



Jesus Christ: secondary teachers' guide

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Introduction

This guide, produced by Westminster Abbey, contains key information on Christian beliefs about Jesus Christ, to support the delivery of Religious Education within your classroom.

Westminster Abbey has a distinctive role within the Church of England, which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. It is neither a cathedral nor a parish church, and it stands outside the normal jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London. It is instead a 'Royal Peculiar', which was a status granted to it in 1560 by Elizabeth I, under which the Dean and Chapter are directly answerable to the Sovereign. Building upon its origins as a monastery and the Benedictine importance placed on education, Westminster Abbey today strives to be a school of the Lord's service.

This resource discusses Jesus Christ in broad terms based on Christian teachings. All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Who was Jesus Christ?

Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus of Galilee, was a Jewish rabbi and religious leader who was born in c.6-3BCE and died in c.30BCE. He is known as the 'Christ', or anointed one - Christians believe that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, known as God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. The New Testament describes Jesus as being both fully divine and fully human (Philippians 2:5-8) and he came to earth to share His teachings.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14)

As well as being the Son of God, Jesus Christ is known as the Messiah. This is a Hebrew term meaning 'anointed one', given to Jesus in the New Testament by the writers of the Gospels, as a term to summarise that He was sent by God to save humanity. He is the one hoped for by the prophets of the Old Testament.

"Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."" (Matthew 16:16)

Christians also refer to him as the Saviour, as they believe Jesus had to sacrifice His own life in order to save human beings from the sins.

"She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."
(Matthew 1:21)

Jesus Christ is also referred to as the Lord, recognising His rule over all creation, and His headship of the Church, known as His Body.



“Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:36)

Events of Jesus’ life

The events of His birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension are fundamental to the Christian faith.

Christians believe that Jesus’ birth was a miracle as Mary was told by the Angel Gabriel that she would give birth to the Son of God. Mary was specifically chosen for this role, yet she chose to embrace this freely.

“The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”” (Luke 1:30-31)

The story of Jesus’ birth in a stable in Bethlehem is told in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Matthew’s Gospel, the Magi (also known as the three wise men or the three kings) visited with gifts laden with meaning, as a sign that the baby was a king.

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11)

Meanwhile in Luke’s Gospel, the shepherds are told about Jesus by an angel and travel to Bethlehem to see the newborn child.

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.” (Luke 2:16-18)

Christians believe that the visits from both the Magi and the poor shepherds shows how Jesus came to serve and save people from all backgrounds.

Christians remember Jesus’ crucifixion during Holy Week, which includes Maundy Thursday and Good Friday (find out more [here](#)). The events of Maundy Thursday introduced Christians to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, when Jesus washed the feet of His 12 disciples, and gave them the commandment to love one another.

“While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them and said, “Take; this is my body”. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” (Mark 14:22-24)

It was on this evening that Judas betrayed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, which led to His crucifixion the next day.

“Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.” (Mark 14:43)

The day of Jesus’ crucifixion, known as Good Friday, is the most solemn of all the days in the Christian calendar. The Gospel of Mark (15:16-39) describes the events of Jesus’ crucifixion.

“Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.” (Mark 15: 22-24)



At three o'clock, Jesus cries out,

““Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
(Mark 15:34)

At the moment of Jesus' death He gives a loud cry and the curtain of the Temple rips in two from top to bottom to symbolise this ultimate moment in the relationship between God and the world.

“Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God's Son!”” (Mark 15: 37-39)

Christians believe that Jesus offered His life as an atonement for the sins of the world.

Resurrection is the belief that Jesus rose again three days after He died on the cross. On Easter Sunday, a group of women visited the tomb of Jesus to anoint His body with spices.

“They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.” (Luke 24:2)

Two men appeared and said to the women,

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.” (Luke 24:5)

In the more detailed account of the resurrection in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus greets the women and tells them to share the news of His resurrection with the apostles,

“Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”” (Matthew 28:10)

Belief in the resurrection is central to Christianity, as it shows that Jesus has destroyed death, that the last boundary between God and humanity has been taken away, and that there is life after death.

For 40 days after His resurrection on Easter Sunday, Jesus travelled and preached with His apostles, preparing them for His departure from earth. Ascension Day marks the moment Jesus ascended into Heaven before His disciples, at the village of Bethany, near Jerusalem, passing from their sight.

“So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.” (Mark 16:19)

Jesus' resurrection and Ascension Day are part of a Christian festival called Eastertide (find out more [here](#)). It was after the Ascension that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon His earliest followers – the earliest Church – so that He would be with them always.

Jesus' teachings

One of the purposes of Jesus' time on earth was to share His teachings about how to live as His disciples, with a focus on love and forgiveness.

