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*Ask the bigger questions*

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## A divine experience

### 1 John: Confidence and faith - Session 1

*To show that God can be experienced through the eye-witness accounts of Jesus and those who do can be confident in their relationship with God - from 1 John:1-4*

"I don't know if a flesh and blood Jesus really walked this earth...let alone whether he was actually God in human form. It doesn't matter anyway...the Bible was written by his followers who wanted us to believe certain things about the one they called Jesus."

#### **Q1. What questions do comments like the one above raise for you?**

- How can we trust what is written down in the bible?
- Does it really matter anyway? (There are benefits in having something to believe in – it doesn't matter if it is based on truth or not)

The letter of 1 John was written by John. John was one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus.

#### **1 John 1:1-4**

*1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete.*

#### **Q2. This might sound to you like an abrupt and convoluted start to a letter!**

**The author John is writing about the person of Jesus Christ. What is he saying about Jesus?**

- About Jesus: he was from the beginning, came from the Father in heaven, was the word of life and eternal life.

### Q3. What is John saying about his experience of Jesus?

- Experience of Jesus: John has heard, seen, touched Jesus – he is an eyewitness (The 'us' refers to the apostles – a specially designated group of followers of Jesus...all of whom were eyewitnesses).
- These are huge claims that John is making and are worth testing.

John and the apostles aren't the only ones who have claimed to have an experience of the divine.

#### The Fathers, the Sun and the Holy Post

Hundreds of believers flocked to the Coogee Beach headland yesterday to witness what they say is an **apparition of the Virgin Mary**. (...) As the sunlight reflected off a crook in the fence throughout the afternoon, hundreds claimed they could discern the shape of a veiled figure, and most agreed it was "Our Lady".

Understandably, the Catholic Church appears less keen to make that conclusion. (...) as far as Father Denis Holm - who took over the Coogee parish of St Brigid's just two weeks ago - is concerned, **the daily appearance of the Virgin Mary on the headland is nothing more than an optical illusion**. "I'm not putting a great amount of store on the significance of it," Fr Holm said yesterday ...

..."However, if people are experiencing a sense of peace by being there, then I see it as a good thing." Unfortunately, the sense of peace does not seem to extend to the locals of the beachside suburb as grid-locked traffic and choked carparks sorely tested their patience yesterday. **"I see a fence post," said local resident Henrietta Dean. "And I have seen that same fence post for many years.** "If all these people want to come to Coogee then that's wonderful but the parking has become horrendous."

*Story Kelly Burke, Sydney Morning Herald, 31 January 2003*

We can speak of truth in four (4) ways: mathematical truth ( $2+2 = 4$ ); scientific truth (an experience confirms a theory); historical truth (Hitler started World War 2); and personal truth (I know my wife loves me). It's important to use the right truth test for the situation. For example, to work out whether your wife loves you, you can't run a scientific experiment!

### Q4. What proof test is being used when it comes to the apparition of the Virgin Mary and what is the limitation of this approach?

- It seems like it is just personal truth – so some see the virgin Mary, others think it's an optical illusion, others see a fence post. Personal truth means what is true in my experience/what makes sense to me must be true "I see an apparition of the Virgin Mary therefore there is an apparition of the Virgin Mary".
- The limitation of this approach is that it's highly subjective.

**Q5. What proof tests can be used to work out whether what John says about Jesus is true and how would you go about performing these tests?**

The truth about Jesus falls in the later two categories (historical and personal).

· How can we be confident that the story of Jesus is historically true?

We can read the biographies of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). We can compare what they say. Do they read like history or myth?

By analyzing the actions, words, and character of Jesus. Are these consistent? Does he do what he says he's going to do etc?

By reading the non-Christian historical sources about Jesus

· How can we be confident that the story of Jesus is personally true? ('Personally true' means it's true of my personal experience). An example of this would be "I prayed for something and it came about so therefore God/Jesus must be true". It is right to expect this personal truth element – the Bible is about truth claims but it's also about personal relationship with God through Jesus. The limitation of personal truth to act as evidence becomes clear when perhaps the prayer that a person prays is not answered in the way they would like. So both personal truth and historical truth are needed together.

John writes: *'...that we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ'* (1 John 1:3).

The word 'fellowship' essentially means 'partnership', where people are united together for a common purpose (think of a business partnership). What John is saying here is that if someone believes his words, they are in partnership with him, and if they are in partnership with him, then they are also in partnership with God.

**Q6. According to John, how does someone have a genuine experience of God?**

· Jesus is from God, we get to know God through the testimony of the eye-witnesses about Jesus. If we believe John's words about Jesus then we are in partnership with him and with God.

· Further question: 'What about other 'experiences' of God eg visions, the apparition of Mary etc?' Answer: These might be experiences of God – but they might not be.

At the end of the letter John explains his purpose in writing.

**1 John 5:13**

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

**Q7. If John is writing to Christians (those who believe in the name of the Son of God) then wouldn't they already know they have eternal life?**

· Yes they would. What John wants to do is give them greater confidence and assurance in this.

**Q8. How can confidence be everything - and nothing - when it comes to trusting Jesus?**

- Confidence is nothing in the sense that it is not your level of confidence that saves you - it's Jesus who does that (just like sitting on a chair - it is not the level of confidence in the chair that keeps you off the ground - it's the chair!)
- Confidence is everything when it comes to a transformed life. If you're really convinced Jesus died to save you, then out of thankfulness the way you live will change.

**Q9. How does this section of the letter (1 John 1:1-4) help the readers with their confidence?**

- As an eye witness, John is qualified to speak of Jesus as he does. It is rational to believe the testimony of reliable eyewitnesses. This will help the readers to feel more confident in what they believe.

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