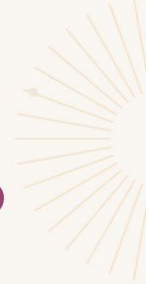




Bible Study Sessions

For use during Lent or at
any time during the 100 Days of Prayer

Travelling Well Together – Sustaining Ministry



Overview

These Bible Study Sessions are offered as a resource for the *100 Days of Prayer* in which we are all participating, as part of our discernment within the *Sustaining Ministry* work we are doing together. During *Sustaining Ministry* our presiding scripture is the Emmaus journey (Luke 24.13-35), a road that is both a road of uncertainty and loss (those travelling it are mourning Jesus's death) and a resurrection road (he is walking alongside them all the time). So, it is both a wilderness road and a resurrection journey.

This Lent, as we discern our communal way, we also walk in a wilderness of difficult times and uncertain futures. Yet at the same time we walk towards and alongside the light and joy of Jesus's resurrection, the one who accompanies us even when we do not know it, and who opens up the Word until our hearts burn with joy and purpose.



Session 1

Scripture: Matthew 4.1-11 (Jesus in the wilderness).

Value: *awareness of grace.*

Study Note

Led out into the wilderness by the Spirit, Jesus entered a place of fasting and temptation. Having fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, the devil comes to Jesus and seeks to draw him away from the reason he had come into the world. “Command these stones....” “Throw yourself down.....” “....fall down and worship me”, through these demands the devil sought to distract, disrupt, and draw away, the Son from the Father who had sent him and had declared from heaven, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Chapter 3:4). To each taunt and temptation, Jesus responds with scripture, rooting his rebuttal of the devil’s temptations firmly in that which had been spoken and written for over a thousand years, until Jesus’s response becomes a command, “Away with you Satan!” For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” At that the great tempter and disrupter leaves, abandoning his attempts to separate the Son from the Father.

Scripture is a source of sustenance in times of challenge; when all around us appears to be wilderness and it is hard to see where our help will come from. In the days of wilderness, it is good to remind ourselves again of the grace of God’s provision in our lives. Sharing our stories of God’s goodness, rooting ourselves afresh in scripture that has sustained us over the years, increases our awareness of God’s presence in our lives and community, giving us the ability to see God’s grace even when all else seems absent.

Discussion Questions:

- How have you seen God’s sustaining presence in your community over the years?
- How can we as the people of God, remind ourselves afresh of God’s provision in each generation?
- When we are tempted by despair or despondency, how can we remain focused on God? What helps and what hinders?
- Take time to think about scripture that has sustained you over the years. Share that with another person and explain how you have been sustained.
- Where are you noticing God’s presence and grace in your life and community at this time? Perhaps take time to create a map of your local community and identify areas to pray for.

Pause: What have you heard?



As you have met and talked together, what have you heard? Take time to listen to each other and reflect together about your conversation, what have you heard in Scripture, through God's Holy Spirit at work in your, and from each other?



Session 2

Scripture: John 3.1-17 (Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night).

Value: *Open to the unexpected and surprising*

Study Note

Under the cover of darkness Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader, risks his status and life to meet Jesus and acknowledge him as a teacher sent from God. But in that encounter Nicodemus is stirred to ask a question, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus’s question is rooted in his desire to understand. His literal interpretation of Jesus’s response leads Nicodemus’s practical questions. However, Jesus encourages Nicodemus to look beyond the obvious to be open to unexpected and see how this ‘born again’ is a new beginning revealed by the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus, “But to all who received him. Who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,...” (1.12).

Jesus calls Nicodemus’s attention to the nature of the wind, blowing how and where it chooses, however Jesus calls Nicodemus to look beyond simply the nature of the wind to also hear the wind. It is through the Spirit we encounter the Kingdom of God. It is through the Spirit we are born again. It is through the Spirit we know the love of the Father made known in the Son. The Spirit moves and is heard as the Spirit acts and as the Spirit determines. Like Nicodemus, we need to be open to unexpected and surprising to see the Kingdom being revealed.

