

WYAD Lent course 2016 - Additional notes

The following is a suggestion of how you might make the three session Diocesan course work over five or six weeks. It takes some of the Bible passages recommended in the Diocesan notes (along with additional Lectionary passages, including some for Lent 2 and 4) and offers some specific questions in relation to them.

Lent 1 (Confidence 1)

Romans 8. 35-39 - The basis of St Paul's Christian confidence and hope

Paul had experienced God at work. He had responded to God, put his faith in him, and then really 'put his money where his mouth was' and devoted his life to spreading the good news. Few of us are called to give our all in this way, although many are e.g. the Australian couple kidnapped in Burkina Faso in January - Dr Ken Elliot and his wife Jocelyn - an Australian couple. They set up the hospital in Djibo, in the north of the country, where they have worked selflessly for more than 40 years, serving the local people in the name of Jesus.

- Spend a moment thinking of others you know who have done this. How do their stories encourage and challenge you?
- If you were asked to point to the evidence for your own confidence in God, what things would you point to?

Luke 7. 1-10 - A Centurion shows confidence in Jesus

The centurion had obviously heard of Jesus, he knew of his reputation. Perhaps he had questioned some of those who had seen Jesus at work, who had been healed by Him. His confidence didn't come 'out of the blue' - it came through hearing/seeing the results of what Jesus had done. His confidence came through the witness of others.

- How have we helped to build the confidence of others in Jesus? What stories might we tell to do this from our own life?
- Do we have examples of what we have heard from others that has boosted our confidence.

Lent 2 (Confidence 2)

Philippians 3.17 - 4.1 Assurance of salvation, what the future holds.

This promise has always been a huge comfort to Christians, especially those who suffer for their faith, from the very first martyr, Stephen, to those in Syria and elsewhere today.

Verse 19 sounds harsh, but fits society today as much as then - with its consumerism and a very different view of morality (you might want to make reference to the recent reaction to the death of Lemmy of Motorhead or David Bowie - both of whom have been made out as cultural heroes. They had talents, but morally they were very far from Christian values, and the damage they did to others, and themselves is considerable)

- How might we begin to discuss this with others who don't share our faith, in the most helpful and 'connecting' way?
- How might we avoid seeming critical or sanctimonious while witnessing to the truth we believe in?
- How do we share the positive value of the Christian way, that it is Jesus' way that offers 'life in all its fullness' and not a life of self-indulgence and consumerism?

Luke 13.31-35 - God acts in sadness, not anger.

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you'

- Why do the people of God sometimes get things so wrong? How can we miss, resist, God's voice?

'how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings' - A mother hen will literally use its own body to protect its chicks from a threat, giving its life to those it cares for

- How does it feel to know God loves us as deeply, more deeply, than any loving parent?
- How does it feel to know that this love meant Jesus was prepared to give His life for us?

'and you were not willing' - Jesus self-giving was part of God's judgement on His people

- Is there anything in our lives, or our church's life, that God might challenge us about?

Lent 3 (Growing 1)

Isaiah 55:1-9 - "Surely you will summon nations you know not."

'Come, all you who are thirsty'

- Do we see people thirsty for God around us?
- How might we meet this thirst to know more of Him?

'I have made him a witness.'

The New Testament passages pick up on this theme. No longer is the prophet, or even the Messiah, the only witness. God calls us each to play our part.

- What might our part be?

Luke 13:1-19

A review in the Times on a new book on Dark Matter and the dinosaurs includes this sentence- "*Then bam! From a clear sky, like the random vengeance of an Old Testament god...*" We must not forget that the problem of evil and suffering is not just an issue for Christians but the other two Abrahamic faiths too (Judaism and Islam). Christianity though has a unique answer in Jesus.

"What the gospels offer is not a philosophical explanation of evil, what it is or why it's there, nor a set of suggestions for how we might adjust our lifestyles somewhat so that evil will mysteriously disappear from the world but the story of an event in which the living God deals with it. The gospels thus tell the story, centrally and crucially, which stands unique in the world's great

literature, the world's religious theories and visions: the story of the creator God taking responsibility for what has happened to creation, bearing the weight of its problems on his own shoulders." (N T Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, p.58)

- If you wanted to raise objections to the Christian faith what sort of things would you say? If you became a Christian from a position of atheism or other faith what convinced you?
- How do we begin to tackle this question with others; to attempt change this understanding of a harsh, judgmental, even punitive, God? Begin by sharing your own way of understanding that God is a God of love and not unreasoned vengeance.

The Cross was both the result of evil and the answer to evil. Evil reaches its climax and God's long term plan came to fruition in Jesus death.

- How much does that message give you confidence?
- How would you explain what happened on the Cross to someone who knew nothing about the Christian faith?
- We are called to pray against evil and suffering, and for healing. What answers to prayer have you seen? How do these help boost your confidence?

