

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Lent with Mark

Images

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Living Lent with Mark is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org

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Introduction

Living Lent with Mark is a Living Faith in Suffolk course providing opportunity to reflect on the passion narrative in Mark's Gospel in more detail than is possible using the lectionary alone. Each session is complete in itself and, while it is written as a six-session course it could be run over five sessions by omitting either the first or last as appropriate to the context. It can be used by individuals or by groups; if you are using it in a group setting then please see the information below. Further resources will be made available for use during Holy Week and will be advertised in 'Learning Together'.

For facilitators

- The material provided here should be used flexibly to suit the needs of your group. The central element of each session is the Bible reading with the related questions underneath, enabling people to reflect on the passage and make decisions about its application. The additional material in boxes can be used as much or as little as is appropriate to your setting. It may provide useful background information for you as facilitator or further reading for those who wish to go deeper after each session. Some or all of it could be used to inform the discussion of the central questions or as additional discussion points. The important thing to remember is that there is no need to try to cover everything.
- The session opens by reading the Bible passage[s] given. When meeting as a group there are a number of different ways of reading a Bible passage:
 - read it more than once, from different versions of the Bible as used by different members of the group
 - allow everyone in the group to take a turn at reading, each reading just one sentence before the next person takes over
 - read slowly and meditatively
 - read imaginatively; that is, allowing people to enter into the story in their imagination, to picture themselves present at the scene (either as themselves or by identifying with a character)
 - read the passage and then allow a time of silence during which people can reflect, before reading the passage for a second time.

Session I

Supper

Read Mark 14:10-26

- As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you?
- The passage begins with Judas offering to betray Jesus – why do you think he did this? How do you think the other disciples felt? What is there here that you can relate to from your own experience?
- Jesus spoke about the bread and wine as “my body.....my blood”. How do you think the disciples would have understood this? What do you understand by this?
- If Jesus is the clearest picture of God that we have, what does this passage show us about the cost of God’s involvement in the world?
 - Here Jesus is preparing himself and his disciples for what is to come. What does this have to say to you about preparing for difficult situations?

“THE PASSION”

The term “Passion” comes from the Latin word for “suffering” and is used to refer to the story of Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion. Sometimes, as with this course, the story starts a little earlier, at the Last Supper; sometimes earlier still, with the events of Palm Sunday.

- How does the use of the term “Passion” impact on the way you read/hear this story?

You might like to compare some of the hymns and songs written for use during communion; what do they add to your reflections about Jesus’ last supper?

Other useful passages:

- ❖ I Corinthians 11:23-25 contains St Paul’s record of Jesus’ last supper; his focus is not to tell the whole story but to remind his readers of the beginnings of the ceremony in which they now participate.
 - How does this record differ from Mark’s account? What do you make of this?
- ❖ Reading a bit more of St Paul’s account, verses 17-34, gives context to his remarks – he is writing to a church in which this ceremony is causing problems.
 - What are your reflections on Paul’s comments?
 - What might Jesus make of Paul’s suggestions in verses 27-33?
- ❖ You might also like to look at the similarities and differences of Matthew’s (chapter 26) and Luke’s (chapter 22) accounts of Jesus’ last supper.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Sharing bread and wine in the context of a church service, we can easily forget the original context in which this sharing of bread and wine occurred.

- ❖ Jesus regularly shared meals with his disciples and others. The Jewish view of the meal table was a symbol of the life of God's people. Jesus' willingness to give and to receive hospitality from a wide range of people shows how he understood God's covenant (his relationship with his people). Judas' act of betrayal was a serious breach of table fellowship and would have shocked the other disciples.
 - What happens when you put the themes of "hospitality" and "betrayal" together?
- ❖ Jesus and his disciples were celebrating Passover, the Jewish freedom festival remembering the story of God setting his people free from slavery, by miraculous acts and demonstrations of power (you can read the story in Exodus chapters 5-14). This was not just the remembering of an historical event, but was celebrated as if it had happened to them, bringing the past into the present and giving hope for the future.
 - How does the story of the Last Supper change shape when understood in the context of the freedom festival?
- ❖ A key element of the Passover festival is remembering the connection between the sacrificed lamb and freedom from slavery. By seeing Jesus as the Lamb of God we make a similar connection between his sacrifice and our freedom.
 - What does the theme of being "saved by the death of the lamb" contribute to your understanding of the story of the Last Supper?
 - What could this aspect of the last supper have to say to us about the way we practise Holy Communion?

