

Set Our Hearts on Fire

Introduction

Every morning *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* invites us to pray that the light of God's presence will 'set our hearts on fire'. This image of hearts on fire gives a powerful sense of what 'Raising the Spiritual Temperature' might look like and feel like. Our faith is not a dispassionate matter and there is no Christian virtue in being 'cool'. Conviction and care stand together as two complementary aspects of the compassion to which we are called. There is no true faith without heat and light.

In this eight-week course, we explore different aspects of this heat and light, this fire for which we pray. During three weeks of Advent, we look at some of the ways in which we are called to be a community on fire with love for God and for the communities we serve. During five weeks of Lent, our attention turns inward somewhat, as we ask what aspects of our individual lives of Christian faith and discipleship might need a touch of 'holy fire'.



How to Use this Course

Please feel free to use these materials in whatever way is most helpful to you. They are designed to be flexible and there is no single 'right' way of using them. The following general suggestions may nevertheless help.

If you are leading a group...

Consider deciding in advance how you want to 'present' each section of material.

- Which sections will you read aloud yourself? This may be best for the **Introduction**;
- Which should a group member read aloud? This can be a good idea for **Dwelling in the Word** and **Testimony**. Consider asking two or three people beforehand.
- Which should the group read quietly to themselves? This might include **A Bit of Background** and **How, When and Where**.

The main sections of the material are intended to spark discussion and reflection. Timings need to be flexible and respond to what arises in conversation, but a good plan to begin with is:

- **First Thoughts** and **Final Thoughts** – 5 minutes each;
- **Dwelling in the Word** – 20-30 minutes;
- **A Bit of Background** – 10 minutes, mainly for question or comment rather than discussion;
- **How, When and Where** – 10-15 minutes;
- **Testimony** – 15-20 minutes.

The **Introduction** and opening and closing **Prayers** should not be rushed but do not need to be discussed. Overall, you should allow at least 90 minutes for the whole session but no more than two hours.

Dwelling in the Word is a form of *lectio divina*, an ancient tradition of prayerful reading of Scripture. Ideally you should have the passage read aloud twice, with some silence in between each reading, before turning to the questions that follow it. You should conclude this section with a third reading of the Bible passage. This is a good opportunity to involve other voices.

If you are doing the course on your own...

Set aside the time to engage with each week's session. This could be in one long session, or several shorter ones. Try to make sure that there is minimal risk of being interrupted.

Consider reading some of the material out loud. This may be particularly valuable in the **Dwelling in the Word** and **Testimony** sections. Although it may feel a little awkward, reading out loud can help you to engage with the words in a different way. This might be particularly helpful with the words of Scripture.

For those sections intended for discussion and reflection, have a notebook to hand and jot down your ideas. Try not to rush this. If you have questions, write these down too and make a commitment to ask someone you trust about them later.

Above all, take your time! You could read a week's session in less than 15 minutes, but the value of the material will be far greater if you give time and space for prayerful reflection and make a record of any ideas that occur to you.

Advent Week 1:

A Voice in the Wilderness – Hearts on Fire for Justice

Introduction

The world is not as we would wish it to be, and people sometimes behave appallingly. It's easy to agree on that. After that, it gets more complicated. We disagree on exactly what's wrong and in our ideas of what should be done about it. For Christian people, at least part of our response is to pray. We pray that God will 'tear open the heavens and come down' (Isaiah 64); we pray that God's kingdom will come 'on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 5); and we pray that Jesus will return soon (Revelation 22). In all this is a vision of the world set to rights by the 'just and gentle rule' of Christ.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, your servant John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness, calling your people to repentance. Set our hearts on fire for justice – courage to stand against wickedness and compassion for those in need and on the margins. Equip us with your Spirit to work for the building of your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

First Thoughts

How do you feel when you hear news of war and famine around the world? What about when you see people who are struggling in your own community? Or when you encounter people who have been treated very badly by others?

Dwelling in the Word

The crowds asked John the Baptist, "What, then, should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Luke 3:10-14

What stands out for you in this passage?

If John the Baptist were to be here now, what do you think he would say to you?

What might he say if invited to preach at your local church?

A Bit of Background

Justice is an important theme in Scripture. In the Hebrew Bible, the Christian 'Old Testament', God is both the source of justice and its benchmark. Israel's leaders are appointed to deliver justice in God's name. The prophets call the people of Israel to act justly in accordance with God's commands, chief of which are to love God and neighbour. The New Testament underlines and extends these themes, setting them all in the context of God's mission to save and redeem the world, offering healing, mercy and forgiveness to all those who believe and trust in Him.

Jesus' interactions with folk on the margins of society underline his concern for justice. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) showed his willingness to cross the boundaries that divide the world up into 'us' and 'them'. The woman who touched the hem of his garment had doubtless been ostracised for her 'uncleanness', yet the healing power of Jesus transformed her life (e.g. Mark 5). The Christmas stories in Saint Matthew's and Saint Luke's

gospels show that the birth of Jesus breaks down the walls that divide people from one another and announces peace to those on whom God's favour rests (Luke 2:14).

