

Adult small group study material for Love Life Live Lent

Introduction

This five-week study course is designed to be used by a small group of adults alongside the *Love Life Live Lent* booklet. It may be used by a regular study group or by a specially gathered Lent study group.

General instructions

Outline of the course

The weekly themes tie in with those of the *Love Life Live Lent* booklet¹ and are as follows:

Week 1: Home & Family: The good, the bad and the ugly

Bible passage: Luke 15.11-32 'There was a man who had two sons ...'

Week 2: Neighbourhood/Community: From the wrong side of town

Bible passage: Luke 10.25-37 'Who is my neighbour?'

Week 3: Work/College/School: Transforming the mundane

Bible passage: Luke 6.37-42 Relationships in the kingdom

Week 4: Global: Shine!

Bible passage: Exodus 3.1-12 Let my people go!

Week 5: God (Holy Week): Focusing on God

Bible passage: Luke 24.13-24 Walking with Jesus

Each week's material contains:

¹ Please note that we have not provided specific material for the 'Environment' theme.

Go to www.ecocongregation.org and click on 'Free resources'.

- An introduction to set the scene
- A list of things to prepare in advance and on the day
- An opening icebreaker or action replay activity to get everyone thinking and talking (first three weeks only)
- A Bible passage
- A short commentary
- Questions for discussion
- A reflection or application activity
- A concluding prayer
- Supplementary material for use in the session or to take away

Group size

This material will probably work best with a small group of around six to eight.

If you are the group leader or want to do some preparation before your group meets, it is suggested that you work your way through the week's material on your own.

A suggested outline for a Love Life Live Lent group meeting:

Welcome everyone with a personal greeting and a drink.

Read the introduction and lead straight into the Icebreaker.

Some people hate the sound of their own voice. Sharing something simple, in turn with everyone else, can help overcome that initial anxiety about speaking in public. Once a person has broken the silence it is easier to make a second contribution.

Use the suggested prayer or one of your own to conclude the personal contributions and focus on listening to God through the Bible passage and commentary.

Ask one of the group members to read the Bible passage. Sharing responsibilities in this way values each individual.

Read the commentary.

Discuss the questions, allowing the group members to bring their thoughts to the conversation.

Move on, at an appropriate time, to the reflection/application activity, encouraging people to respond in a way that suits them best.

Finally, end the evening with prayer and thank everyone for his or her contributions.

Remember that the material is designed to be freely adapted for the local setting in which you are using it and there is no need to do everything – feel free to pick and choose from the material.

Acknowledgements

This material has been written by Elizabeth Low, based on material developed in Birmingham Diocese in 2006 and used by kind permission. Church House Publishing would like to express warmest thanks to those involved in the development of the original material:

Canon Gary O'Neill, Dr Mukti Barton, Revd Nigel Hand, Dr Paula Gooder, Canon Peter Howell Jones, Revd Dr Toby Howarth

Unless other acknowledged, all Bible passages are from the *New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized edition)*, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

The prayer in Week 4 beginning 'We commit our work to you, O God' is by John Lovatt and taken from *Pocket Prayers for Work*, compiled by Mark Greene, Church House Publishing, 2004.

The prayer in Week 6 beginning 'In my journeying with you' is copyright © John Birch 2004 and taken from www.faithandworship.com. Reproduced by permission.

Other prayers are taken from *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* or from the Church of England website, www.cofe.anglican.org

WEEK 1

Home & Family: The good, the bad and the ugly

Introduction

The television series *Who do you think you are?* shows well-known personalities tracing their ancestors. Some find skeletons in the closet. Some are moved when they discover unsung acts of heroism by their relatives. Families are full of surprises! The first *Love Life Live Lent* Adult Bible Study group looks at a parable that Jesus told. It would not seem out of place in the script of any of our modern television soap operas. It's a story of 'everyday folk', the good, the bad and the ugly.

What you will need

In advance

Arrange for someone to be prepared to read the Bible passage out loud on the evening.

On the day

Provide a welcoming drink for your guests.

Play some reflective music quietly in the background to create a peaceful mood in the room where you will meet.

Have copies of the *Love Life Live Lent* booklets for each person in the group, if they do not already have them.

