

LOVE LIFE LIVE LENT: the course

Introduction

ABOUT THIS COURSE

This course is designed to be used alongside the *Love Life Live Lent* booklets. Each booklet contains 42 ‘positive actions’ to be done during the period of Lent and Holy Week, beginning on Shrove Tuesday and ending on Easter Sunday. While the booklets have been prepared for use by individuals, this course is designed to be used by a group who wish to support each other to take positive actions and live generously, and who wish to learn from their experiences in carrying out their daily actions. The Bible passages used for group reflections are taken from John’s Gospel.

WHAT IS LOVE LIFE, LIVE LENT?

Love Life Live Lent is a national ecumenical initiative. It has been commended by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. They say: ‘With God’s help we can change the world for good a little bit every day ... Together we can build better and more generous communities. Together we can lighten our load on the planet. Together we can show God’s love when we do these things.’

Love Life Live Lent is a different way of approaching Lent, one which focuses on taking up positive actions for the good of all. Often Lent has been about giving up things – traditionally some sorts of food, but these days more likely chocolate or alcohol. We give up things with a view to focus more closely on our relationship with God as a preparation for living through the momentous events of Holy Week and Easter once again.

While there are elements of ‘giving up’ in the daily actions (we’ll think about that in week 2) the focus of the actions is on generosity and being ‘life-giving’ rather than ‘life-denying’.

The booklets were first designed by Christians in Birmingham and behind them are some of the ideas developed by Danny Wallace and his ‘Karma Army’ who carry out ‘random acts of kindness’ on Fridays – see <http://www.join-me.co.uk/> or read his book *Join Me: The True Story of a Man who Started a Cult by Accident* (London:

Random House, 2003). I have to say that Danny claims that his ‘Join-me’ collective (not a really a cult!) is non-religious, but he has clearly tapped into something that is common to many religions (see p. 395 of his book). We’ll think some more about these ‘random acts of kindness’ as we go through the course.

HOW TO RUN THE COURSE

Locally, Lent Courses are delivered in all sorts of ways by all sorts of people. Perhaps the best way is in small groups. Conventional wisdom about group size is that between eight and twelve is a good number.

Each group needs a facilitator or two. In fact it is good practice to have two people because this can introduce balance in the leadership both in style and gender and have a back up if one can’t make a session.

Love Life Live Lent may be especially attractive to children and young people – their insights and creativity will be invaluable (there is a separate booklet for children, also obtainable from Church House Publishing). Do think seriously about how they may be involved – separate material is available on the website for groups of children and young people.

WHAT WILL YOU NEED?

First of all, this material! It forms the basis of each session and offers ideas for designing the course in your local context.

The sessions are as follows:

1. ‘Love Life’ – the wedding at Cana
2. Spontaneity and letting go – at the Bethesda pool
3. What’s in it for me? – feeling good or washing feet?
4. What’s in it for them? – feeding 5000
5. Taking action, making a difference – the man born blind
6. The freedom to give away one’s life

Everyone will need a *Love Life Live Lent* booklet and a commitment to carry out the actions if at all possible.

WHEN?

As you can see, the course has enough material for six sessions. This should fit with the six weeks of Lent. It's probably best to start the course in the week after Ash Wednesday so that there are enough completed actions to reflect on in the first session. If you do this, the last session will take place on the day of your meeting in Holy Week.

Some groups – especially those forming just for Lent - might like to have an initial meeting before Lent to get to know one another – or even have a party on Shrove Tuesday as suggested in the booklet!

HOW?

Each week will follow a simple pattern of reflection, Bible study and prayer which we suggest below.

We suggest timings for the various parts of the session, giving a meeting time total of 90 minutes (excluding refreshments/meeting-up time) – this could be increased to two hours if the group preferred by simply extending the time of any of the parts.

The process then looks like this:

1. Reflection (30 minutes)

The purpose of this section is to look back over the actions of the past week or so and *tell our stories* about them.

In a smaller group this could mean everyone telling of something significant that happened for them in one of the actions, or in a larger group asking for contributions (and making sure everyone gets a chance over the weeks).

Make sure individuals know that they don't have to contribute and can keep to themselves any confidential information. The group also needs to agree a contract about its own confidentiality.