Sometimes the world around us speaks of 'justice' as if it were the same thing as 'punishment'. For Christians this cannot be right. We believe that Christ will come 'to judge the quick and the dead' and that his judgement is perfectly just. But we also know that God is both just *and* merciful. Without God's mercy, we all stand condemned, so we have no basis for not extending to others the same mercy that has been shown to us.

Justice in the World Around Us – How, When and Where?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many local churches responded to the needs of their local communities with generosity and energy: collecting and delivering prescriptions; buying and delivering groceries; providing phone-based friendship and support; establishing online networks to allow social life to continue; working harder for local food banks and/or community larders. For some, this was a new experience of living out their Christian calling, while for others it extended practices that were already well-established.

It is a matter of responding to need: providing food when people are hungry; shelter when they are without a home; welcome to those who are ignored or cast aside. It is also about finding the courage to challenge bad behaviour when we see it, not with hostility towards its perpetrators but with profound compassion for its victims.

Testimony

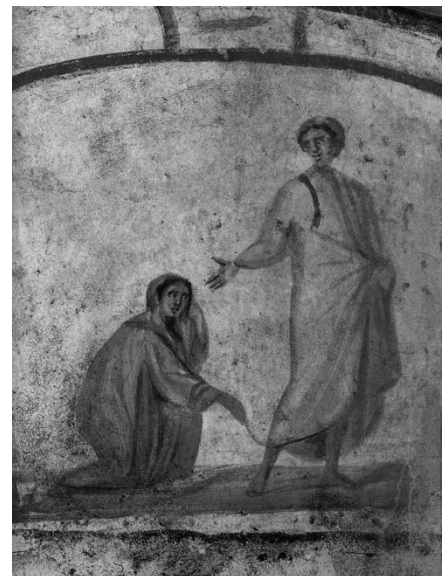
By the Rev'd Lynne Smith – Warden of Lay Ministry

When I was in training for ministry, I devised a service for female survivors of domestic abuse. I chose for that service three readings from the Bible: the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4); the story of the woman healed of persistent bleeding (e.g. Mark 5); and Jesus' words summing up the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25).

I reflected that 'Jesus taught us how to care for, value and reach out to each other even when things are as bad as they can possibly get. He demonstrated the love of God and taught that God is always with us.

'God is with us in our pain, holding us until we have the strength to move. God is with us in our anguish when we cannot see God at all. God loves us when we cannot love ourselves and enfolds us in that love until we feel able to heal.

'It can be hard, perhaps impossible, to believe when our lives are shattered and we feel trapped and afraid, but every act of kindness, every look of acknowledgement, every glimmer of hope, shows us that God is standing right beside us.'



Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, inspire us with the example of Christ to reach past the barriers that divide us and invite everyone to encounter your love and mercy. Give us compassion and courage to stand against wrongdoing and set our hearts on fire for justice. Amen.

Advent Week 2:

Yours are the hands – hearts on fire for service

Introduction

St Paul teaches us that we are the 'body of Christ' (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12). Jesus taught his disciples that 'just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). Responding to human need with loving service is the third mark of Christian mission. All this points us towards the importance of being a Church that serves the community in which it is set. Our parishes and partnerships are called to be the people and the places where God can be met and known.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, your Son Jesus taught us to love and care for those in need. Set our hearts on fire for service; eager to meet you as we meet others' needs. Equip us with your Spirit to work for the building of your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

First Thoughts

How do you respond when people in your own family, community or church need your help? Does it depend on the person? Or the need? Try to be honest even if this feels challenging.

Dwelling in the Word

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had reclined again, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

John 13:3-5;12-17

What stands out for you in this passage?

Jesus does not refuse the title of 'Lord' yet washes his disciples' feet. What can we learn from this about leadership and authority in the Church?

Can you think of examples of how Jesus' teaching about service is followed in your local church?

A Bit of Background

There are many passages in Scripture in which Jesus underlines the importance of service. Some of these passages are profoundly challenging. For example, in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46), our Lord equates our service of others with service offered to Jesus himself.

Christians are called to be and to become a different kind of community. Instead of being divided into those who lead and those who serve, we are to lead by serving. In Philippians 2, the apostle writes powerfully of Christ's obedience and humility in accepting death, 'even death on a cross' on our behalf. The passage goes on: 'Therefore God has highly exalted Him and given him the name that is above every other name'. Think about that 'therefore'. It's not 'nevertheless' or 'despite all this'. Christ's authority and Lordship are in perfect alignment with his self-giving, sacrificial obedience to the Father's will in loving service of all humanity.

This is surely stirring stuff! A detached admiration for the Christian gospel is only possible if we fail to understand it. In 2 Corinthians 5 the apostle writes that 'the love of Christ *constrains* us'. When we recognise and receive the amazing love of Jesus, we respond with love for others.