Icebreaker

Since people in the group may not all know one another, begin by telling everyone a maximum of three simple facts about the family you grew up in. For example: 'My name is John. I am the eldest of four brothers. I grew up in a three-bed semi in the London suburbs of Kent.' Ask each person, in turn, to share about his or her family in the same way until everyone in the group has spoken.

Bring this part to a close and move on to the Bible study and discussion with a prayer.

You may like to use this one:

For all mothers and fathers,

Lord, receive our thanks and prayer.

For the security of homes and family life,

Lord, receive our thanks and prayer.

For the joy of all loving human relationships,

Lord, receive our thanks and prayer.

For your family in this place, and our life together,

Lord, receive our thanks and prayer.

Bible passage: Luke 15.11-32 ‘There was a man who had two sons ...’

Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your

son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

Commentary

Different editions and translations of the Bible give this story different titles. We probably know it simply as ‘the prodigal son’. One writer describes it, however, as ‘the parable of the lost sons’ (plural), suggesting that both sons are lost and that this is really a story about family relationships.

As we have mentioned in the introduction, this ‘story of everyday folk’ that Jesus told features scandal and humiliation, sibling rivalry and resentment, reconciliation and rejection. It was a scandal for a son to ask for what would rightfully become his on the death of his father. He was effectively saying, ‘Drop dead!’ It was humiliating for the son to return, broken and asking to serve as a household slave. The father, unable to bear his son’s pain, ran to embrace him in the full gaze of the gossips. What would they be saying about him around the well that evening? The lavish gifts of ring,

clothes and a party restored all that the son had squandered. But the man had two sons. Resentment over his younger brother's behaviour had been eating away at the older son for ages. He'd kept it well hidden but this outrageous party was the final straw and his feelings overflowed in bitter recrimination. The Father's generous reconciliation was extended once more but this time met cold refusal. The story does not tell us whether the elder son ever went into the party. The father's attempts at restoration are left unresolved.

Questions for discussion

- A well-known proverb says, 'Familiarity breeds contempt.' It's often easier to be critical within the family circle than to appreciate the close relationships we enjoy. Which specific actions from the *Love Life Live Lent* booklet could help you to be a blessing to others in your family?
- All families have their 'black sheep'. Do you share the elder son's desire for revenge or the father's desire for reconciliation when you consider those in your family who have caused distress to loved ones by their actions?
- Is there someone or something at home or in your family that you resent?

Reflection/application activity

When something irritating finds its way into an oyster shell, the oyster reacts by coating layers of 'nacre' (mother-of-pearl) around the intruder. Eventually this action produces a beautiful, iridescent pearl. When someone or something is getting under your skin, it may be God's way of showing you how to react with patience and forgiveness so that something very precious is formed in you.

If you feel able, choose a way of blessing that person or situation you resent and do it this week.

Closing prayer

God of compassion,

whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself:
strengthen us in our daily living
that in our joys and in our sorrows
we may know your presence to bind together and to heal;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Supplementary material for Week 1: Home & Family

David Oliver from Care for the Family has compiled a list of ‘magic moments’ to build lasting family memories. They are mostly things that will cost nothing but remain in the memory for ever. He will send you the list if you email him: magicmoments@letsdolife.com. Action 13 from the *Love Life Live Lent* booklet suggests having a TV-free evening and doing something with your household instead. Perhaps you might like to try one of David’s ideas this week.

It’s important to bear in mind that ‘home and family’ mean different things to different people. Families come in all shapes and sizes and may not be related to us! Bridget Jones famously talked about her ‘urban family’ – a group of close friends who offered love and support in times of crisis. Are there people beyond your immediate family or household with whom you could share some of the ‘magic moments’ discussed above?

WEEK 2

Neighbourhood/Community: From the wrong side of town

Introduction

Every year the British Crime Survey asks a representative sample of the adult population of England and Wales the following question: ‘In general, what kind of neighbourhood would you say you live in? Would you say it is a neighbourhood in which people do things together and try and help each other, or one in which people mostly go their own way?’²

The second week of *Love Life Live Lent* brings the British Crime Survey right up to date as we focus on what it really means to be the kind of neighbour Jesus valued.