It's particularly important to pay attention not only to the 'success' stories where something really good happened, but also to those where difficulties arose. Perhaps someone couldn't do a particular action or it wasn't received very well. The group

will need to develop trust to hold these things.

After the story-telling time spend some time discussing why things turned out as they did in one or two of the stories that the group chooses. Leaders can help the group choose by asking which story has the most energy and interest for everyone.

2. Bible study (up to 45 minutes)

Use the Bible passages from the Gospel according to St John suggested for each week and/or the questions raised in the story-telling session above to reflect on what God is saying to us through our experiences and his Word.

Each week some background and context is given to the passage – this could be filled in with the use of a good commentary for group leaders. It would help participants if they briefly read and thought about the passage with this material before coming to the session.

Some questions are also provided for you to kick-start discussion if necessary.

3. Prayer (15 minutes)

Give thanks for the good things that have happened through the actions. Intercede for those people and places that have arisen. Encourage one another for next week's actions.

Study One

'Love Life' – the wedding at Cana

Aims: to study a biblical example of generosity and define it
to engage with the implications of generosity for our 'religion'

Bible passage: John 2.1-11

Introduction

If the group is a new one, meeting for the first time, it would be good to 'break the ice' by introducing one another. This may affect the timings of this first session.

There are a number of ways of doing this. Here's one suggestion:

In the whole group everyone says who they are and where they are from and describes the colour they are feeling either now or as they approach the course.

Then in pairs, group members ask each other the following questions:

- What words or images come to mind as you think about your actions so far?
- What are your hopes for this course?
- What are you most excited about?
- Is there anything about the course or doing the actions that makes you nervous or fearful?

If appropriate, ask the pairs to report back to the whole group (but try not to let this take too long).

Reflection

If you have started this course in the week after Ash Wednesday, encourage the group to reflect on their experiences of doing the first week's actions. For example, did anyone invite friends and neighbours round for a pancake party (action 2)? Did anyone give up their place in a queue for someone else (action 5)? What was the reaction?

One way of kicking off your discussion might be to go round the group and allow everyone to volunteer their 'favourite' action from the previous week. This might not be the easiest action but one that has the most positive story attached to it.

You might wish to repeat the process by asking the group which of the actions they found the most difficult.

Bible Study

Love Life Live Lent encourages us to undertake small acts of kindness and generosity, and thereby to transform our world. We begin this week by studying an example of generosity from the story of the wedding at Cana. As the Archbishops say in the

booklets, generosity can seriously affect our lives and our faith and we will be thinking about this.

Background and context of the passage

We are presented with seven miracles in the first part of John's Gospel in order that we can meet the 'Word made flesh' (John 1.14) and believe in him. We will be looking at some of them in this course. The wedding at Cana is the first of these (v. 11).

The scene is typical of a wedding in Jesus' day when the feasting would go on for a long time. Cana is thought to have been fairly near to Jesus' home village of Nazareth.

It seems that the story is designed to focus on Jesus and his transformation of the wedding party. Human effort does its best but eventually, however hard we try, 'the wine runs out' or we end up with the 'plonk.' The use of the Jewish ceremonial washing jars seems deliberate as Jesus transforms the strength of ordinary religion into something quite different. It must be significant that the wine he produces is the 'best' wine.

This very best wine in huge abundance is from God – this is the generosity of God which we can mirror in some small way in some of the daily actions.

What is also interesting in this passage is that Jesus is encouraged into the miracle by his mother (verses 3-5). Danny Wallace, when talking about how his 'joinees' take on their 'random acts of kindness,' says that people are basically good and want to do good – they just need an *excuse* to do it. (*Join Me* p. 332). So if they do join up they make a promise to do a random act of kindness every Friday. This gives them permission to do good at least once per week!

Meditation and questions for reflection

A good way to enter into this passage is by imaginative meditation. The leader settles the group and draws them into the story by taking them imaginatively to Cana – seeing the place and its sights – hearing the sounds of the party – smelling the food and the wine – finding a place to stand or sit and watch the action as it unfolds. Leave space for Jesus to speak to individuals and then draw them back slowly to the present.