Serving Christ in One Another – How, When and Where?

The world is full of need. Sometimes that need can seem overwhelming. We can struggle to know where to begin to respond. Our own needs may also seem to be quite enough – sometimes too much – for us to handle. Phrases like 'God helps those who help themselves' and 'Charity begins at home' may offer themselves as convenient excuses, although neither is a strictly Christian sentiment.

The 'how, when and where' of serving others is perhaps better thought of in relation to Theodore Roosevelt's axiom: 'Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.' As Christians, it is important to reflect prayerfully on our experience, asking God to help us discern His will and respond accordingly. Rather than allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by problems that are beyond us, we can pray that God will equip us to do what we can with what we have.

Testimony

We had ordered too much food. There was nothing unusual about this – there were too many things on the menu that we liked. We took our time, we did our best, but at the end of the evening there was still enough food to feed us both all over again. On another night it might just have been thrown away, but that evening we asked to have it boxed up so that we could take it away.

On the way home we ran into a couple on the bridge, asking for money. Our immediate reaction was anxious. We had no cash, and other recent experiences had made us wonder about the wisdom of giving money in these circumstances anyway. What should we do?

What happened next was not the result of direct, conscious thought or prayer. In some ways, it felt as though I was observing myself from afar as I said, 'I haven't got any money, but I have got some curry. Would you like it?'

The reaction was ecstatic. Quite obviously, we were meeting a real need. Two hungry people would be well fed from food that 20 minutes earlier was at risk of going in the bin. God had already given us the resources to do what we could, with what we had, where we were.

Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, teach us how to serve Christ in one another.

Help us to do what we can, with what we have, where we are
and set our hearts on fire for service. Amen.

Advent Week 3

Holy, holy, holy – hearts on fire in worship

Introduction

Worship, we often say, is ‘our duty and our joy’. If we’re honest, it may sometimes feel more like a duty than a joy. Up to a point, that’s fine – worship is quite properly a matter of obedience and discipline, something that we must *choose* to do and to keep doing, even when we don’t much feel like it. Yet it’s important not to lose touch with the emotion, the joy in particular. Worship invites our focused attention on God who created us, who loves us and who has redeemed us. A heart left cold by those thoughts would indeed be a heart of stone!

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, your Son Jesus taught us to worship you in spirit and in truth. Set our hearts on fire in worship, loving you with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Equip us with your Spirit to work for the building of your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

First Thoughts

What is Sunday morning like for you? Does the thought of going to church excite you? Or would you rather stay in bed, or go for a coffee, or go shopping? Does it vary from week to week? What makes the difference? Try to be honest even if this feels challenging.

Dwelling in the Word

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshipped.

Revelation 5:11-end

What stands out for you in this passage?

What do you think St John’s vision of worship in heaven has to teach us about worship here on earth?

Are there any examples of when earthly worship has felt particularly heavenly to you?

A Bit of Background

Worship is one of the central themes we encounter in Scripture. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5) insist that only God may be worshipped – the sin of worshipping any other god, or anything that is not God, is called idolatry. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4) he reminded the tempter of words from Deuteronomy 6; “You shall worship the LORD your God and only Him shall you serve”. He taught his disciples that they must worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). St John’s vision of heaven in Revelation 4 and 5 reminds us that the final destiny of redeemed human beings is worship.

Indeed, worship is merely the proper response of a created being to its creator. It is not, first and foremost, a procedure or a script but rather something that is called forth in us when we catch a glimpse – usually it is only a glimpse – of who and what God is. The popular hymn puts it well: “Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee, How great Thou art!”

Participating in public worship is one of the distinguishing features of the Christian way of life. It may be, however, that we lose focus on these principles. Preoccupation with rotas, music choices, and different ‘styles’ of service may deflect our attention away from the object of our worship – God, who commands our worship. It is He alone who deserves our worship, and in whose glorious presence we can scarcely do anything other than worship.

Joining in Heaven’s Song – How, When and Where?

When it comes to worship, these questions carry very different weights. If we ask ‘where do we worship’ the obvious answer is that we worship in church. And it is a good answer. Scripture tells us not to neglect the practice of coming together for worship (Hebrews 10), and the church building is most importantly a place where people gather for this purpose. While we may also find it possible, even desirable, to worship in other places, it is important to remember that worship is something we need to do *together*.

The question of ‘when’ we worship provokes a little more disagreement, as anyone who has ever tried to change a service time will testify! Christians have long gathered for worship on Sundays to mark the fact that Jesus’ resurrection was revealed on a Sunday, the day after the Jewish Sabbath. That has never meant, however, that worship is *limited* to Sundays. Taking other opportunities to gather for worship can be helpful in many ways.

It is when we ask ‘how’ we worship that disagreements become most sharp. The Church of England holds together in communion people with hugely varied views and preferences. As we’ve already seen, Jesus insisted that we must worship ‘in spirit and in truth’, but what does that mean? That is a huge question without a complete answer. One thing seems clear, though: the ‘how’ of worship has at least as much to do with attitude and intention as it does with content and style.