What you will need

In advance

Decide whether you want to use the icebreaker suggestion to begin the evening (if the group are still getting to know one another) or one of the ‘action replay’ suggestions (if your group are comfortable with sharing more personal contributions).

Arrange for someone to be prepared to read the Bible passage out loud on the evening.

Print out and photocopy the article about being a street pastor from the Supplementary Material so that each member has a copy to take home.

On the day

Provide a welcoming drink for your guests.

Play some reflective music quietly in the background to create a peaceful mood in the room where you will meet.

Icebreaker

In general, what kind of neighbourhood or community would you say you live in?

² Source: British Crime Survey. Home Office

Action replay

We ended last week with a challenge to choose a way to bless a person or situation that you resent. Does anyone have any stories to tell about what they did and what happened?

Bring this part to a close and move on to the Bible study and discussion with a prayer.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

Attributed to St Francis of Assisi

Alternatively, you may like to use this one, personalizing it to take account of what has been shared:

Father of all,

Thank you for the positive actions *Anne* has taken to be a good neighbour in *her* family, *doing the ironing for her daughter's family this week as well as her own*. The

story of the Good Samaritan that we are about to read is very well known. Open our eyes to see it as if for the first time.

Amen.

Bible passage: Luke 10.25-37 ‘Who is my neighbour?’

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on 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 animal, 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.” Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Commentary

It’s easy to take this familiar story at a superficial level and think Jesus’ point is that we should ‘be nice to people even if they are different from us’. But is that what Jesus is really teaching here? There is a magnificent depth that we can so easily miss.

The context in Luke's Gospel is a series of incidents in which Jesus seems to be redrawing the boundaries of who is in and who is outside the blessing of God's covenant people. In Luke's account, we see Jesus healing the servant of a Roman army officer (a representative of an oppressive occupying power; Luke 7.1-10), taking a tax collector (freely associated with political collaborators) into his band of close friends (Luke 5.27-32), touching lepers, regarded as ritually unclean (Luke 5.12-16, 8.43-48) and allowing an immoral woman to pour expensive oil on his feet (Luke 7.36-50). The religious authorities, looking on, were outraged.

This story hinges on the unlikely hero. The lawyer, listening to this tale unfold, would have been angered that it was a Samaritan who turned out to be the good guy, while a Jewish priest flouts God's requirement to show mercy (Micah 6.8). The Jews considered Samaritans racially impure and religiously incorrect.

It is easy to fall into the same trap. We think God is only at work in 'people like us'. We fail to expect people of different faiths and no faith at all to be used by God. God is so much greater than the boundaries we impose. He can use anyone to be a good neighbour.

Questions for discussion:

- It's easy for us to miss the impact of Jesus' story because we are unaware of the significance of a Samaritan being the hero. If Jesus were telling the story today in your neighbourhood, whom might he choose in place of the Samaritan?
- Have you ever had an experience where someone culturally or religiously different from yourself acted like a neighbour to you? (You may wish to use 'A story from Birmingham' from the Supplementary Material as an aid to discussion).
- Mentally, cast your eyes around your neighbourhood. Can you identify anyone who is not quite 'acceptable'? Who is 'in' and who is 'out' in your neighbourhood?

Reflection/application activity

Jesus refused to restrict God's love to certain types of people. For him the more important question was 'Are you *being* a neighbour?' (verse 37).

It is the goal of evangelist Laurence Singlehurst for every road in the UK to have its own secret 'street pastor', a Christian who will commit to care for his neighbours with unconditional love. Read the experiences of someone who decided to do this. Would that be something you might be able to do where you live? Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Map out your immediate area and fill in any information you already have.
- Pray for your neighbours. You might simply ask for God's blessing to rest upon them using the words from Numbers 6.24-26 or pray more specifically for any needs of which you become aware.
- Visit loveyourstreet.org.uk
- You may wish to use this prayer for your community...

Gracious God,

We pray for this local community
and for all people in their daily life and work.

We pray for the young and the elderly,
for families, and all who are alone.

We give thanks for human skill and creativity
and all that reveals your loveliness.

We pray for those who are in need;
for the sick, sorrowful and bereaved.

We pray for all who bring comfort, care and healing.

We give thanks for human love and friendship
and for all that enriches our daily lives.

Let us commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.

