

Count your blessings:

A small group session for Lent 2008

\$20 billion (£9.8 billion) is spent on cosmetics in the United States each year – more than double the \$9 billion (£4.43 billion) it would take to provide basic water and sanitation for everyone.

We live in an upside-down world. A quick glance at any newspaper reveals many stark contrasts like these. But it doesn't have to be this way. The kingdom of God offers us a new way of living, asking that we turn our own lives upside down in order to put things right in the world.

Introduction: A fresh look at Lent

Lent is traditionally a time to simplify our lives, withdraw and focus on God's love and purposes, following Jesus' example of fasting and prayer in the desert. It's also a good time to look at God's emotional, physical and material provision for us, and ask what life might look like without that provision. And of course Lent prepares us for Easter, allowing us the time and focus to contemplate God's 'incredible gift' to us: God's son, given so that we might have life.

But contemplating God's gifts to us can also be a difficult process. It raises questions about poverty and wealth, and the enormous gulf that seems to exist between different individuals and communities. To answer such huge questions is challenging, perhaps impossible. But a deeper understanding of what it means to give and receive will enrich our understanding of the character of God, and can help us look at these questions in a new light.

For this session you will need:

A Bible; a piece of paper and pen for each group member; enough copies of *Count Your Blessings* for each person (you can download copies at www.christianaid.org.uk/getinvolved).

Worship: Rich blessings

Give a piece of paper to each person in the group. Ask them to write down three blessings to thank God for this week.

Sing *Blessed be your name* by Matt and Beth Redman. Or, if you'd prefer, simply read out the words, taking time to reflect upon their meaning. Words and music can be found at shop.kingswaysongs.com

Word: The desert and the harvest

Read aloud **Matthew 4:1-11** and **2 Corinthians 9:6-15**.

World: Najibé's desert

Nominate a group member to read Najibé's story:



Christian Aid/Felicia Webb

Painfully shy and fragile, Najibé was a child bride at the age of 13. Her family's poverty meant they felt they must give her away in marriage as soon as her fiancé presented them with the bride-price. Najibé, now 14, has been taken out of school and is now a carpet weaver and domestic help in her in-laws' house in Housche village, in Afghanistan. Although her parents laid down a condition that the marriage should not be consummated for five years, Najibé is a child thrown into an adult world. She says: 'I wasn't excited on my wedding day. I was sad because it meant I would leave my home... I wasn't ready...'

Najibé now has little prospect of a future other than child-rearing. She misses school and feels very trapped. 'I weave carpets all day – from the moment I wake up in the morning. And when I am carpet weaving I'm not allowed to leave the house... I also cook dinner and lunch, and afterwards I wash the dishes. I pour tea, I wash the glasses, I do the laundry... I just want to study my lessons – that's all. I was a good student. I wished for everything when I was in school; I wanted to be a teacher.'

Through democratically elected groups called *shuras*, set up by Christian Aid partner AHDA, Afghan people are working together for change, trying to counter the devastating effects poverty has on the lives of people like Najibé. It is hoped that through rights-awareness training, the all-female shura in Housche will eventually prevent other young girls from suffering Najibé's fate.

Discussion: The upside-down kingdom

Break into groups and discuss the questions below. If you are short of time, ask some groups to talk through the first passage, and others the second, and then gather together again to summarise the different threads of discussion.

Matthew 4:1-11

As Jesus withdraws to spend time with his heavenly father we see a new view of the kingdom unfold. The ideal of the earthly kingdom which stores up wealth for itself is rejected in favour of God's kingdom in which Jesus trusts entirely in God for all things.

- Re-read verses 1-4. What does it mean to live on every word that comes from the mouth of God? What practical implications might this have for our everyday lives?
- God's provision is not always as we initially hope or expect it to be. Discuss the times when God has met particular needs in unexpected ways.
- Now read verses 8-11. Earthly kingdoms put the emphasis on individual human lives, often to the detriment of family life, and the local and global community. God's kingdom puts God at the centre of all life. Discuss the radical effect the kingdom of God could have on your own lives and the lives of others you touch, either directly or indirectly.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

In today's society we are taught to see the act of giving as ending with the recipient, and this can colour our understanding of this passage in Corinthians. We begin to wonder whether God's understanding of giving is transactional – that if

we give, we get back; and that those who haven't got haven't given enough. But this is not God's way. All God's gifts to us are designed to be life-giving. By their very nature they must go on giving – strengthening us so that we can give to others more easily; transforming us and those around us.

- Begin by reading verse 6. What does this seem to mean for our own lives, and for the lives of people like Najibé across the world?
- Now read verse 7 and Luke 21:1-4. An open heart is often associated with generosity. Think carefully about what it means to 'decide in your heart'. How do our hearts compare to that of the widow?
- Now look at verses 8-11. Does this change your understanding of the relationship between sowing and reaping? How do God's gifts go on giving?
- In verse 15 Paul bursts into thanks to God for his 'incredible gift'. What can we learn from God's astonishing example of giving? What does it mean for our receiving as well as our giving?

Prayer and reflection: Lives that go on giving

What we do with the gifts God gives us – our material wealth, our time and energy – is an integral part of the giving process. Ask each person in the group to return to their list of blessings. Ask people to think about how those blessings might go on giving. This might mean sharing the blessing itself, or using the strength and joy those blessings have provided to bless someone else in a similar or related way.

Finally, as a group, discuss how you will each respond to God's 'incredible gift' this Lent. Give out copies of *Count Your Blessings*, and as you feel moved, commit either as a group or as individuals to use this resource to help you to continue to pray, reflect and give.

Close the session by spending time praying for the blessings and needs in your own lives. Then pray for Najibé and others like her, and for Moisés, Talent and the many other unnamed individuals affected by the situations featured in the *Count Your Blessings* Lent calendar.