Testimony

I was attending a Christian convention with my parents and sister. It was the last day and over a thousand people were gathered in a huge tent for the final act of worship, a celebration of Holy Communion. The service was simple to the point of austerity. It came to the moment when communion would be distributed to the congregation. When the musicians had received, the pianist began playing the hymn ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’. It was clear that none of what happened next had been planned. The congregation began to sing along, quietly. No one had been given a copy of the words, but a thousand people sang four verses of that hymn from memory. It remains in my memory as an example of worship that transcended opinion, preference and plan.

Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, teach us how to worship you in spirit and in truth.

Help us to offer you the best of what we have and what we are

and set our hearts on fire in worship. Amen.

Lent Week 1:

‘These things I pray’ – hearts on fire, day by day

Introduction

St Richard of Chichester’s famous prayer asks that he may know Christ more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly, ‘day by day’. Being a Christian is not just for Sundays. Many people struggle, though, to find the right way of living out their faith on a day-to-day basis. St Richard had a deep desire to know Christ, to love Christ and to follow Christ. It echoes the longing expressed in Psalm 42 – ‘my soul is athirst for God, even for the living God’. Any pattern of daily prayer, study and witness is best rooted in a profound yearning for God.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, you have taught us the surpassing value of knowing Jesus. Set our hearts on fire day by day, that our whole lives may be guided by your will and shaped by the example of Christ. Equip us with your Spirit to work for the building of your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

First Thoughts

How do you fill your days? All of us need to eat and to sleep. Some of us go out to work and most of us have commitments to our families and friends. We tend our homes and gardens; we have fun. What does all that look like in your life? Does being a Christian influence you in the way you go about these things? Try to be honest even if this feels challenging.

Dwelling in the Word

The presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, “O King Darius, live forever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to any god or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.” Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.

Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.

Daniel 6:6-10

What stands out for you in this passage?

Daniel was faithful in daily prayer, even though by doing so he risked his life. What does his example have to teach us about the importance of ‘saying our prayers’?

What pattern of daily prayer would be best for you? Why?

A Bit of Background

Saint Matthew’s gospel tells us about a discussion Jesus had with some religious leaders (Matthew 22:34-40). They asked Jesus which commandment of God was the greatest. Jesus answered that the commandment to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ is the greatest, along with the commandment to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’.

An interesting thing about these commandments is that it is not possible to obey them on a part-time basis. We can obey speed limits when driving but ignore them when sitting at home. Traffic

laws, like many others, are specific to a context. But a law that requires us to love God with every fibre of our being must also require us to love God all of the time.

Being a Christian is not a recurring appointment in a diary, or something that we mention in a list of hobbies. It is something that shapes (or ought to shape) every aspect of our lives. Scripture tells us to 'do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Colossians 3:17). There is no part of our lives that we can keep to one side. On the contrary, we are 'being transformed into the same image [of Christ]' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Making a 'Rule of Life' – How, When and Where?

It can be helpful to have a 'Rule of Life'. It is an idea that has its origins in the earliest religious communities, but it is not just for monks and nuns! It is simply a plan, a set of commitments if you like, about how you intend to live out your Christian faith in every aspect of your life, every day of your life. Below are a few questions to start you off, some links to resources that may help, and a couple of pointers about how to take things further.

How and when will you pray? Some form of daily prayer is a great place to begin. Visit <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer> for suggested forms of daily prayer, or download the Daily Prayer App.

When will you gather with others for worship? Regular participation in corporate worship is part of the bedrock of the Christian way of life.

Who will be for you in your journey? A 'spiritual director' or 'prayer guide' may help you to attend to the spiritual dimension of life.

How will your faith be reflected in your working life? A commitment to integrity and honesty in the workplace is important. What might you add to that?

How will your faith be reflected in your family life?

It's important to be realistic. Make commitments that you have a good chance of keeping. You can always adjust things later. Have a look at <https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/RULE-OF-LIFE-WORKBOOK.pdf> for further guidance on developing a rule of life. Or download the Ten Top Tips leaflet from the Diocesan Learning Platform: <https://learn.lincoln.anglican.org/learning-resources/10-top-tips-creating-a-rhythm-of-life/>

Testimony

Being a parish priest during the Covid lockdowns came with some obvious challenges. Among the less obvious, though, was the challenge to maintain a discipline of prayer. Familiar routines and structures were put on hold. There was no external *requirement* to lead others in prayer and worship. All the motivation and energy had to come from within – a potential disaster for some personality types.

'Saying my prayers' certainly felt more like work in those months. What kept me to it was a combination of three things. There was that inescapable sense of *need* for one thing – the world was in crisis, people were suffering. I had someone with me, too – my wife and I learned how to pray together in a new way. There was also a new awareness – from God, I believe – of how the Eucharist brings the needs 'of the church and the world' before God.