- If ever there was an act of abundant generosity this is it! Work out how many bottles of wine are created.
- What effect did the miracle have on the party? What does this tell us about God?
- Have any of the stories told about our actions this week mirrored the joy of the wedding guests at Cana?
- What are the implications of this passage for our 'religion'?
- Talk in the group about whether the actions are things that some already do. Why do we need 'permission' to do good in today's world?

- Will the actions continue after Lent? If they do, how will we find the *excuse* to do them? Are there any connections here with our earlier discussion about religion?

Study Two

Spontaneity and letting go – at the Bethesda pool

Aims: to introduce the idea of ‘spontaneity’ as working out of our best selves to describe and reflect on our experiences of ‘letting go’

Bible passage: John 5. 1-15

Reflection

As well as telling stories of this week’s actions it might be good to focus on the element of surprise in what has been happening.

What has surprised group members about their actions? Describe reactions in ourselves and in others. Have we discovered God at work in usual places through what we have been doing? For example, what was the response to actions 7, 10 or 11?

Bible Study

There are at least two aspects of this passage that deserve study this week. We are going to look at what, at first sight, seems a random healing – one man amongst many hundreds and think about what this means for these supposedly ‘random’ acts of generosity that we are being called to do. Secondly we will look at what it takes when we are called to ‘let go’ in some of the actions, just as the man was called to ‘let go’ of his old life and take up a new one.

Background and context of passage

This week’s passage is the third miracle that Jesus performs in John’s gospel. The scene is in Jerusalem near one of the entrances to the walled city – a place you can still visit today. The sick were gathered there, not only for the healing powers of the pool, but also to gather alms from travelers as they entered the city.

1. Randomness and spontaneity

On first reading this looks like a story of a ‘random’ healing. There were loads of sick people by the Bethesda pool – not just so they could get in when the waters stirred, but because this was their livelihood. It was a place that people with disabilities could gather and collect money from the passers by. The question is, why does Jesus choose this one man out of all of them? It seems totally random – why couldn’t he heal them all?

But is it as random as it seems? It’s a Sabbath day and that must be significant. And we are told Jesus somehow *knew* that the man had been ill for a long time. Reading

between the lines of the story it also looks like the man is not actually too keen on getting healed. Has his excuse (v. 7) really been the same for all these 38 years? Has he actually become comfortable with his illness? In some ways it is not a bad place to be – he is reconciled to it. To be called out of it by Jesus is going to cause him a whole new set of problems, but Jesus, knowing all this, chooses him ‘randomly’ from the whole crowd of the sick.

Timothy Radcliffe OP would say that this isn’t random at all, it is Jesus acting ‘spontaneously’. He says:

‘...our deepest freedom [as human beings made in the image of God] is spontaneously to do what is good, because it is what we most deeply desire. Often one is given the impression that an action is especially virtuous if it is hard work ... [but it is more like how] a good player can spontaneously snatch a goal without having to calculate all the angles and trajectories. His whole body knows what to do. So spontaneity is not doing the first thing that comes into one’s head. It is acting from the core of one’s being, where God is, sustaining one in existence. Think of the utter spontaneity of Jesus. He is fully in what he does. Christ in us makes all our actions ours.’

What is the Point of Being a Christian? (London: Continuum, 2005)

2. Letting go – how to receive well

The man with a disability by the pool is challenged by Jesus to leave his old way of life and find a new one – however comfortable his situation. He has to let go of it to receive the new life – but it doesn’t look like he has much choice over the matter! (v. 8)

It also gets him into trouble (verses 10-15) with the religious authorities and eventually Jesus himself! (v. 14) As we saw in last week’s study, generous actions have consequences for religion and now for the individuals involved. Doing good isn’t always as simple or as easy as it first seems.

Questions for reflection

1. Randomness and spontaneity

Think about Timothy Radcliffe’s definition of spontaneity – not the ‘first thing that comes into heads’ but rather working out of our best selves – our centre – where, if we are Christians, we believe God himself dwells.

Does this idea of spontaneity – being in touch with our deepest desires to do good which come from the presence of God within - help us when thinking about the actions we are doing every day this Lent?

So this week we perhaps learn that we don’t need an *excuse* to do good (as we thought about last week) – rather we do good out of our deepest desires within – as Frederick

Buechner said – vocation is where our deepest gladness and the world’s deepest needs meet.

