

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’ Guidelines for Course Facilitators

‘Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story’ is a free resource produced by St Martin-in-the-Fields in partnership with the National Gallery. The course uses fine art paintings in the National Gallery’s collection, along with a short theological reflection and a Biblical text, as a spring board for exploring these two questions:

- How can I deepen my faith in God?
- What does it mean to follow Jesus today?

The course is designed for use in a group, and is intended to build relationships among those participating. It was originally run at St Martin’s between September 2015 and June 2016. This online resource was publicly launched at the Greenbelt festival in August 2017.

The course has been structured as 22 hour-long gatherings over three terms. It aims to cover key elements of the Biblical story from Creation to Apocalypse. Each hour-long session can, however, stand alone. So participants don’t need to have attended an earlier session to participate.

The following resources are offered:

- An overview of the course
- Guidelines for the course facilitator(s)
- 22 theological reflections, typically about 8 minutes in length
- 22 handouts with a Biblical text and two reflection questions
- 22 images of paintings from the National Gallery collection
- A list of further recommended resources

Who might facilitate the course?

I envisage that the course will best be facilitated by someone of mature Christian faith, either an ordained minister or pastor, or a lay minister or other mature lay Christian; or better, and as St Martin’s, by a small team of such people. One option is to have one person offer the theological reflection, and another to facilitate the process of the course, as set out below.

When is it best to run the course?

There’s no single answer to this question. The course was originally developed so that it can fit broadly with the liturgical seasons, in this way:

- Sessions 1-7 in the run up to, or running into Advent
- Session 8-15 in the run up to Easter, including Lent
- Sessions 16-22 after Easter connecting with the Ascension and Pentecost

However, there’s other ways you could do it, especially if your group doesn’t follow the Lectionary.

What size group is the course intended for?

The resource is flexible but is likely to work best with a group of between 8 to 32 participants, depending in part on the size of the available meeting space. It could work with a larger group, provided you have suitable space for participants to sit together in groups of four, as well as amplification for the speaker and facilitator.

What preparation is needed?

I recommend that you do the following:

- Read the guidelines set out here;
- Look at the overview of the course;
- Decide whether you're going to run the whole course or just part of it;
- Decide when you will offer the course, in order to work for your group;
- Look at the paintings, theological reflections and handouts for the first three sessions that you're planning to run, to get a feel for what's offered;
- Decide whether you are going to use the theological reflections as drafted, or whether you want to tweak them, or write your own;
- Develop some publicity to help advertise the course; and
- Recruit an assistant or small pool of assistants who can help with set up of the room, and with welcoming participants and ensuring everyone completes a name label.

What equipment is needed?

As a minimum you will need:

- A laptop with Microsoft Powerpoint software and suitable connecting cables; and
- EITHER a data projector with a large blank wall area or a dedicated projector screen (this is likely to be the best option for a large image); OR a large television screen; and
- Enough moveable chairs for all participants, initially set out in rows so everyone can see the projected image, and which can later be moved into groupings of four.

With a large group (e.g. over about 32 people) you may also need amplification equipment for the speaker and facilitator.

What set up is needed before participants arrive?

Before any participants arrive you'll need to set up the projection equipment so that the image is displayed as large as possible, and arrange seating so that everyone can see the image clearly. (Display without the caption giving the painting details.) Ideally you want a partially blacked out room, with curtains or blinds partially drawn, and lights near the screen or wall turned off, to see the detail of the image to best effect, but also to give sufficient light for people to read the handout.

The image for the session should be on display from before the first participant arrives, so that participants can start looking at the image upon arrival.

What does a single session look like in overview?

Assuming a start time of midday, and an ending of 1:00pm, the overview for a single session is:

11:50-12:05: Arrival and welcome by welcomer and facilitator/presenter

12:05-12:07: Facilitator/presenter welcomes and introduces the session

12:07-12:12: Looking together at the projected image of the painting

12:12-12:15: Reading aloud of the selected Biblical text, by participants

12:15-12:25: Presenter offers a theological reflection

12:25-12:28: Formation of and movement into small groups of four people

12:28-12:50: Small groups work on two task questions, after brief set up by facilitator

12:50-12:52: Regathering small groups into plenary

12:52-12:58: Sharing of one reflection from each (or some) of the small groups

12:58-1:00: Concluding prayer, read by a participant, and session formally ends

Detailed guidance on each segment of a single session:

Please note: the timetable offered assumes a start time of midday, and an ending of 1:00pm, which was the timing used at St Martin's. You'll need to amend the times to fit your schedule.