Closing prayer

Most merciful God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we confess that we have sinned
in thought, word and deed.
We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
In your mercy
forgive what we have been,
help us to amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be;
that we may do justly,
love mercy,
and walk humbly with you, our God.

Amen.

Supplementary material for Week 2: Neighbourhood/Community

1. A story from Birmingham

The imam of our local mosque invited me as minister of the parish church to attend the naming ceremony at his house for his newborn daughter. During the ceremony, even though I was the only non-Muslim in a room full of other imams, I was the only guest given the honour of being asked to make a speech. Not having been given any notice and needing to think quickly, I spoke about neighbours and told Jesus' story of the Samaritan from Luke 10. Some of the other imams in the room were clearly a little put out that they had been passed over in favour of a Christian. The following day, I met my friend and asked him if he had taken a risk in inviting me to make the speech. He simply replied, 'There are some things I can't do in the mosque, but my home is my home.' As I reflected on the encounter, I realized that while I had talked about being a neighbour, he had been a real neighbour to me.

Print the following story out for your group to read during the reflection/application activity:

2. Being a street pastor: A true story

I would freely admit that I prefer my people in ones and twos rather than hordes, but the idea of ‘loving my street’ was so inspiring that I just had to get on and do something about it. Getting started was easy. I drew a plan of the road and wrote on the number of each house and the names of the people, if I knew who lived there. I had quite a few gaps! Over the months I began praying for my neighbours. I liked it because it was secret. No one knew what I was doing. I didn’t have to talk to anyone. It was safe!

One day I noticed a car on a drive that had not been there before. It was there every day and, as I passed one afternoon, another car drew up and three people got out. We all smiled and said hello, continued on our ways and went indoors. Opening my own front door, I could have kicked myself. It had been the perfect opportunity to introduce myself and add a name to a gap in my road plan, but I’d not been brave enough. Summoning all my courage, I went back and rang the doorbell. I met a frightened mum-to-be, at home for bed rest because of the danger of a miscarriage, and her parents. We arranged that I’d go for a coffee the following week. Throughout the pregnancy I was able to pray for the unborn baby, who finally arrived safe and sound five months later.

Feeling encouraged, I began asking God for a way to meet the other ‘gaps’ on the road plan. The idea came out of the blue: I was just flicking through a free magazine at the supermarket checkout when a feature caught my eye. It was a menu for a New Year’s Eve dinner party complete with recipes. There were instructions for the host to share out the courses between the guests, who were to prepare the dishes in advance and bring them along on the night. It instantly appealed because it had all the fun of entertaining without all the work! It was exactly what I was looking for. Tentatively, I posted a note through the neighbours’ doors. Unexpectedly the response was positive.

When the evening came it was obvious that people didn't know each other much beyond a polite 'good morning – nice weather', and the conversation was a bit stilted. However, the champagne eased nerves a bit and all went well. Actually, the food was excellent! Then the unexpected happened. Just as dessert was being served there was a long ring on the doorbell and in burst Paul and Eleanor: 'You'll never guess what! We've just got engaged!' Amidst all the congratulations (and introductions) the final shreds of awkwardness completely evaporated. Suddenly everyone had a story to tell of how they had met and fallen in love. And then it wasn't just me who had opened the door. Now my neighbours were leaning dangerously out of their open windows and calling a warm welcome to the others to 'come inside!'.

WEEK 3

Work/College/School: Transforming the mundane

Introduction

Do you like the radio on in your home? Have you ever noticed how the programme presenters mirror the perceived national mood according to the day of the week? Monday mornings are greeted with a weary despondency – back to work, everyone – whereas Fridays are full of cheery optimism for the weekend ahead. Do we really all hate work that much? UK charity Care for the Family runs an interesting course called *Living for God at Work*. It is full of practical ideas for revitalising your nine to five and achieving your God-given potential. A crucial element is to transform your underlying attitudes, particularly where relationships with colleagues are concerned. Whether you spend your days at work, college, school or in the home, Jesus has some challenging teaching in this fourth week of *Love Life Live Lent*.

What you will need

In advance

Arrange for someone to be prepared to read the Bible passage out loud on the evening.

On the day

Provide a welcoming drink for your guests.

Play some reflective music quietly in the background to create a peaceful mood in the room where you will meet.