For me, the result of all this was a deepening of my commitment to daily prayer. Yes, it was hard work, but that was perhaps some of the point. My rule of life continues to evolve in this and other areas but the Covid experience taught me a new understanding of our Christian duty to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, teach us how to see you more clearly,

love you more dearly and follow you more nearly.

Help us to follow Jesus in every part of our lives, all of the time,

and set our hearts on fire day by day. Amen.

Lent Week 2:

Teach me, my God and King – hearts on fire for learning

Introduction

The Gospels are filled with stories in which Jesus teaches. He spoke to a little chap up a tree, a tax collector called Zacchaeus and invited himself to his home. Zacchaeus was so moved by Jesus' message that he turned his life around completely and for the good of others (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus also taught large gatherings, on one occasion sharing with them what became known as the Sermon on the Mount. Within this are the Beatitudes, a series of blessings, sometimes described as a roadmap to the Christian life (Matthew 5:3–12). Jesus revealed his wisdom to his closest followers, his disciples, whether that be a lesson in how to pray, in the form of the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1–4), or by preparing them for their future ministry (Luke 10:1–20). Through parables, sermons, and in conversation, Jesus taught those around him, and they in turn shared their experiences and their newfound or growing faith in Him.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, our scriptures are filled with women and men who felt compelled to see and hear the man who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6), and to learn from him. Create in us hearts which are equally eager to look for him, to listen and to learn. Place onto our lips each day the prayer, *Teach me my God and King*, and help us too to be teachers of the faith to others. Amen.

First Thoughts

Who have been your teachers of the faith? How do you feel about learning new things? Are you a little nervous to ask questions about the Christian faith, the Bible, or about God? Do you know where to go to find help in unpacking any questions you have?

Dwelling in the Word

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

Deuteronomy 11:18–21

What stands out for you in this passage?

What do we need to do to put God's words in our hearts and souls? How can we write them on the doorposts of our houses?

What options do you have for learning more about your Christian faith?

A Bit of Background

In this passage from Deuteronomy, Moses teaches that followers of God can be directed by three rules: i) that our hearts be filled with the word of God; ii) that our eyes be fixed upon the word of God; iii) that our tongues be used to share word of God.

Moses emphasizes his message to the people he led for forty years, from slavery in Egypt to the promised land – that the word of God will never fail them. He tells them that “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:3). He wanted to be sure that his people understood the importance of being immersed in God's

word, and that they shared what they knew of God, the experience they had of God's presence, guidance, generosity and love, with their children and for generations to come.

The key influences on children at that time were to be found within the family – parents, grandparents, and community elders who taught and guided youngsters in the way of God. They were taught to keep God's words close to their hearts and minds and to be intentional, purposeful, in teaching their families about God's goodness and the way He asked them to live – the values to maintain, the practices or holy habits to be embedded into daily life, the behaviours to display towards others, and of course, the central place that should be given to God.

Becoming a Lifelong Learner – How, When and Where?

It could be argued that the sources of information to which many turn, perhaps especially children and young people, are of dubious origin and insecurely grounded in fact or truth. It can be difficult to discern real wisdom and truth in a world of social media posts, AI, and online influencer podcasts. Who teaches us what about God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? How do we learn about our neighbours across the globe, and the world we inhabit? These are questions of ever-increasing (and some might say existential) importance.

Gaining knowledge of who God is, understanding our own life in relation to God, and learning about His expectations of us should inform, impact and direct every aspect of our life. Edward King, a former Bishop of Lincoln (1885–1910), said, "What we want is more Christ-like Christians." The more we are touched by Jesus' presence and teachings, the more we learn of his generosity of heart, grace, forgiveness and love, the more Christlike we become.

In John's gospel Jesus is described as the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1-5). With our hearts filled with the Word of God, with our eyes fixed upon the Word of God, and our tongues used to share the Word of God, we can live our lives according to the values of Jesus, which will shape our thinking and our behaviour, our decisions and our action. People will know that Jesus is our Teacher and our Lord by the way we conduct ourselves. ("By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" – John 13: 35.)

Testimony

By the Rev'd Jackie Johnson, Wellbeing & Continual Ministerial Development Officer

Northumberland is, for many, holy ground, a liminal place where God is tangible, immediately present. The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin on Holy Island or Lindisfarne hosts a large wood carving titled *The Journey* by artist Fenwick Lawson, depicting six life-size monks carrying the coffin of St Cuthbert to safety and its eventual place of rest in Durham Cathedral.

At each visit I place my hands in the carved hands of the monks, pausing with each one, and find myself transported to a different place and time. In laying my hand within or alongside the elm-carved hands I feel connected to centuries old wisdom, prayer, spirituality, and experience. There's no need of a time machine; here I am always moved to tears sensing that my reality is merged with that of another. It's a little like the experience noted in the second verse of the hymn 'Teach me my God and King', by George Herbert: "A man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye; or if he pleaseth, through it pass, and then the heaven espy."

