and our profound desire to return, to *belong*.

What are your visions of restoration for the future? What do you long to return to? Paint a scene like the one in verses 12-14 with details that resonate for you of meaningful restoration and reunion after this past year of scattering and disconnection.

Read Ecclesiastes 3: 1-13

Life is full of ebb and flow, of passing seasons — of exodus and return, failure and redemption, getting lost and finding our way home. Human lives may be fragile but human communities are astonishingly resilient and able to overcome great trial and adversity — adapting to new challenging situations.

Verse 5, about a time to refrain from embracing, hits hard during a time isolation and pandemic.

What are the 'stones' that we are throwing away this year? The things we are choosing to leave behind, discard, or let go of in order to gather new things in this new year?

Read Psalm 72

Our blood is precious to the King!

Our human physical, skin and bones lives are valued, cherished, and treasured by Jesus our King. We are not abstract to Jesus. We matter.

We don't just have value as a whole humanity — each individual person matters too. For humanity gets its worth through the God-given dignity and value of each unique person.

How can we work towards fairer societies that value the real flesh and blood lives of everyone the way Jesus does?

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Part 3: Golden fools

Read Matthew 7: 24-27

It's easy to think what a numpty the foolish man in this story is but he likely got there through a series of logical sounding steps. We humans often struggle to think of the long term benefits when the short term gains look promising. Building on sand has got to be easier, quicker and cheaper right? Digging stone foundations sounds like a lot of hard work...

Cognitive bias is the study of how our secret weapon — our massive complicated brains and the mystery of consciousness — can also be our secret downfall as we miss what is right in front of us. For instance 'Gamblers fallacy' is when we think because a coin has flipped and come up heads 10 times it is more likely to go tails next time even though the odds haven't changed at all. Or there's 'Actor-observer bias' when we attribute our own actions to our circumstances ('I lost my temper but I'd had an awful day and a horrid cold...') and attribute other people's actions to their personality ('He lost his rag because he's just like that and he's never going to change...'). Flick back to verses 1-5 where Jesus takes aim at our hypocrisy...

As humans why do we so often focus on the short term and discount the long term consequences? And why do we so often give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and assume Jesus is challenging others when what he says applies to us too ("And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them...")?

Read 1 Corinthians 4: 9-13

Being fools for the sake of Christ... To the world it often seems foolish to keep trying in the face of failure, to keep loving in the face of rejection, to keep striving in the face of struggle. But the people who have changed the world the most were often written off as foolish to begin with.

Are there celebrated figures or communities in history that you are fond of — who kept going even though others dismissed them as fools? And how can we embrace our own 'foolish' counter-cultural side?

Read 1 Corinthians 3: 10-23

Gold seems odd in that list of building materials. Surely it should be stashed securely away because it is so valuable? But gold is a bit like love, on the one hand it's delicate and easily broken but on the other hand it endures — never rusting, or corroding or tarnishing. Both can come out of fire more refined. The wisdom of the world is to guard your love warily whereas we — foolishly — are called to share our love generously and compassionately and openly.

This year what changes can we make to continue to build the precious, generous love of God into our everyday lives? An enduring love that catches the light like gold...

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Part 4: Words, worms, and worthiness

Conversation starter:

This week we are looking at three unusual metaphors. One is to do with flying words, another is to do with becoming worms, and the third is concerned with living buildings... Why do you think the Bible is so full of metaphors? Do you have a favourite metaphor in the Bible?

Read 1 Samuel 3: 1-20

Doubt is an integral part of what it is to be human. "Surely God isn't talking to *me*! Surely I haven't got anything worthy to say..." Have you ever felt like Samuel and doubted God is speaking to you? How do we know when God's voice is speaking in our life?

What about verse 19? "As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." (NRSVA translation). To run with the metaphor Samuel's words were aerodynamic! In order for something like a bird or a plane to be aerodynamic it needs some form of *thrust* to drive it forward, and it has to be shaped in such a way that it can *lift* through the air and minimise *drag* to keep it up and moving forward. How could we apply the concepts of **thrust**, **lift** and **drag** to how we communicate God's words to others?

Read Psalm 22

Here is a harrowing, raw, unfiltered glimpse of the human soul in agony. "But I am a worm, and not human..." Life can be cruel and sometimes it tries to rob us of our humanity — desensitising us as the psalm so startlingly describes "...my heart is like wax..." When the very things that make us feel human such as love, kinship, dignity, or a sense of belonging are undermined we can begin to lose a sense of who we are.

But the choice of worms is a revealing as they are an essential part of the ecosystem — working largely unseen to sustain life. They transform soil, breaking down dead organic matter and making nutrients available for living plants. With the running lines about dust in the poem there could be a sense of going to ground, going back into the earth from which we came, on which we rely and fumbling around in the primordial depth of the soul to rediscover the source of life. For our worth doesn't rely on our human effort — it is drawn from our maker who loves us into being and loves us back into being when we are hurt and lost and feel like we are disintegrating.

How can we help ourselves and others rediscover their worth when life has flattened us/them?

Read 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20

Your body is a temple. Mind, body and spirit are all closely connected. Forget buildings — your own body is a place of worship! How can we glorify God with our bodies?

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Part 5: Unshakeable, unbreakable, unfake-able

Read Psalm 62

"I shall not be shaken." Over the centuries humans have called upon God through trial and adversity. Ironically it is often through contemplating the divine — the superhuman — that we discover our own human strength.

Do you have any favourite examples from ancient, recent — or anywhere in between — history of those who have called upon God for strength through adversity?

Read John 18: 15-27 and John 21: 15-19

Peter was wrestling with catastrophe, trauma, threat to his life... he broke. Humans break (we are, after all, only human). But the human spirit can't be broken beyond repair. And Peter's wasn't.

Healing a broken spirit can be painful as Peter discovered but through love he was repaired, re-equipped and restored for the task ahead.

What can we learn from Peter's journey of heartbreak for our own lives?

Read 1 John 4: 7-21

We humans ultimately were made as an act of love, are held together in love, and are called to belong with one another in love.

God loves creation so much he wants people to share it with — that's you and me. We are free beings able to discover who we are in the context of love. In other words: children.

Why is our love of God so closely tied to our love of others? Simply put... why does it matter to God that we love one another?