Icebreaker

People should be feeling more comfortable with one another after three weeks, so an icebreaker should no longer be necessary.

Action replay

- Did anyone get involved in an action benefitting their neighbourhood or community (such as action 9 – a garden or neighbourhood clean-up)?
- Did anyone pray for their neighbours?
Did anything change as a result?

Bring this part to a close and move on to the Bible study and discussion with a prayer.

You may like to use the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Bible passage

Luke 6.37-42 Relationships in the kingdom of God

[Jesus said,] 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running

over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

He also told them a parable: 'Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbour, "Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye", when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour's eye.'

Commentary

We all say the Lord's Prayer with great regularity, but how much do you think about the words 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'? If God took you literally when you pray this prayer, how much forgiveness do you think you would receive?

In this passage Jesus picks up the theme of forgiveness with a string of commands to mutuality. Don't judge, don't condemn, forgive and give – and in the measure you do this you will receive the same back again. What Jesus is talking about here is living our lives with realism. If we live lives of judgment then we can only expect to be judged ourselves. If we live lives of forgiveness then we may be forgiven in return. Living properly with our neighbours involves mutuality; we cannot expect forgiveness if we do not live lives of forgiveness ourselves. The inspiring reaction of Mrs Gee Walker (told in the Supplementary Material section that follows) is a real life example of Jesus' words in action.

Relationships in the kingdom are always two-way – God expects us to act towards him exactly as he acts towards us; not only that, but God expects us to act towards others as he acts towards us. You can only expect to receive what you give. Jesus' words here remind us very strongly that, tempting as it is to see the fault in others and not in ourselves – to place blame and run – a life lived in the kingdom of God is one which always begins with trying to find the log in our own eyes.

Questions for discussion

The ‘work’ actions in the *Love Life Live Lent* booklet help us to be a blessing to colleagues in the work environment. They are based on attitudes that challenge accepted workplace culture. For example, when you have lunch with someone you don’t know well (action 19) you are displaying an open and inclusive attitude towards outsiders instead of only interacting within your usual group, and when you praise another person (action 1) you introduce a positive atmosphere into office communications.

- What are the prevailing attitudes in your workplace?
- How can you play your part in acting towards others as God has acted towards you?
- Can you think of any current situations you face at work that might be helped by taking the log out of your own eye before you criticize others?

Reflection/application activity

It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing Lent as a time of *not doing* something (e.g. many people give up chocolate). However, *Love Life Live Lent* takes the opposite approach and encourages positive action to make a difference. Think of your colleagues at work, college or school (or your family in the home). We are often on the receiving end of small acts of kindness that can easily go unnoticed in our busy lives. Make a commitment to look for people to appreciate during the next week. When you notice someone, make a point of thanking that person either with a word or a note or an unexpected gift.

Closing prayer

Finish with these words of Rabbi David Saperstein: ‘Prayer is not just the communication we have with God; it is also the work we do to make God’s values real to the world. I think God listens to both kinds of prayer with equal joy.’

Or use the following prayer:

We commit our work to you, O God.
Make us instruments of your grace,
ministers in your service,
and creators in your kingdom.
Help us to serve the needs of others,
to persevere in truth,
to persist in prayer,
and at all times to seek your will;
so that in all our daily work
begun, continued and ended in you,
we may glorify your holy name.
We make this pledge and prayer
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

John Lovatt, salesman

From Pocket Prayers for Work, Church House Publishing, London, 2004

WEEK 4

Global: ‘Shine!’

Introduction

Light has some amazing properties. A single candle in a high place can be seen on a clear night from over 40 miles away.³ In the Bible light is used at different times as a metaphor to describe the life, truth and righteousness of God. As we consider the story of Moses in the fifth week of *Love Life Live Lent* we see the light of God invading first Moses’ sense of personal failure (he had long ago abandoned any idea of righting the wrongs of slavery he saw when his interventions ended in murder and he was forced to flee), and then the Israelites’ desperate need of a deliverer from their oppression by the Egyptians. It is easy to be depressed by terrible events happening around the world, but it is important to remember that God’s light cannot be extinguished and always brings hope for change. Wherever the darkness produces a ‘Pharaoh’, God’s light burns in a ‘Moses’.