Detailed guidance on each segment of a single session follows. Aim to maintain the discipline of the timings given (unless you are taking longer than an hour for the session).

11:50-12:05: Arrival and welcome by welcomer and facilitator/presenter

See the guidance above on set up prior to participants' arrival. In addition:

- The welcomer welcomes, and ensures everyone has a label with their first name, in large letters that's legible from a distance. (This makes the facilitator's job much easier, in getting to know everyone's names, and thanking people by name for their contributions.) You'll need a supply of sticky labels and a Sharpie or similar thick marker pen.
- Encourage everyone who arrives to be looking at the image of the painting. (This isn't difficult, because the image should already be on display.) The image should be displayed without the accompanying caption (which will be revealed later), so that people focus on the image and not on any other information.
- The facilitator or presenter invites one participant to be ready to read the pre-prepared prayer at the close of the session, and gives them the prayer on a sheet (see the final sheet of each reflection).
- Allow for informal chat among participants and with the facilitator/presenter. If possible, notice anyone who is new, and make a point of welcoming them and talking with them.
- The session is timed to start at five minutes past, to allow a bit of leeway for participants to arrive. However, I recommend starting promptly at five past, even if you're expecting some others to come. This helps to build a pattern that people will learn to respect, over time.

12:05-12:07: Facilitator/presenter welcomes and introduces the session

The facilitator/presenter should:

- welcome those attending, and thank them for coming;
- briefly introduce themselves, and have the presenter briefly introduce themselves, if this person is different from the facilitator; and
- very briefly explain the 'Inspired to Follow: Art and the Bible Story' course, and the particular focus or theme for the day.

12:07-12:12: Looking together at the projected image of the painting

With all the participants looking at the image, the facilitator asks these two simple questions:

- **"What do you see?** Offer a description, rather than an interpretation, where possible."
- **"What else do you see?** Again, describe what you can see, where possible, rather than interpreting it."

The key task for the facilitator is to:

- draw out what participants see and notice;
- to receive and summarise briefly in your own words what's offered by participants; and
- to ensure that a range of different participants are heard from.

Among the challenges here are:

- trying to ensure it's not just the same few people who speak each time; and
- acknowledging everything that's offered without necessarily commending everything.

On the first of these challenges, you may need to be somewhat directive, for example saying, “I’d especially like to hear from new people / from people who didn’t contribute last time,” or something similar.

On the second challenge, if someone is clearly offering a particular interpretation of what they see, you can summarise this by saying, “So what *you* see is X.” And you might continue, “I wonder what others see. And remember to try describe what you see.”

With many of the images, participants will often pick up on a range of different aspects of the painting, and will notice a number of the elements that then get referred to in the theological reflection. So the work they do in looking at and noticing the painting lays the foundation for what follows. And don’t be surprised if someone notices something you yourself hadn’t spotted!

At this stage, avoid displaying the National Gallery’s caption with information on the painting, so that participants focus on the image itself.

12:12-12:15: Reading aloud of the selected Biblical text, by participants

Whether the reading of the Biblical text comes before or after the theological reflection will depend on the presenter. Most of the reflections offered work on the text being read before the reflection.

Distribute the handout. In most cases the chosen texts have been divided into paragraphs. Invite participants in the group (not the presenter or facilitator) to read the text, one person reading a paragraph, and then another person picking up the baton and reading the next paragraph, and so on. This maximises the variety of voices, and the sense of participation. The facilitator may need to gently prompt people, by catching someone’s eye to encourage them to read the next paragraph.

In some cases it will work better to have various participants reading what is said by the different characters in the text; this may work best with one person taking the role of narrator, and others reading each character’s spoken text.

12:15-12:25: Presenter offers a theological reflection

In broad terms each theological reflection offered aims to answer these two questions:

- What’s interesting about this painting?
- How does the event or image depicted in this painting connect with the story of God’s work in the world and with the Christian faith?

In some cases some introductory information about the painter and the painting is offered. You can choose whether and when to offer this to the group. This information can also be omitted without any loss to the purposes of the course.

As you’ll notice, a variety of slightly different approaches have been taken by those who’ve contributed the theological reflections offered with this resource. Some focus more on the theological questions, while others give more attention to the painting.

As noted above, you’ll need to decide whether you’re going to use the theological reflections as drafted, or whether you want to tweak them (perhaps to personalise in some way), or whether to write your own. If you’re going to write your own, I recommend aiming for seven to eight minutes in length, about 800-900 words. Keeping the reflection short maximises the time for participant discussion in the small groups. Some of the reflections offered are closer to ten minutes in length, so that’s been allowed for in the timings. If you can run shorter, so much the better.