Discussion Questions:

- In your journey of discipleship, what has been the most surprising thing you have discovered about the Kingdom of God? Why was this surprising?
- How have you seen and/or heard the Spirit of God in your life or in the lives of those around you?
- Are you someone who likes practical clear answers? Have you ever faced questions or a time when the answer you were seeking wasn’t clear? What did you learn from that time?
- How can we be open to the unexpected movement of the Spirit? What do we need to do to be open to God’s unexpected movement or call?
- In your community where is the Spirit moving and being heard? Take time to pray and ask God to give you the ears to hear and the senses to feel the work of the Holy Spirit in you and in your community.

Pause: *What have you heard?*



As you have met and talked together, what have you heard? Take time to listen to each other and reflect together about your conversation, what have you heard in Scripture, through God's Holy Spirit at work in your, and from each other?



Session 3

Scripture: John 4.5-42 (the Samaritan woman at the well).

Value: *valuing the marginal; focussing outward.*

Study Note

Tired from a journey and sat by a well, Jesus's request "Give me a drink" to a woman about to draw water from the well seems simple, yet in making this request to a Samaritan woman, Jesus reveals how the Kingdom of God calls us beyond our boundaries. In the land of Samaria, Jesus's request "Give me a drink" crosses gender, ethnic, and religious differences as Jesus uses his request to help the Samaritan woman understand who it is who is asking her for water. "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (v10). Like Nicodemus, Jesus encourages the woman to look beyond the obvious nature of water as satisfying thirst, to see the gift of living water and eternal life that Jesus was offering her. It is remarkable that the woman remained in conversation with Jesus. To have had her life laid bare in such a way must have been challenging, yet in her responses to Jesus the woman demonstrates a profound courage and insight, as she remains in conversation with Jesus at the well. As we read through this encounter we reach an extraordinary culmination, where in response to the woman's statement "I know Messiah is coming...", Jesus responds, "I am he" and in doing so reveals that he is God incarnate.

The woman did not stay silent when she returned to her city. She carried a question with her that she asked out loud, and in asking her question out loud she invited all those around her to "Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Journeying beyond the boundary of what is familiar to us, entering new places as we focus outwards with the good news of Jesus, is an opportunity to encounter people different to us, to hear their story and to share our story of Jesus with them. For the woman and the people of her city, that story of Jesus was utterly transformative.

Discussion Questions:

- How was the woman's life changed through her encounter with Jesus? What stands out for you as you read this passage? How would you have replied to Jesus?
- How have you been refreshed by the living water in your journey of discipleship?
- What boundaries exist in your community that you haven't ventured beyond before? That might include a particular area, a club or community group, a school or care home, or some other place.
- What new places is God calling you to as a community? Is there somewhere from your map in Session 1 that God is calling you to?



- Who have you told about Jesus and the place of faith in your life? If you've never told anyone, could you pray and ask God for the opportunity to tell someone? If you have told someone, have you prayed recently for the person you told? If not, pray for them today.

Pause: What have you heard?

As you have met and talked together, what have you heard? Take time to listen to each other and reflect together about your conversation, what have you heard in Scripture, through God's Holy Spirit at work in your, and from each other?



Session 4

Scripture: I Samuel 16 (the anointing of David by Samuel).

Value: *kindness, mutual respect, gentleness and humility*

Study Note

The story of the prophet Samuel anointing the young David as future king is set in the bitterness of Saul's rejection as king over the people of Israel. As David is recognised, Saul is tormented, and their lives become entwined for a time as David enters Saul's service and David brings peace to an increasingly troubled Saul. Some advance, others fall-back. Sometimes it is hard to sit in relationship with God when all we see is loss and absence. Yet in the story of David and Saul we see Saul's welcome and appreciation of the ministry of David toward him. Here we see gentleness and respect, though the relationship between the two would soon break, as David received the accolades that Saul longed for.

It is all too easy for relationships to fracture in the midst of change. Unspoken assumptions about leadership or outcomes can lead to conflict as one community of people seems to flourish and another does not. Perhaps it is that we need to hear the words of God to Samuel, "...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (v7b). To look upon the heart requires a change of perspective. It means putting to one side that which we want to see or expect to see and instead to pause and pray and wait to see what God reveals that we might see God's provision and God's intention for us as his people.