There are different names given to the ceremony which remembers Jesus' last supper: Eucharist (which means "thanksgiving"), Breaking of Bread, Mass (which is derived from the Latin for "dismissal" and has become linked to the idea of mission), Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Agape meal (which puts the ceremony in the context of a meal).

- Which of these names mostly closely reflects your own understanding of the purpose of this ceremony?

Session 2

Arrest

Read Mark 14:32-52

- As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you?
- This passage shows clear tension between Jesus' desire not to suffer and his determination to do God's will. How do you think his disciples might have made sense of this? What is there here that you can relate to from your own experience?
- Jesus instructed his disciples to "watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (v.38). How do you think the disciples would have understood this?
In what ways might you fall into temptation?
- Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss and the other disciples ran away. How are these different ways of betrayal? How might this relate to Jesus' earlier warning (in verse 38)? What might Jesus' experiences have to say to you when you are feeling betrayed or deserted?
- Here, as with session 1's reading, Jesus is preparing himself for what is to come. What can you learn from how he does this?

KEEPING WATCH

Three times in this passage Jesus instructs Peter, James and John to be watchful (verses 34, 38 and implied in verse 41). Watchfulness is a key theme in Mark's Gospel which, alongside telling the story of Jesus, emphasises the importance of being ready for all that is to come in the lead up to Jesus' return in glory (see Mark 13).

- In what ways might we keep watch and be ready for Jesus' return?
- How does this relate to Jesus' instruction in verse 38?

SON OF MAN

Jesus refers to himself here as the "Son Of Man" (verse 41). This was a term used of the prophets when they were being addressed by God (see, for example, Ezekiel 2:1). It was also used by Daniel for the one who would receive dominion, glory and a kingdom after God's judgement (see Daniel 7:13-14). When Jesus used the term it was mainly in connection with the need for him to suffer and be vindicated in order to bring about this Kingdom.

- How does this knowledge shape your reading of this passage?

KNOWING GOD'S WILL

Jesus commits himself to going through with what he believes to be God's will (verse 36). But how can we know God's will?

People "hear" God in different ways – through their responses to particular experiences, through other people, in the Bible, in silence, in a worship experience. To hear God, though, it is necessary to listen, to build in time to take notice of our responses to what we see and hear. It is also important to check out what we notice, with the Bible and with a trusted Christian (such as a spiritual director) to ensure that what we have "heard" is genuine.

- What are some of the ways in which you "hear" God speak to you? How do you know that what you hear is from God?
- It is not always comfortable to "hear" what God says. How willing are you to discover that God asks something difficult of you?

For Jesus, submitting to God's will was costly. For many Christians today it is costly to express faith.

- How willing are you to face persecution for your faith? Is there something in your faith that is worth suffering for, or is it a part of your life that you would give up if required?

You might like to look at the websites of Release International or Christian Solidarity Worldwide for stories of people who are imprisoned for expressing their faith. Could you get involved by writing to them or praying for them?

The Jewish people experienced a lot of persecution at different points in their history. They eagerly awaited the Messiah foretold by the prophets, who they saw as having a political role in leading them to victory against their enemies. They also expected him to bring people back to a true understanding of their faith, and to bring about justice and peace. These expectations came from their interpretations of the diversity of proclamations from the Old Testament prophets. One of the unifying threads in this material is God's vindication of his suffering servant (see Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53).