What you will need

In advance

- Arrange for someone to be prepared to read the Bible passage out loud on the evening.
- Use a newspaper to select three current world issues for the group to pray about during the application activity. Collect together a globe, or an atlas, and a candle as a visual focal point. You may also be able to find some objects that represent the issues about which you want to pray.

On the day

Provide a welcoming drink for your guests.

Play some reflective music quietly in the background to create a peaceful mood in the room where you will meet.

³ ‘God is light’ from *Incomparable* by Andrew Wilson, published by Survivor, 2007.

Action replay

Did anyone 'appreciate' someone at work, college, school or home last week? Would you like to tell us about it?

Bring this part to a close and move on to the Bible study and discussion with a prayer. You may like to use one of these:

Prayers for Peace

Most gracious God and Father,
in whose will is our peace:
turn our hearts and the hearts of all to yourself,
that by the power of your Spirit
the peace which is founded on righteousness
may be established throughout the whole world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

God, our refuge and strength,
bring near the day when wars shall cease
and poverty and pain shall end,
that earth may know the peace of heaven;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Bible passage

Exodus 3.1-12 Let my people go! (Moses at the burning bush)

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the

bush is not burned up.’ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’

Commentary

Here at the beginning of the story of the Exodus, the epic account of the deliverance that shaped the identity of the biblical people of Israel, we learn two things: God sees the innocent suffering of the Israelites and how the Egyptians were oppressing them. Both of these were against the will of God and so God called one of the Israelites, Moses, and gave him two tasks: to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of this oppressive situation. God’s nature and character are unchanging. He continues to see the suffering of the oppressed. He continues to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly. This is what made Mary’s song of joy burst out ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant ... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.’

When Jesus began his ministry, teaching in the synagogues around Nazareth, he summarized his mission in this way: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (Luke 4.18-19) Later he reveals the next stage of the plan to his disciples: ‘Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.’ (John 14.12-13) The mantle is now passed to us. We are the ones to go to Pharaoh. We are the ones to bring people out of oppressive situations. As Saint Augustine said, ‘Work as though everything depended on you; pray as though everything depended on God.’

Questions for discussion

- **Jubilee 2000 Global Debt-Cancellation Alliance** won the cancellation of \$100 million of debts owed by the poorest nations. **Fairtrade Foundation** organized a successful campaign of letter-writing, leafleting and picketing to persuade UK supermarkets to stock fairly traded goods. Can the group offer any more examples from the recent past of the powerful being brought down and the lowly lifted up?
- Martin Luther King said: ‘Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.’ What actions are open to you to make a difference when you see injustice and oppression in the world today? Perhaps you have a story to tell of a time when you stood up for those with no voice of their own.
- Who are the ‘Pharaohs’ and the ‘Moses’ of our generation?

Reflection/application activity

Place the globe or atlas, newspaper and candle on a low table in the centre of the room so that everyone can see. Bring out the current issues you have identified as concerns in the nation or world at this time. You may also have objects that act as symbols of

each subject to lay on the table as you introduce each issue. Light the candle as a symbol of God's light overcoming the darkness of these situations.

Use these prayers to ask God to bring his light into the national and global situations that concern you:

Almighty Father,
whose will is to restore all things
in your beloved Son, the King of all:
govern the hearts and minds of those in authority,
and bring the families of the nations,
divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin,
to be subject to his just and gentle rule;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

God, our refuge and strength,
bring near the day when wars shall cease
and poverty and pain shall end,
that earth may know the peace of heaven
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

A prayer for the leaders of the nations

O God our heavenly Father,
whose love sets no boundaries and whose strength is in service;
grant to the leaders of the nations wisdom,
courage and insight at this time of darkness and fear.
Give to all who exercise authority determination to defend the principles of
freedom, love and tolerance,
strength to protect and safeguard the innocent
and clarity of vision to guide the world into the paths of justice and peace.
This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Supplementary material for Week 4: Global

We are familiar with the actions of William Wilberforce in connection with the abolition of slavery, Mahatma Gandhi in leading the non-violent protests that won India her independence and Martin Luther King in overturning the laws of racial discrimination, but have you ever considered yourself in the role of a modern day 'Moses'?