On the holy ground of Northumberland, and on Lindisfarne with this carving, I am alongside angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. My heart is filled with the Word and wonder of God and his people, past and present; my eyes more easily fix upon the Word and work of God, on Jesus, his nature, teachings, and will for my life; and in the many 'tellings' of my experience of faith, I share the Word and love of God, as I and others experience it.

Sadly, I can't be in Northumberland nearly as often as I would like, to experience God in this unambiguous way. However, I try to carve out time each week to think about where the

connection between me and God has seemed most clear. When I do this, I find God in all kinds of places I hadn't noticed Him. Then Jesus the teacher instills in me the curiosity to learn more; Jesus the teacher sets my heart aflame again and again, such that I want to share what I learn, and his compassion, forgiveness, and love to all his beloved children – young and old.

Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

“Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.” Amen

(Teach me, my God and King by George Herbert)

Lent Week 3:

Let me be as Christ to you – hearts on fire for others

Introduction

Jesus summed up God's law as being contained in two commandments: love God and love your neighbour (e.g. Mark 12). But he gave his closest friends a 'new commandment' to 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34). In other words, the measure of the love that Christians are to have for each other is the love of Christ himself. This is a hugely challenging teaching since it draws our attention to the love that took Jesus to the cross and held him there. This is not an abstract or intellectual business but a passionate commitment to the wellbeing of others.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, your Son Jesus commanded us to love one another as He has loved us. Set our hearts on fire with love for one another. May we be seen to be your disciples. Equip us with your Spirit to work for the building of your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

First Thoughts

The example of Jesus' love is overwhelming. It is not a standard that we can ever really match. But it is the standard that Jesus sets his followers regardless. How do we measure up? Are we loving one another as He loved us? Try to be honest even if it's difficult.

Dwelling in the Word

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Romans 12:9-18

What stands out for you in this passage?

What do you think St Paul means when he urges the Christian community in Rome to 'outdo one another in showing honour'?

How can we put St Paul's teaching in this passage into practice?

A Bit of Background

Saint John tells us that Jesus gave his disciples 'a new commandment' on the night before he died. This new commandment was to 'love one another'. Jesus went on, 'As I have loved you, you also should love one another' (John 13:34).

What was 'new' about this commandment? Jesus taught that the Old Testament law could be summed up in two commandments: love of God and love of neighbour. That teaching was general, shared with many. This 'new' commandment is intimate, shared only with his disciples. This is a commandment for the Christian community, in other words. Its standard *and* its inspiration are Jesus Himself. His love is evidenced in service, as he washes their feet, and in sacrifice, as he chooses the cross.

This is not a contradiction of the general commandments to love, nor even really an extension of them. It is, rather, a specific *example* of how they are to be worked out in the life of the Church. The love of Jesus for his disciples *defines* the Christian community. Everything that happens in that community should be shaped by that love. It makes us who we are.

This offers great comfort and presents enormous challenge. The comfort lies in knowing that Jesus loves us, the challenge in realising how difficult it is to obey His commandment to show the same love to each other.

Compassion and Care – How, When and Where?

Back in Advent we came across Theodore Roosevelt's axiom to 'Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.' Showing the love of Christ within the Christian community may be something very similar, a matter of responding to others' needs as they present themselves, as much as we are able. But when it comes to the practicalities of compassion and care, it may be more helpful to think about what stands in our way.

Perhaps the biggest single reason that we struggle to obey Jesus' 'new commandment' is fear. Scripture assures us that 'perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:18) yet our first impulse in relation to others is often fearful. Do they want more from me than I can give? Are they laughing at me behind my back? Can I trust them not to take advantage of me? Are they really 'one of us'?

These fears are natural and understandable, but they stand in sharp contrast with the love of Jesus. If we are to show one another the same love, we will need to pray that the love of God will help us to overcome our fears and free us to judge wisely how we can show that love to others in our Christian communities.

Testimony

In my early thirties my health broke down. I was forced to sell up and move away from London with a young family. I had no expectation of ever being able to work again. It is hard to reflect on that period of my life, as much because the illness itself had an adverse impact on my memory as because of the painful nature of the experience.

This is not a story of how local Christians rallied round to provide non-stop practical support! We would not have welcomed that, nor would it have helped us. What our new church community gave us was something different and infinitely more valuable – acceptance. With hindsight, they must have had many questions, but there were no impertinent enquiries (well not many, at least!) just quiet kindness and the reassurance of knowing that we were welcome. Over time, as my health (unexpectedly) improved, we found that we had roles to play in that community, that we were valued. The love we were shown didn't infantilise us or tempt us into an unhelpful dependency. It called us back into the light, and I will always be grateful.

Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to love as Jesus loved.