Read the reflection aloud, but as with any good presentation, ensure that you keep looking up and engaging with participants, looking around the whole group over the course of the reflection; and ensure that you keep your voice varied and interesting, without being forced or artificial.

At the end of your reflection, move the Powerpoint presentation on one click to display the National Gallery’s caption with information on the painting. Leave the painting displayed throughout the small group work that follows.

12:25-12:28: Formation of and movement into small groups of four people

The facilitator now directs participants to cluster in a group of four people, ideally with others whom they don't know well. (So, for example, if someone is there with a partner, encourage them each to join different small groups, and to move seats if needed.)

It may be helpful, once everyone has arrived, for you or your assistant to add up the total number of people, and see if it divides by four. The group may not divide neatly into groups of four. If one or two are left over, then they can help make up a group of five, or three groups of three. If three are remaining, they can form a group of three people.

The aim should be to have no group smaller than three, and no group larger than five. (So a group of six should always sub-divide into two groups of three.) This ensures that no one is stuck with just one other person; but that the group is small enough to ensure that everyone gets a chance to contribute fully.

Encourage people to move their chairs so that they can all hear and see one another, but also can still see the projected image. So a semi-circle or U shaped arrangement will likely work best.

You'll need to decide whether you as the facilitator (and presenter if different) become a participant at this point. (Any assistant can be a regular small group participant.) If the facilitator and/or presenter is a clergy person or ordained minister, it may be best for them *not* to become a participant, as their presence may inhibit others from participating fully, or leave them thinking they need to produce a 'correct' answer. This also leaves you free to manage the process and timings. You could also experiment with being a small group participant, perhaps after the course has been running for several sessions, and most participants are familiar with the process.

12:28-12:50: Small groups work on two task questions, after brief set up by facilitator

Once people are settled in their small group, explain the task to them, which is set out at the bottom of every handout, as follows:

First, they are to begin with a round robin, one at a time, responding to the question:

“What do I find interesting, new or challenging about what’s been presented, and/or the text that we’ve read, in terms of understanding the Christian faith?”

Remind people that during this round, they are not to respond, but simply to listen, as each person shares in turn, until everyone has had a chance to contribute something.

Then they can move into a more free-flowing conversation, in which anyone in the small group can respond to the second question:

“What does what we’ve been considering mean for following Christ today, in my context?
How does this bite for me?”

Explain that this is an open conversation, in which people can respond to one another, ask a question or offer a wondering – but that they should still give space to hear from others.

Then let them get started. The group may be quite quiet at first, but don’t fret. Before long people will start contributing. Leave them to get on with the task.

12:50-12:52: Regathering small groups into plenary

About a minute before, ask the small groups to be winding up their conversation. Then, after that minute, ask everyone to finish and to turn their chairs to face towards the front.

12:52-12:58: Sharing of one reflection from each (or some) of the small groups

If you have no more than five groups, then say that you’d like to hear one brief reflection from each group’s conversation. Pick on one of the groups, and ask if someone in that group can offer one reflection on their conversation, or one thing they were discussing. Receive this, then summarise it very briefly in your own words to show you’ve understood. Then ask for someone from the next

group to offer a reflection from their group's conversation. And so on until you've received five contributions.

If you've got more than five groups, it won't be realistic to hear from every group in the time available. So indicate that you'd like to hear one brief reflection from four different groups. This is likely to be sufficient to give a flavour of the conversations.

12:58-1:00: Concluding prayer, read by a participant, and session formally ends

Commend people for their engagement and their work together. Then ask the chosen participant to read the pre-prepared prayer to bring the session to a close. (Remember that you'll have given this to someone at the start of the session.)

Finally, don't be surprised if after the conclusion of the session there's an opportunity for a pastoral conversation with one of the participants. So don't allow packing your equipment away to prevent this opportunity from arising.

(Depending on other constraints, participants could share refreshments together, either after the formal conclusion of the session, or before the session starts.)

Concluding Remarks

The course is designed to provide an engaging way to explore the Christian faith and to consider what Christian discipleship might look like today. As you'll have noticed, it's open-ended, and non-prescriptive, leaving participants to make connections and to take responsibility for what the content means for them. Through the small group conversations, it also works well to build relationships between those who participate. It can therefore be particularly helpful for newcomers to your group.

My hope is that you and your participants will enjoy the sessions as much as those who participated in the original course at St Martin's. And my prayer is that you and your participants will find the course a great blessing, and a way to deepen your faith in God, in your context.

If you'd like to offer feedback on your experience with the course, email clergyoffice@smitf.org.

Grace and peace to you,

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