- Mark's Gospel is keen to demonstrate Jesus as fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies (see verse 49). For what reasons might this be important?
- What does this theme of the vindicated servant contribute to your understanding of Jesus' role and purpose?

Session 3

Trial

Read Mark 14:53-65; 15:1-15

- As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you?
- It is easy to gloss over this story quickly when the whole passion narrative is read in one sitting during Holy Week. Now that you have time to look at it more slowly, what are the emotions provoked by today's passage?
 - What do you read into the priests' failure to find evidence against Jesus, the conflicting false testimonies and Jesus' refusal to defend himself?
 - A question that is often asked in times of difficulty is "Where is God in this?" In this tension between Jesus and the authorities, each side would have given a different answer. How and why would you answer that question?
 - In what ways might your understanding of, and response to, Jesus be different now that you have reflected on this passage?

Other useful passages:

The other gospels include different details in their telling of Jesus' trial. Have a look at:

- Matthew 26:57-68, 27:1-26
- Luke 22:66-23:25
- John 18:19-19:16

A FAIR TRIAL?

Some scholars have argued that Jesus' trial included a number of flaws which made it unfair; Jewish trials were not allowed to take place at night and should have included two days' thinking time after hearing the evidence before reaching a verdict.

Others have argued that the events in Mark 14:53-65 were hearings in order to gather evidence that would ensure Roman involvement. The hearing before Pilate then consisted of accusation, interrogation, defence (the opportunity for which was given to Jesus by Pilate) and a verdict. Pilate delivered a verdict to please the crowd rather than on the basis of evidence.

- How well did Pilate get a balance between justice and trying to appease the crowd? On what occasions have you had to make a choice between what is right and what is easy?

You might like to search for some images of Jesus before the Jewish and Roman authorities (e.g. Stations of the Cross including those from Latin America). What do they say to you?

THE CASE AGAINST JESUS

The Jewish leaders were concerned by Jesus' claim to have God's authority; they saw this as blasphemous because what he was teaching as being from God didn't fit with their own understanding of how Moses' law should be followed (for example, Jesus' interpretation of rules around the marking of the Sabbath – see Mark 2:23-28).

They were also concerned by Jesus' popularity as a preacher, teacher and miracle-worker. This not only meant that he had a huge following, but it called into question the authority of the other Jewish leaders.

The Jewish leaders were not able to sentence someone to death and so they needed the support of the Roman authorities. But their concerns would not be enough to stimulate the Roman authorities to action against Jesus. However, Passover was a volatile time in Jerusalem, with the city full of pilgrims celebrating their freedom festival. To portray Jesus to the Romans as challenging their rule (see for example Luke 23:2) meant that he would be seen as a destabilising presence that needed to be removed. Turning the crowd against him by portraying him as a threat to the temple establishment (Mark 14:57-58) which was a chief source of income and employment as well as holding religious significance, illustrated the strength of feeling Jesus' presence provoked.

- How does being aware of the context to the story change your understanding of these events?

“A murderer they save,
the Prince of life they slay”
(Samuel Crossman 1623-1683).

Barabbas was in prison awaiting crucifixion for rioting and murder, when he was released at the crowd's request in place of Jesus.

- What might it have felt like, to go from expecting death any day, to being free? How might this be said to reflect the message of Christianity?
- If the message of Jesus is about forgiveness and second chances, how might we let this influence the way we live?

WHO WAS JESUS?

“Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse” (C. S. Lewis).

Jesus provoked strong reactions in many people. Some saw him as the anticipated Messiah (Mark 8:29), yet he was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting. Some saw him as a returning prophet (Mark 8:27-28). Some questioned his authority (Mark 11:28).

He spoke out against the leaders of his people (Mark 12:38-40), associated with those usually regarded with suspicion (Mark 2:15-17), challenged teaching and practice (Mark 2:18-28, 11:15-18), forgave sins (Mark 2:5) and demonstrated authority over nature (Mark 4:35-41), evil spirits (Mark 1:21-28), sickness and death (Mark 5:22-43).