Does this help us when we think about our daily actions, especially the places where there are surprises?

2. Letting go – how to receive well

What would group members feel like if it was them by the pool ordered to get up by Jesus? How good are we at receiving? How have our actions been received? Has anyone refused a kindness or generosity that we were offering?

Several of the actions are actually about letting go – and this, as we mentioned in the introduction is what Lent is traditionally thought to be about.

We could let go of: gossip (action 1)
overeating (action 3)
TV (action 13)

but there needs to be some purpose to these individual actions – what effects have group members noticed them having? What new life have we discovered, like the man by the pool, by leaving something behind?

Have any of our actions got us into trouble or had implications for our faith?

Study Three

What's in it for me? – Feeling good or washing feet?

Aim: to investigate the effects of doing good on the one doing it

Bible passage: John 13.1-17

Reflection

This week when telling our stories of the actions, try to focus on the effects the actions are having on group members.

What's interesting about the people who do 'random acts of kindness' for Danny Wallace's *Join me* collective is that almost without fail they say it makes them *feel* good (e.g. *Join me* p. 166).

Is this the same experience for group members for those actions that have involved doing something for others (e.g. actions 5, 7, 9, 10, 11)? What feelings have these actions aroused in us? Is there a sense of achievement and a good feeling when an action goes well? Think together about why this is.

Now there's nothing wrong with feeling good about doing good in itself! But let's think a bit more deeply about this.

If we do something good *for* someone else it changes the power relations between us and them. Has anyone had that rather strange conversation at Christmas about whether we have sent someone a Christmas card because we have just received one from them?

Danny Wallace soon realized when he started his 'collective' that he became very *powerful* very quickly – the 'fame' came later! (*Join me* pages 104, 235).

Bible Study

This passage is usually read in services on Thursday in Holy Week but we are going to look at it this week as it is highly relevant for those attempting to do good!

The question for this week is: What does doing good do to the one doing good?

Background and context of the passage

John doesn't give us the usual picture of the 'Last Supper' like the other synoptic gospels when Jesus offers himself in bread and wine (John does this in other ways in his gospel). Rather Jesus here offers a model of how to live as disciples to the apostles. He takes the position of a servant – actually, literally the household slave – who was dressed in this simple fashion (v. 4) and whose job it was to wash the feet of those preparing to eat.

So is this why Peter objects so violently to having his feet washed by Jesus (verses 6,

8)? Jesus' act turns upside-down the normal power relations between master and disciple (verses 13-14). And Jesus says this is to be our pattern (v. 14).

Questions for reflection

Maybe there is more coming back to us from acts of kindness to others than we think. All ministers will tell of the temptation of the 'need to be needed' – where the minister gets satisfaction and even identity from meeting other people's needs.

So Jesus' example of *servant leadership* should perhaps help us with the temptation to do things *for* others which are really both for them and for ourselves. A better way is to do things *with* others – in this way they set the agenda and are in control – the power is with them and between us and not with us alone.

Have a look at some of the actions in the weeks to come and see how they might be best done *with* others not *for* others (e.g. 19, 24, 28, 35).

Think also about how we receive *service* - would we be able, unlike Peter initially, to receive the foot-washing from Jesus?

The group could finish with an appropriate foot-washing ceremony or service.

Study Four

What's in it for them? – Feeding 5000

Aim: to investigate the effects of doing good on those it is being done to

Bible passage: John 6.1-15, 22-27

Reflection

When telling our stories today focus on the effects of the actions on others. What do the actions do to them?

Also what does the group think happened to the £1 coins left in random places i.e. when we don't know the effect of the action (action 10)? Other people leave books in places where they are likely to be picked up and then track them on the Internet (<http://www.bookcrossing.com>). Does it matter what happens to the money or book – and why do we want to know?

Ask any minister what they do about people coming to their door asking for money – ('I need to get to the other end of the country urgently for...') or think about people you pass in town asking for money 'for a cup of tea.' Do you give or not? Does it matter if that person spends the money on drugs or alcohol? Or perhaps they are just a con artist¹.

Bible Study

This week we continue from where we left off last week. In John 6 Jesus meets an absolutely vital need – there is a vast crowd and they're all hungry and if nothing is done things might get ugly.