Christian Aid, in an article entitled 'Why campaign?' reminds us of our power as voters and customers. When numbers of people speak out in favour of justice their collective power significantly increases. Politicians looking to win votes, and businesses seeking to attract customers, reconsider their policies. Supporting a campaign is no longer about chaining yourself to the railings! It is just as effective to send a letter, sign a petition or click your computer mouse.

There are many campaigns in which you can become involved. Christian Aid is currently promoting the 'Micah Challenge', which aims to lobby governments to halve poverty by 2015 through achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Tearfund issues, free of charge, each quarter, *Global Action* magazine, which has everything you need to make a difference including up-to-date news and simple campaign actions alongside prayer points and biblical reflections. Closer to home, there are local opportunities to make a difference by volunteering and fundraising.

A story from Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe - the church is speaking out

'Our prayer is that the people of Zimbabwe can live in a free country and can speak openly without fear. We want children to have access to education and to have three meals a day. We would like the dignity of human life to be respected. And for the diaspora to be able to return home to be reunited with their families. We want to be able to debate without fighting or killing in the election process.' Promise Manceda, pastor and founding member of the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA).

Asked if his dream of a new Zimbabwe is possible, Promise said, 'We are hopeful. Our God is there and he is hearing the cry of his people. And no levels of oppression can stand in the way of God freeing them.'

Networking across Zimbabwe

The ZCA is a network of Christian leaders in Zimbabwe who are speaking out against injustice, calling for the restoration of democracy and encouraging their congregations to do the same. Churches of all sizes and denominations are working together.

Useni Sibanda is the national coordinator. He describes ZCA as, 'A prophetic voice in a political crisis, encouraging ministers to speak out against injustice and trying to model a culture where there is no fear. What we are saying is prayer and living out our faith in that context is very critical.'

The challenges are huge. Those who were the middle classes are now poor, and those who were poor are now really struggling. Zimbabwe's inflation is soaring, unemployment stands at 80 per cent and life expectancy has sunk to the mid-thirties. And President Robert Mugabe has outlawed political meetings.

Dangers

And there are big risks involved for the ZCA. Several people were arrested during a church meeting in Kadoma during a ZCA launch in that church, charged with inciting people to violence.

Members of the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA) were intensely questioned by police for an hour and a half prior to a prayer meeting they had organized. The police chief ordered police to shoot to kill the ZCA organisers if there was any disturbances.

But eventually the ZCA were given permission to hold the meeting. Useni says, 'There was no disturbance. We prayed for everyone who was there. I think the message was clear, that our prayer meetings are actually prayer meetings.'

Previously, police had stopped a ZCA-organized prayer meeting in Harare. One person was shot and killed and many people were arrested and beaten on their way to the venue, including the leader of the main opposition party.

On our side

The ZCA is confident that God is with them and that he is using them. Useni says, 'The just shall live by faith. We have seen the influence of the Christian church and we have opened up a space in civil society. We are seeing God at work, changing hearts and bringing miracles.'

In Luke 4.18-19 Jesus says, 'The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because he has appointed me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. To release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

This, says Promise, is a verse that greatly encourages the ZCA. Promise continues, 'We need to respond to the situation, for example children are not going to school and some are dying out of lack of food. We need to speak out to show this.'

Useni adds, 'We are not just praying but taking practical action that identifies us with the poor and oppressed. We are lobbying for a new constitution, the removal of some oppressive laws. We need to make sure that people can take part in the democratic process. We believe non-violent protest can bring transformation.'

Broken for you

'The Bible says if one member of the body suffers we suffer with them. The crisis in Zimbabwe affects us all, we are the body of Christ,' says Promise. We can lobby our MPs to take action on Zimbabwe and we can pray.

Taken from the Tearfund web site, www.tearfund.org (November 2007)

Reproduced by permission

WEEK 5

God (Holy Week): Continuing on the journey...

Introduction

In the third book of C. S. Lewis' Narnia⁴ series a boy is making a dangerous journey on a talking horse to Narnia. It's a long, difficult way and the boy gets to the point where he cries because it seems so unfair that he has met so many lions along the road. As the tears roll down his face and he feels totally alone, he is terrified to discover another great lion is silently padding along directly beside him. The lion turns out to be Aslan, who explains the mystery of the great beasts who have dogged his path. It has been Aslan himself who has been present throughout the journey, guiding events to provide company, solace and protection. The 'lions' have been a blessing in disguise.