Acts 2. 42-47 - A model of health and growth

Look at the four things that characterised the life of those first Christians in verse 42.

- How are these seen in the life of your church? Could any be made more of?
- Look at verse 46 - how much are these things seen in your church fellowship? Would people outside the church notice? How might we make our Christian life more visible?
- What difference would it make to your church if numbers doubled, trebled (or much more) within a matter of days?

Ephesians 4. 7-16 - Growing in Christ-likeness

This is the only mention of 'evangelist' in any of the lists of gifts God gives to His Church. It is used only two other times, as a description of Philip and Timothy. This suggests it might not be that common a gift, and some say it only arose after the initial period when more specialisation of roles took place. The overall stress in the New Testament is on all Christians as witnesses (Acts 1:8).

- How does that make you feel? Relieved? Challenged? Excited?
- Do we see the other gifts at work in our church?
- Should we expect all the gifts to be seen in each small fellowship?
- What do we do if we need a gift that we don't have?
- How do we best make use of the gifts other parts of the church can offer us?

Lent 4 (Growing 2)

Luke 15.1-3,11b-32

This Sunday's Gospel links the idea of God welcoming sinners with the parable of the prodigal Son, perhaps the clearest example of Jesus' teaching on that subject.

- When did the son grow the most? On his return or when he was at his lowest?
- Do you find the father in this parable a good picture of God? Why? (or why not?)
- Might you ever succumb to the attitude of the older brother, who has done all the hard work and seen little reward? (cf. the workers in the Vineyard, Matthew 20:1-16)
- How do we respond to the 'prodigals' in our own families and congregations (including the ones who have not yet come back)?

2 Corinthians 5.16-21

The words 'Reconciled/reconciliation' come five times in this short passage.

- How might reconciliation to God affect our relationships with others (both those who share our faith and those who don't)?
- Looking at the world around us, how important might such a ministry be for the Church today

Verse 20 - we are Christ's ambassadors.

- What do ambassadors do?
- How do ambassadors need to behave?
- What affect might the things we do and the way we behave have on the way we are seen in our local communities. How might these affect the way that people are (or are not) attracted to us?

Lent 5 (Changing Communities 1)

Isaiah 43.16-21 - 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!'the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise'

Change is God's work. We work with Him to see it come about.

- What new thing(s) is God doing in His Church at the moment?
- A positive attitude to change is not always the first thing that comes to mind when talking of a local church. What attitude is there in your church to these new things?
- What further change would you like to see in your church, things that would in turn drive change for good in your local community?

Jeremiah 29. 4-7 - Blessing our communities

- Those in exile were not living in a country sympathetic to their values and beliefs. What does this say to us now that there are so many challenges to traditional Christian beliefs?
- Might there be advantages in feeling more like exiles than natives?
- How might we 'seek the peace and prosperity' of our community?
- Is there anything specific we could do to bring this about?

Matthew 25. 31-46 - Faith being put to work for the sake of others ...

- Do we see Jesus in everyone, and see meeting their needs an opportunity to serve Him?
- Looking back over the last few years, have there been any missed opportunities we now wish we had taken (as individuals or as a church)?

‘they will go away to eternal punishment’

- Is this fair? How do we feel as we read this passage?

James 2. 14-17 - Faith without action ... is dead

- How do we share God’s good news through our actions?
- Can our intercessions on a Sunday be a bit like the attitude James is warning against? How do we make sure they are not?
- What sets us apart from any well meaning person or group?

‘preach the gospel - use words if necessary’ (attributed to St Francis of Assisi)

- When do we need to use words? How do we respond when someone asks us ‘Why are you doing this?’

Palm Sunday and Easter both allow you to continue the Changing Communities theme with references during the sermons and/or prayers, perhaps incorporating some of the feedback from your groups.

Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50.4-9a

‘Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.... Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!’ - the battle is joined. Jesus challenges the powers that be and the powers of evil. Change comes at a cost.

‘It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me.’ - Jesus showed this confidence, Isaiah foresaw this and taught that this is how God’s people must be.

Luke 19.28-40

‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’

God’s power, His purposes, cannot be stopped. He will bring about changes, the changes needed for His purposes. During his ministry Jesus had changed various individual’s lives. Not just the disciples but the many whom he had met - Bartimaeus, Zaccheus, the woman threatened with stoning and the one who broke the jar of perfume over his head.... Now he was coming to set in train the actions that were going to change the whole of the future for the whole of humanity.

Easter Sunday

Acts 10.34-43

'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism''

'everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness'

The potential for change is huge - literally everyone and anyone in the world

'We are witnesses'

Called to live for God's mission in the world

Luke 24.1-12

'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!'

Change, transformation, begins with Jesus. He was changed, we can be changed, the whole world can be changed, indeed will be changed at some point. This is God's promise.

Richard Steel
Area Dean, Almondbury