The love which God has for all human beings is known as *agape*. Human beings themselves are encouraged to love others unconditionally too. God's sacrifice of His son Jesus to atone for human sins is an example of *agape*. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is asked which of the 10 commandments (found in Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21, both in the Old Testament) is the greatest.

“He said to him, “You shall love the Lord God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”” (Matthew 22: 37-39)



His reply is often referred to as the Two Great Commandments, which notably focus on love. Christians believe that the 10 Commandments are to be interpreted through the life and teaching of Jesus, rather than the Two Commandments replacing the 10 Commandments.

Jesus' teachings about forgiveness can be found in the Lord's Prayer, which is considered to be one of the most important prayers in Christianity. This is a prayer that Jesus taught His followers when they asked Him how they should pray to God.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12)

“And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” (Luke 11:4)

During public worship, Christians often recite the Lord's Prayer out loud together. There are two versions commonly used in the Church of England, and at Westminster Abbey, Christians recite the traditional language version.

“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” ([Full text](#))

Jesus specifically instructed His disciples to teach and forgive sins, just as God had told Jesus to forgive humans' sins. This is sometimes known as the 'Power of the Keys', as ministers ordained by the Church are empowered to pronounce the forgiveness of sins in Jesus's name.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:23)

Jesus also teaches Christians what it means to be a true disciple in the Gospel of Mark. Disciples are expected to do three key things.

“He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 8:34)

By denying themselves, Christians put the needs of others before their own. By taking up the cross, Christians are prepared to accept suffering for their faith, and in some cases death. Christians who give up their lives for their beliefs are known as martyrs and it is important to remember that martyrdom still happens today. At Westminster Abbey, above the Great West Door, ten statues commemorate ten famous examples of victims of Christian persecution in the 20th century, known as the [Modern Martyrs](#). Finally, to follow Jesus is to accept His lifestyle, teachings and beliefs.

Parables

Parables are didactic stories designed to illustrate a key lesson or principle in a memorable way, a technique often used by Jesus. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous parables in the Bible. This parable is told in response to a follower asking Jesus who exactly should be thought of as a neighbour.

“Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.” (Luke 10:30)

Jesus tells how a priest and a Levite saw the man, but both ignored him and crossed to the other side.

“But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animals, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.”” (Luke 10:33-35)



This parable shows Christians that they should show agape to *anyone* in need of help, rather than just those that they might consider within their own community, whether that be defined by geography or race.

The Sermon on the Mount

Found in the Gospel of Matthew, this sermon from Jesus is considered to be the culmination of all His key teachings. It contains the Beatitudes and an expansion of the Commandments in the Old Testament. A more condensed version of these teachings is also found in the Gospel of Luke, referred to as the Sermon on the Plain.

The Beatitudes are a set of proverb-like blessings:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” (Matthew 5:3-11)

Here, Jesus describes characteristics that people should follow in order to be blessed by God.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to the Commandments in the Old Testament, stating that He has not come to overturn God’s laws but to make sure they were upheld.

“Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:19)

In Jesus’ sermon, He expands upon Old Testament teachings. For example,

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement”. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Matthew (5:21-22)

However, in keeping with His teachings about love, Jesus encourages unconditional love and a shift away from revenge as outlined in the Old Testament.

“You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” (Matthew 5:38-39)

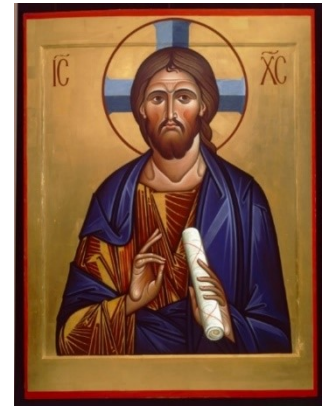


Iconography of Jesus Christ

While the events of His life and teachings are fundamental within liturgy, Christians are also reminded of Jesus Christ visually when inside places of worship. It's worth noting that we do not know what Jesus looked like. He was a Jew from the Middle East. In artistic imagery, the colour of His skin and hair often reflects the racial majority in the artist's country. In the UK, this means that Jesus is often portrayed as a white man.

At Westminster Abbey, depictions of Jesus Christ are prevalent, including sculptures, stained-glass windows, wall paintings and two icons, displayed in the nave. Christians will also regularly see the symbol of the cross with many church buildings, including the Abbey, itself built in the shape of the cross. These depictions act as constant reminders of Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection.

For your own benefit, or to use with your students, this [short clip](#) shows examples how the events of Holy Week and Eastertide are visible within Westminster Abbey.



Finding out more

You may also wish to look at our other [Christian beliefs teaching resources](#).