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to look on someone's heart and not on someone's outward appearance? What skills or attitude do we need to be able to do that?
- Have you ever experienced anyone make assumptions about you without knowing you? What was it like?
- How does envy or misunderstanding fracture relationships in or between churches?
- How can different church communities want the best for one another? What would that look like?
- Take time to pause and pray for the church, locally, nationally, and internationally, that we might look upon each other's hearts and see one another as God sees us.

Pause: What have you heard?

As you have met and talked together, what have you heard? Take time to listen to each other and reflect together about your conversation, what have you heard in Scripture, through God's Holy Spirit at work in your, and from each other?



Session 5

Scripture: John 11 (the raising of Lazarus).

Value: awareness of grace; kindness

Study Note

The home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus's had been a place of welcome for Jesus and now that home had been shattered by the death of Lazarus. Yet even in the midst of utter loss, Martha's trust in Jesus is evident, her faith in him as the Son of God declared in the words "Yes, Lord, I believe..." (v27a). Death is an affront to God and the compassion of Jesus is expressed in his tears as he responds to Mary's grief bathed in a hope unrealised, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (v32c) Yet hope is not dead, for it stands before the tomb of a man dead for several days and commands life itself in the words "Lazarus, come out!"

Humanity finds it hard to consider death. Our brains are wired to avoid dwelling upon the reality of our mortality. Death is the great change, from one state of being to another, and experienced in a number of different ways; in our bodies, our families, our communities, in the things we value in life, even our church. However, we do not face death alone. Mary knew this as she told Jesus she believed she would see her brother again at the resurrection. Perhaps in days of change we need to look to the faith of Mary and the response of Jesus who declared, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (v25-26).

Discussion Questions:

- As you read this passage, what stands out for you? Share with one another a key verse or phrase and explain why you have chosen it.
- How can we best support one another at times of loss? What have you learnt from supporting others or through being supported?
- Jesus assures us that he is the resurrection and the life. Do you believe him? If so, why?
- Institutions die. Should we be afraid of the Church of England dying out? What would happen if there were no more parish churches.
- What would it mean to not be afraid of death and long for resurrection in your community? What would that look like and how can you pray for new life?

Pause: What have you heard?

As you have met and talked together, what have you heard? Take time to listen to each other and reflect together about your conversation, what have you heard in Scripture, through God's Holy Spirit at work in your, and from each other?



Session 6

Scripture: Acts 8 (Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch on a wilderness road and they find water in which he is baptised).

Value: *creative, courageous, open to the unexpected and surprising*

Study Note

It takes courage to keep going. Stephen had been stoned to death. Saul was ravaging the church and dragging people to prison. Severe persecution affected the church in Jerusalem. Yet those who had been scattered continued to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ; crucified, died, and risen. They were telling whoever would hear that the Kingdom of God had come and now was the time to repent, believe the good news, and be baptised. Philip was one of the seven chosen to serve when the apostles prayed and laid hands on them (Acts 6:1-6). Hard-pressed on every side, yet still Philip served with courage and in the power of the Spirit, making Jesus known to all who would hear and believe. At the heart of Philip's service was obedience to the one who had called him. An angel of the Lord tells him, "Get up and go toward the south to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza." Philip is obedient to God's call and in doing so meets an Ethiopian eunuch from the court of Queen Candace who would take the good news of Jesus as a baptised disciple back to his country with him.

The courage to persevere and obedience to God's call can take us into unexpected and surprising places as disciples of Jesus. God's call might take us into unexpected conversations that lead to the transformation of a life. God's call might ask us to prayerfully persevere knowing that God is faithful as we share with others the good news of Jesus that has changed our lives and the lives of others.

Discussion Questions:

- How have you persevered when you have felt discouraged or hard-pressed? What have you learnt about yourself as a disciple of Jesus during those times?
- What helps you hear God's call or voice in your life or your community?
- Has God ever asked you to do some in particular? What was it and what did you do?
- What or where is God calling you to at the moment and have you told anyone?
- Return to the map of your local community from Session 1, ask God where he is calling you to? Ask him to equip you as a community and make you ready to go where he calls.

Pause: What have you heard?

As you have met and talked together, what have you heard? Take time to listen to each other and reflect together about your conversation, what have you heard in Scripture, through God's Holy Spirit at work in your, and from each other?