The final week of *Love Life Live Lent* has a journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus as its theme. Just like Aslan in the story above, Jesus draws alongside two dispirited disciples and paints a picture for them of God's intervention and purpose in recent events. The result for them is new confidence to continue the journey wherever it will take them. The aim of this study is to review *Love Life Live Lent* and to decide what you will continue doing when Lent has ended.

What you will need

In advance

Arrange for someone to be prepared to read the Bible passage out loud on the evening.

On the day

Provide a welcoming drink for your guests.

Play some reflective music quietly in the background to create a peaceful mood in the room where you will meet.

⁴ *The Horse and His Boy* by C. S. Lewis, first published by Bloomsbury 1954.

Action replay

Either: What have you discovered this Lent that you will take with you into the journey of your life this coming year?

Or: Which of the actions from the *Love Life Live Lent* booklet has made the most impact in your life in the last five weeks?

Prayer

In my journeying with you
may I never lose my sense of direction,
never lose sight of the landmark
towards which I travel.
And should cloud or rain obscure my vision,
may I draw closer to you
so that my feet may tread
in your footsteps,
your words be my encouragement
and your love my protection
against the storms that assail me.

John Birch

Bible passage

Luke 24.13-24 The Walk to Emmaus

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in

Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ He asked them, ‘What things?’ They replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’ Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Commentary

We all love to eavesdrop. We might pretend we are not listening but there’s something in us that feels drawn to it. Reading this fascinating story is like

eavesdropping on a conversation. It twists and turns, and just when you think you know what will happen it surprises you with the unexpected.

Cleopas and his friend are weighed down by disillusionment and a sense of being abandoned. They had thought their journey with Jesus would end differently. Crucifixion was not on their itinerary.

Into their confusion walks a stranger with all the answers. With his help they can see how they have been carried through trial and suffering. The penny drops as the bread is broken and the wine poured out. But, before they have time to pinch themselves, Jesus disappears from their sight.

God is often pictured as the one who walks with us. Kosuke Koyama, a Japanese theologian, shows in his book *Three-mile-an-hour God* how God teaches people important lessons at the slow pace of a human walk, three miles an hour. Jesus is on the move, still drawing alongside and walking with us on our journey today. What has our walk through Lent achieved? How will we go on from here?

Questions for discussion

- In speaking at the United Nations in July 2007 about achieving the Millennium Development Goals, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said: ‘If not now, when? If not us, who? If not together, how? ... I believe the scale of the challenge is such that we cannot now leave it to some other time and some other people ...’ Is there a challenge from your journey this Lent that cannot wait but must be put into action? What is the first step you need to take to see it become a reality?
- As they walked with Jesus the hearts of Cleopas and his friend felt as if they were on fire (v. 32). Has your journey this Lent inspired a new passion in you? What do you need to do to fan the sparks into a flame so that more light spills out into the darkness (see week 5)?

- Mahatma Gandhi said: ‘You must be the change you want to see in the world.’
Is there anything holding you back from making a difference in the world in which you live?

Reflection/application activity

The *Love Life Live Lent* booklet has stirred each of us to take positive action in our homes and families, our local neighbourhood, our city, town or village, the place where we work, in our nation and on the planet on which we live. For many of us this has been like stepping out on an adventure. It has involved breaking out of habits and attitudes that feel familiar and comfortable into risky places. It is a challenge to recognize that the adventure does not need to finish with the dawning of Easter Sunday. We have a choice to continue it; to keep on loving and living the life God has given us.

This prayer is attributed to Sir Francis Drake. If you feel able, you might like to pray it for yourself, asking God to commission you for a voyage into ‘the future with strength, courage, hope and love’.

Closing prayer

Disturb us, Lord,
when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord,
when with the abundance of things we possess
we have lost our thirst for the waters of life;
having fallen in love with life,
we have ceased to dream of eternity
and in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
to venture on wider seas
where storms will show your mastery;

where, losing sight of land,

we shall find the stars.

We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes,

and to push into the future

in strength, courage, hope and love.