- Was Jesus really changing the Jewish teachings, or was he attempting to point people back to the teachings' original intentions?
- For what reasons might Jesus be seen as the Son of God? For what reasons might he be seen as a madman or something worse?

Session 4

Denial

Read Mark 14:27-31; 66-72

- As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you?

- Peter, closely followed by the other disciples, expresses an amazing declaration of loyalty (v31).

What do you think motivates this? What responses does it evoke in you? The declarations of loyalty are quickly forgotten (v66-72). What do you read into this?

- In the midst of predicting Peter's denial Jesus also foretells his own resurrection but no one picks up on this reference. Why do you think this is? How could hearing this have shaped people's responses differently? In what ways is our understanding of the Passion shaped by our knowledge of the resurrection?
 - What (or who) would you be prepared to die for? Why?
 - On what occasions have you been tempted to deny Jesus? What would help you in your attempts to remain faithful?

You might like to search the internet for images of "fear quotes" – what do these have to say to you about the fear you experience?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US TO DENY JESUS?

In this country we don't find ourselves in the position of fearing for our lives when being challenged about our faith. But there are still plenty of occasions when we have to make a choice between speaking and living in a way that is consistent with following Jesus or denying him. We may deny what we believe, or say or do something that we know is contrary to living as a Christian. Our denial may be passive, choosing not to speak out or act.

- What are the areas of our faith which are often undermined or challenged and for which we may need to take a stand?

FEAR

Fear is a reaction to something that threatens our safety. It is the way we protect ourselves from perceived harm because it provokes a response (such as fight, flight, freeze, aiding decision-making). Sometimes perceptions about the nature of the threat are incorrect or the response is triggered by drawing unconscious parallels with a previous experience; sometimes the threat is genuine.

- On what occasions do you feel afraid? How do you behave as a result?
- What in Peter's situation can you relate to?

REGRET

Regret is a feeling of sorrow, disappointment and repentance over something you have done or failed to do (Oxford English Dictionary). Peter's response was to break down and weep (Mark 14:72).

- What are your regrets? If you want to share these with others then remember that what is shared must be kept confidential to the group, and don't feel pressured into sharing if you don't want to.
- How do you respond when you feel regret? Why? How far is it possible to do something about the situations you regret?

MOVING ON

Regret doesn't have to be the end of the story. For Peter, there was the opportunity to redeem his three-fold denial when Jesus asked him three times to affirm his faith (John 21:15-17). His denial was not unforgiveable. For us, too, regret can lead to a changing of direction, another chance, restoration.

- How willing are you to accept the possibility of restoration?

Peter had a big personality; he was always ready to jump in with both feet, often without thought about the consequences. See, for example, the circumstances surrounding him walking on water (Matthew 14:22-33), his suggestion at the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8) and his response to Jesus' talk of forthcoming suffering (Mark 8:31-33). He was quick to declare Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 8:27-29) and to insist that he would follow Jesus even to the point of death (Mark 14:27-31).

It would be easy to remember Peter for his "failure" of disowning Jesus. But Peter was also one of Jesus' closest disciples (see, for example, Mark 5:37). After he is reinstated (John 21:15-19) Peter takes a leading role in the group of disciples (Acts 1:15-22) and, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, becomes a prominent public figure, preaching (Acts 2:14-41), healing (Acts 3:1-8) and testifying in all sorts of circumstances (Acts 4:1-22). Two of the letters in the New Testament are attributed to him (1 Peter and 2 Peter) and he was eventually killed for his faith.

- In what ways can Peter's story encourage and inspire us in our attempts to follow Jesus?

Session 5

Death

Read Mark 15:16-39

➤ As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you?

