

Love Life Live Lent: Be good neighbours

Ideas for Sunday sermons

We have provided some ‘starter ideas’ for Sunday sermons to tie in with the themes of the *Love Life Live Lent* booklets. The ideas and themes here are also followed in the adult small group study materials¹.

For other suggestions on how to introduce *Love Life Live Lent* in your Sunday services, see the ‘Getting your whole church on board’ sheet.

The weekly themes are as follows:

Week 1

Theme: Home and family.

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

Week 2

Theme: Neighbourhood and Community

Bible passage: Luke 10. 25-37 (‘Who is my neighbour?’)

Week 3

Theme: Work or college

Bible passage: Luke 6.37-42 (Relationships in the kingdom)

¹ Please note that we have not provided sermon suggestions for the ‘Environment’ theme. There is plenty of resource material for this theme in Claire Foster and David Shreeve’s *Don’t Stop at the Lights*, Church House Publishing, 2008 or at www.ecocongregation.org (click on ‘Free resources’).

Week 4

Theme: Global

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

Week 5

Theme: God

Bible passage: Luke 24.13-24 (Continuing on the journey with Jesus...)

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WEEK 1

Love Life Live Lent theme: Home and Family: ‘The good, the bad and the ugly’

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

Sermon starter notes

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 story told by Jesus in the passage we have just heard read (Luke 15.11-32) 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.

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.

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 older son ever went into the party. The father’s attempts at restoration are left unresolved.

Possible application points:

- ‘Familiarity breeds contempt’. It is often easier to be critical within the family circle than appreciative. How can we remedy this in the coming week? (You may wish to suggest particular actions for Week 1 of *Love Life Live Lent*)
- All families have their ‘black sheep’. How can we be agents of reconciliation?

WEEK 2

Love Life Live Lent theme: Neighbourhood and Community

Bible passage: Luke 10. 25-37 ‘Who is my neighbour?’

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

It’s easy to take the familiar story we have just heard read from Luke 10 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, 8.43-8) 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

² Source: British Crime Survey. Home Office

is so much greater than the boundaries we impose. He can use anyone to be a good neighbour.

Possible application question:

- Who is 'in' and 'out' in our neighbourhood? Who can we be better 'neighbours' in our area? (You may wish to suggest specific actions from Week 2 of *Love Life Live Lent*)

Week 3

Love Life Live Lent theme: Work or college: ‘Transforming the mundane’

Bible passage: Luke 6.37-42 Relationships in the kingdom

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?

Many of us spend a great deal of our time at work. We may spend more time with our colleagues and co-workers than with our friends and family outside work. Our relationships with our colleagues can be a source of joy and strength or a cause of stress and worry. It is easy sometimes to let bad relationships fester – to resent a colleague for something they did a long time ago – whether that was borrowing your stapler and not giving it back, undermining you in a meeting or not pulling their weight.

The workplace can be the most testing place to be a Christian, yet the way in which we treat our colleagues can have amazing ‘ripple’ effects.

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, who publicly forgave the killers of her son Anthony (see Supplementary material for Week 4 in the adult bible study material) 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.

The suggested ‘Work’ actions in the *Love Life Live Lent* booklets 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.

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 at 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.

Possible application points:

- 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 criticise others?

Week 4

Love Life Live Lent theme: Global: 'Shine!'

Bible passage: Exodus 3.1-12 Moses at the burning bush

'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'.

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 summarised 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

³ 'God is light' from *Incomparable* by Andrew Wilson, published survivor 2007.

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.'

Possible application point:

- How can we play our part in opposing unjust situations in our nation or the wider world?
- You may wish to mention a specific project or campaign run by your diocese or denomination.

Week 5

Love Life Live Lent: God: 'Following the leader'

Bible passage: Luke 24.13-24 Continuing on the journey with Jesus...

In the third book of C. S Lewis' Narnia⁴ series, *The Horse and his Boy*, 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 passage from Luke describes 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.

We all love to eavesdrop. We might pretend we are not listening but there's something in us that feels drawn to it. Hearing or 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.

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

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?

The *Love Life Live Lent* booklets have stirred each of us (adults, children, young people) 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 recognise 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.

Possible application points:

- As this is the last sermon in the series, this might be a good opportunity to have members of the congregation (not forgetting the children and young people) to share what they have learnt about being a good neighbour during Lent, or to share a story about something that happened as a result of carrying out the actions.
- You might also want to challenge the congregation to think of one way in which they will continue to make a difference after Lent has ended. This could also be the subject of prayer.