May our lives and our churches be recognised by our love as truly Yours.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lent Week 4:

All things come from you – hearts on fire with generosity

Introduction

Psalm 24 tells us that ‘the earth is Lord’s and all that fills it’. Thinking about the world as belonging to God is not the easiest thing. It becomes especially challenging when we realise that this includes our own possessions, our own money. A deep suspicion of material wealth is present in much of our Christian tradition and to this day some Christians are called to a vow of poverty. All Christians must reflect on how they use their gifts of time, treasure and talent to help in the building of God’s kingdom.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, you have commanded us to be cheerful in giving and generous to those in need. Help us to be thankful for your gifts to us and to be willing to share. Equip us with your Spirit to work for the building of your kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

First Thoughts

Being a Christian has economic implications. That is perhaps an uncomfortable truth, but not one that is easily avoided. How much of a connection do we make between our faith and our material possessions? Do we pray about what we have, what we spend and what we give? Try to be honest even if it’s difficult.

Dwelling in the Word

Then David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly; David said, “Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.

“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”

1 Chronicles 29:10-14

What stands out for you in this passage?

King David’s thanksgiving prayer indicates that everything that we think of as ‘ours’ is a gift from God. How do you feel about that idea?

If we agree that our money, time and talents are all ‘ours’ through God’s generosity, how should we be using them?

A Bit of Background

When it comes to money, Scripture is full of warnings. The most famous is also quite commonly mis-quoted. What the first letter to Timothy actually says is, ‘the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains’ (1 Timothy 6:10). So while it is not Scriptural to say that ‘Money is the root of all evil’ the warning is plain. The love of money, the desire for money, the worship of money even, are temptations to be vigorously resisted. Saint Paul writes that ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Corinthians 9:7). This would be difficult without a generous heart! The willingness to use our material wealth, whether it is great or small, for God’s glory and the building of God’s kingdom, is what really matters.

Jesus said that 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:25). Although a handful of people have tried to argue for a 'prosperity gospel', suggesting that God rewards the faithful with wealth and health, the mainstream of the Christian tradition has been more cautious of money. It is common for those called to live in religious communities to make a vow of poverty. Most of us will find ourselves somewhere less extreme! But our Christian duty to understand the way that we use our money and possessions as part of our loving service of God and neighbour is clear.

Living and Giving – How, When and Where?

Christian generosity must be realistic and responsive. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Saint Paul writes that the faithful should 'put aside and save whatever extra you earn'. And in 1 John 3:17 we read 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?' (Those words are familiar from the Book of Common Prayer service of Holy Communion.)

In practice, many Christians find it helpful to allocate a certain proportion of their income after tax. Some of this might be given to their local church in support of the Christian mission and ministry there. Some might be kept to allow them to respond to emergency appeals, secular charities and other good causes. Whereas the Old Testament prescribed the giving of 'tithes' (e.g. Leviticus 27:30-32), the New Testament emphasis seems to be more on the transformation of attitudes from obligation to generosity.

Scripture is consistent in teaching us that all of our material goods are gifts from God's own generous heart. Our own generosity is a response to His: for a person of faith, the proper response is gratitude for what we have received and generosity in our own turn.

Testimony

Since the late 1980s I have been a regular visitor to the Channel Islands. Since shortly after the first World War, Jersey has been considered a 'tax haven' and the finance industry is now the largest sector of the island's economy. On arrival at Jersey Airport, one quickly notices that most of the adverts on the walls are for financial services, including something called 'wealth management'.

This is testimony not criticism. The financial sector employs a lot of people and generates a lot of wealth that can be and is used for good. But for me the experience of visiting a place where money is the primary industry has become increasingly associated, over the years, with a sense of spiritual challenge. As we've seen, Scripture warns us that a desire for personal wealth can deflect us from God and lead us into suffering.

The call here, for me, is to reflect prayerfully on what I have, which has never been less than enough. The world around presents many temptations to dissatisfaction, to thinking about what I don't have and can't afford. These temptations turn my attention away from recognition of God's gracious and generous provision.

Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to recognise that 'all things come from you' and to be truly thankful. Fill us with compassion for others and set our hearts on fire with generosity. Amen.

Lent Week 5:

In fear and trembling – hearts on fire with wonder

Introduction

The hymn ‘Let all mortal flesh keep silence’ is one of the most ancient texts still used in Christian worship. It echoes even more ancient words from the prophet Habakkuk (2:20). These words powerfully evoke an experience of God’s presence that is at once awe-inspiring and intimate, joyful and overwhelming. Another hymn describes it differently, as being ‘lost in wonder, love and praise’. As we’ve found throughout this course, these are not matters for cool detachment. God’s love ‘demands my life, my soul, my all’.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, your prophet Elijah sought you in the storm, yet you spoke to him in the silence. Teach us to meet you in the quiet that we may hear your still small voice. Set our hearts on fire with love for you, lost in wonder, love and praise. Amen.

First Thoughts

Think back to a time when you were ‘lost in wonder, love and praise’.

What helps lead you into stillness before God?

How might it be to glimpse the presence of God and how would you respond?

Dwelling in the Word

God said to Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake, and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

1 Kings 19:11-13

What stands out for you in this passage?

The presence of the LORD is experienced by Elijah in this passage as ‘sheer silence’. What does that suggest to you about how we ought to pray and worship?