The question for this week is: What does doing good do to those being done good to?

This is because our actions are like signs and symbols – they have meaning and people will interpret them in different ways – just as the crowd interpreted Jesus' action here in a certain way.

Background and context of the passage

This is a very familiar story told by the gospel writers which John uses for a particular purpose in building up to the idea that Jesus is the 'bread of life' later in the chapter (v. 35). The act of generosity of the boy is a familiar idea as he gives up his lunch (or was it his family's dinner?) to Jesus and this act is then multiplied many times.

As well as focusing on the miracle itself, and the boy's action (how easy was it actually?) we should also take note of the later verses (22-27) as these are about the meaning of the miracle (act of kindness/generosity) for the people who received it.

¹ For some fun you could do some research about the effect a man called Raymond Price had on the *Join me* collective – it's an interesting story.

Jesus seems upset at the end of this passage as he thinks the people just haven't understood what this sign was all about (verses 26-27). He has met their need for survival – met their hunger and all they can think is: 'Yes, there is such a thing as a free lunch and we'll have some more of that please!' They seem unable to make the connection between the sign and his claim to be the 'bread of life.'

The question is: Why is this and does it matter?

Questions for reflection

What wisdom is there in our passage for today that could speak to us? Is what the young boy has and gives and then is multiplied a lesson for us? Or is meeting people's physical needs in the end enough? If not, then what is the purpose of generosity? Can it be an end in itself?

Ask the question posed above about Jesus' frustration with the crowd.

Questions about the purpose of doing good are real questions which are not going to go away. They come up every time there is a charity appeal – especially for money for the developing world. Should we give freely – 'without strings attached' or should we track how every penny is spent? Should we not give any more if any goes missing? What is the purpose of giving, especially for those on the receiving end?

Study Five

Taking action, making a difference – the man born blind

Aim: to investigate the public and political dimensions of taking action

Bible passage: John 9.1-41

Reflection

We pick up again this week where we finished last week as the main question we raise is: Does taking these actions really make any difference?

A focus of the story telling of this week's actions could be on what overall effect they may be having. What difference are we really making to 'our neighbours and the world'? You could focus on actions 9, 22, 26, 28, 29, 30, 35.

An example to spend some more time on might be the neighbourhood or garden clean-up (action 9)– whether it was carried out or not. If not, explore the reasons why it wasn't. Try a *Why, why, why Analysis* where you keep asking 'Why?' to every answer that is given!

Both Danny Wallace and the Bookcrossing web site (referred to last week) make use of the rather nebulous idea borrowed from Eastern religion of karma. The claim is that somehow doing good and leaving stuff around increases the overall 'karma' in the world. This may be so, but the problem with this understanding of doing good, is that it seems to avoid its *public and political* dimensions.

Bible Study

Once again Jesus is in Jerusalem and John uses another of his series of Jesus' miracles to point to him as 'light of the world.' (v. 5) However this act of kindness to one man has serious implications for him, for Jesus and for the authorities because of the way it occurred.

Background and context of the passage

No one complained about the wine at the wedding or being fed one evening – but healing a man who was 'steeped in sin' (v. 34) on the Sabbath brings Jesus into direct conflict with the political and religious authorities (in Jesus' day these were almost one and the same, unlike in ours).

There was clearly a belief in Jesus' day that disability was linked to sin (v. 2). Jesus rejects this completely and claims that there is a *kairos* moment here in which God will be at work (v. 3). Jesus seems to want to provoke the authorities by deliberately working (making mud) and healing on the Sabbath (verses 3-4).

Jesus succeeds as the Pharisees launch an investigation into what has happened which focuses not on the act of Jesus but on its public and political implications. Eventually this turns upside down notions of who is blind and who can see.

Questions for reflection

A good way to introduce the passage this week would be to use the *Dramatised Bible* and act it out (it's very long just to read). In a very serious story there are some hilarious turns (e.g. v. 27) and if the group has the right kind of members these could be drawn out in the acting!

Has anyone had any similar reaction to any of their attempted actions – has anyone got angry at group members for trying to do good?

Try, as a group, to step into the shoes of the Pharisees. What is so offensive to them about Jesus' act and why can't they accept it?