How can we be more open to the ‘otherness’ of God?

A Bit of Background – Contemplation and Adoration

As Christians we live within a relationship of love with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As with any loving relationship, time spent together feeds, nourishes and nurtures those in the relationship. It also spills over to all who come into the periphery of that relationship. A relationship with God is fed through contemplation and adoration.

Contemplation is more than a focus on God; it is a reflective, spiritual practice that deepens our connection and engagement with God, surrendering our wills to be more closely aligned to God’s will, often through stillness and silence.

In Psalm 27, the writer is confident that through seeking God’s face, seeking God’s ways, we ‘will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.’ The Psalmist urges us to ‘Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.’

Adoration is more than praise; it is the total experience of relinquishing ourselves to God's holiness and love in worship, reverence, humility and delight.

In 1 Samuel 2:1-10 we meet Hannah whose heart sings with joy and gratitude to God at the news of her pregnancy. Psalm 95 invites us to worship and bow down and kneel before the Lord our maker. In John 12:3 we encounter Mary of Bethany kneeling to anoint Jesus' feet with pure nard and wiping them with her hair, until the whole house is filled with fragrance. Her extravagant act expresses her adoration of Jesus, beyond any thoughts of practicality. For us, we might spend time in adoration through falling at Jesus' feet in awe and wonder, in word and music, stillness and silence. We might also express our adoration of God in acts of tenderness and encounter with people who are considered the most vulnerable.

How, When and Where?

Contemplative prayer is a way of 'resting in God' (Thomas Merton), letting go of words and simply being with God.

One approach is through the 'Centering Prayer', which helps people into silent prayer, deepening our relationship with God, experiencing God's presence with us as one who is closer to us than our own breath. In this form of prayer, we wait on the Lord, trusting that God will meet us in the inner room of our hearts.

This Centering Prayer takes you from a sacred word, image or phrase into an intention to be open to God at work in you. Initially, you might plan for 10 minutes of silence and words such as 'Be still and know that I am God'. Sit comfortably with eyes closed and hearts open, waiting silently with the words. As you engage, return your thoughts gently to the words whenever you need. When you are finished, stay in silence for a further few minutes for this time of communion with God to settle into you.

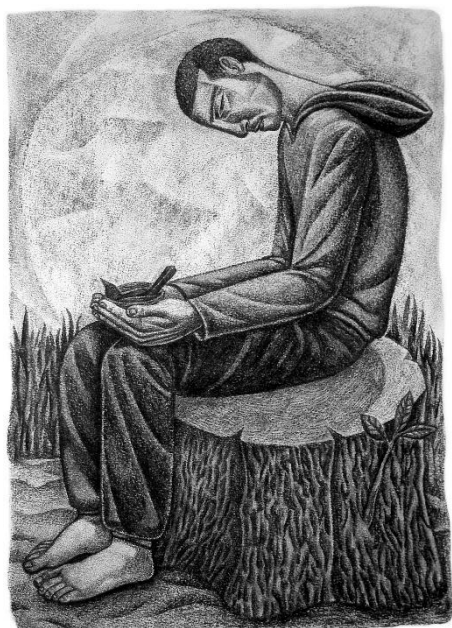
To explore some more ideas try the free app or read more about it on:

<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>, or download the 10 Top Tips leaflet on 'Daily Devotionals': <https://learn.lincoln.anglican.org/learning-resources/10-top-tips-daily-devotionals/>

Testimony

By Canon Sarah Spencer – Mission and Discipleship Officer

I was reflecting with a friend on the 'sandstorm of uncertainty' we are living through. Acknowledging our anxiety, they introduced me to St Kevin (6th century Irish Saint) and the legend of the blackbird. As you listen, you may want to relax your hands and place them in a position of openness to God. This is what I learnt:



As a young priest Kevin withdrew from the company of others, seeking solitude to devote himself fully to prayer and reflection. His shelter was rugged—a cave that barely shielded him from the sun and rain. Here he spent time in contemplation and communion with God.

One day, as he prayed, his hands open toward heaven, something extraordinary happened. A blackbird, by God's grace, landed on his outstretched hand. To his amazement, twig by twig, she began to build a nest there and in it laid an egg.

I imagine, that in that moment, Kevin felt a deep stirring of compassion. He didn't move; he couldn't disturb what had been entrusted to him. So, he remained still, allowing that fragile life to hatch, grow and take flight. In yielding to God, his hands became a cradle for creation; his heart, a vessel of patience and love; his life a space through which God could minister. What Kevin went on to do is another story... I hope you look him up. I

image: **St Kevin and the Blackbird, by Micheal Cook, Hallowed Art**

Final Thoughts

What encouragement have you found in this session? What challenge? What might change in your life as a result?

Closing Prayer

Lord, give us wisdom to perceive you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
eyes to behold you,
a heart to meditate upon you,
and a life to proclaim you.
In Jesus' name, Amen.