Some of our daily actions are both *public and political*. As Christians why are we sometimes reluctant to step outside the boundaries of church and take action in the community? Perhaps we remember what eventually happened to Jesus (which we'll look at next week) and shrink from the consequences of our potential actions.

What motivates Jesus to act in the way he does – provoking the authorities by deliberately working? What would motivate us to deliberately break laws or taboos for the sake of good? A good example is the 'non-violent resistance' that some Christians advocate in the face of oppression and the misuse of power – e.g. in the past, Christians have been among those arrested for a non-violent protest at the Faslane nuclear submarine base.

Does any of the group have any experience of this kind of action which goes further into the 'public square' than most of ours this Lent?

Study Six

The freedom to give away one's life

Aim: to consider the freedom Jesus retains in giving up his life and the implications of this for us and our on-going discipleship after the course

Bible passage: John 18.33 – 19.30

Reflection

After looking at last week's actions ask the following question:

Have any of the actions taken this Lent involved group members in risk or sacrifice or difficulty? Talk about any that have.

Bible Study

This week we reach the culmination of Lent as we come to the cross – it's a very different place to where we started with the joy of the wedding at Cana. But somehow as we have gone on it has become more and more inevitable – although good is at the heart of very many people, there are other forces at work in individuals, structures and society which militate against good (despite everyone thinking perhaps they are working for good or freedom – however we define that). These forces are focused on Jesus in our passage for today.

Background and context of the passage

Somehow, despite the forces and powers ranged against him Jesus retains his freedom to give away his life. For him, acting as he has *spontaneously* (to pick up that idea again from Timothy Radcliffe OP), that is being true to who he is, has meant that somehow he *must* die (see *What is the Point of being a Christian?* p. 46)

Throughout all his interrogations and chastising Jesus somehow remains free to choose this path – even free to remain silent and accept the death being done to him. Others think they are doing him to death, but it remains his choice.

This raises questions of freedom and the rightness of Jesus to follow this path and offer the ultimate act of kindness – giving away his life.

Questions for reflection

Read the passage slowly and meditatively and spend some time as a group staying with the moments where Jesus retains his freedom in the face of his persecutors.

Timothy Radcliffe asks:

How can we dare throw away our lives? Might they not just be wasted on some silly cause, or trampled on as without value?

We thought about this last week – do the actions we take make any difference? What about the ultimate action – the act of giving one’s life away? Is it done in freedom and for some good purpose?

Radcliffe goes on to say (p. 47):

The test of whether this self-gift is free is whether it makes others free. Does it build the communion of the liberated? Jesus gives away his life so that we might be liberated Freedom is never just individual, the consumer hesitating between alternative products. Freedom is the space in which we flourish together. The freedom of spontaneity is founded on communion between God and humanity which is the foundation of our existence. The freedom of giving our lives away aspires to the communion of all humanity in the Kingdom.

One of the constant worries that Danny Wallace has is that his *Join me* ‘collective’ is really a cult – with all the overtones of mass suicide that cults bring with them. Of course it’s nothing like this – but here is the reason. Mass suicide is the very negation of flourishing together in freedom. And yet Christians and others (I don’t know about Danny’s joinees) from time to time are called to give their lives away for others. And it is the toughest decision most often as to whether this will lead to yet more freedom.

I suppose the hope of those who have been involved in compiling *Love Life, Live Lent* is that it won’t stop once Lent is over. The question might be, from this study: will we choose to do the odd random act of kindness from time to time (in that rather consumerist way that makes the random acts so popular, I think) or will the course make a permanent difference to us as we follow the ultimately good one who went to the cross for us? This will be a costly path – as Radcliffe says it may not cost us our lives, but it might cost us our sleep sometimes!

Radcliffe (p. 48) quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian pastor in Germany during the Second World War who was eventually martyred by the Nazis:

‘Not in the flight of ideas but only in action is freedom. Make up your mind and come out into the tempest of living.’

As Radcliffe concludes this will be visible to those around as we ‘Love life’ and take the risk to ‘come out into the tempest of living’:

‘If we are free with this freedom, then people will ask what might be its secret root.’

Talk about what lessons have been learnt on the course and what the group will take with it into Easter and beyond.