- This is not a pleasant story and there is a temptation to read it quickly. In addition to the obvious physical pain, in what ways does Jesus suffer? What emotions are provoked when you consider it in detail?
- For what reasons do you think some people are unwilling to give this story much attention? Why is it important to reflect on it?
- People mocked Jesus for not behaving as they thought a Messiah or king ought. What expectations did they have? In what ways does God fail to meet your expectations?
- How might your understanding of, and response to, Jesus be different now that you have reflected on this passage?

SYMBOLISM

Understanding some of the symbolism in this passage can help us to uncover another layer of meaning.

While Jesus hung on the cross the sky became dark (Mark 15:33). One way of interpreting this is to see a link to the creation story in Genesis 1, when God created light. In this passage we see something of the reversal of the creation in order that there can be a new creation brought about by the following events.

As Jesus died the curtain in the temple was torn in two (Mark 15:38). The curtain partitioned off the holiest area of the temple where even the priest was allowed only once a year. When it was torn, nothing remained to keep people separate from God, symbolising the end of the temple and all that it stood for.

- How does an appreciation of this symbolism add to your understanding of these verses?

You might like to listen to Rowan Williams' reflections on the purpose of Jesus' death at http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/passionofchrist_1.shtml (audio half way down the page; link live at 15/12/14)

CRUCIFIXION

Crucifixion was the method of execution and political control favoured by the Romans, who were ruling Israel at the time of Jesus. For the Jews it was a particularly shameful way of dying because the crucified person was seen as cursed by God (Galatians 3:13). It was a particularly barbaric form of killing. Already very weak from being severely whipped, the person was nailed through wrists and feet to the cross where, in order to breathe, he must raise his body by pushing up on his nailed feet. The pain from this, the previous whipping, the cramps caused by the position of the body and the hanging from nails, were added to by dehydration, exhaustion and the filling of the chest cavity with fluid. Eventually the person died from suffocation or heart failure.

- What difference does it make to you to know the kind of death Jesus died?

'SURELY THIS MAN WAS THE SON OF GOD!'

While Jesus' disciples, for all their beliefs about who Jesus was, kept their distance at this time, a Roman centurion who watched him die saw something that marked Jesus out as different. Death by crucifixion would have been a sight he was used to. Maybe there was a difference in the way Jesus faced his death. Maybe it was the darkening of the sky. Something told the centurion that this was someone special.

- What does the centurion's statement have to say to you?

ABANDONED BY GOD?

'Jesus cried out in a loud voice... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' (Mark 15:34).

After Jesus' arrest his followers ran away (Mark 14:50); was he now also abandoned by God? The words Jesus quoted come from Psalm 22. Some see Jesus as identifying with the psalmist's distress, and so with all those who suffer unjustly. Others have suggested that in quoting that first verse his intention was to point people to the rest of the psalm as it moves from despair to hope and a restatement of trust in God. 'You are my strength; come quickly to help me' (Psalm 22:19). Even if this wasn't Jesus' intention it can be a useful exercise to remember how the psalmist's despondence moved on.

- Feelings can sometimes mislead us. On what occasions have you felt abandoned by God? What is there to hold on to in times like these?

What difference did Jesus' death make?

There are lots of different ideas about this.

- He expressed love and solidarity by entering a broken world and experiencing our suffering (Mark 15:34).
 - He triumphed over evil by refusing to retaliate and eventually, in his resurrection, proving himself stronger than death (Acts 2:24).
 - He was a sacrificial offering for all our past, present and future sins, so that we can be forgiven by God (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:25; Romans 8:3).
 - He paid the price necessary to set us free from being held captive by sin (1 Peter 1:18-19).
 - He took away our sin so that we are cleansed, healed and whole (1 Peter 2:24)
- What does each of these ideas have to say to you about the difference Jesus' death can make to you?
 - Which of these ideas do you find most helpful? Why?

Session 6

Waiting

Read Mark 15:40-47

- As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you?
- Jesus' disciples all ran away when he was arrested (Mark 15:50) but we read here that many of the women remained. What do you read into this? Why might the women have reacted so differently?
- Reflect on Joseph of Arimathea's actions (Mark 15:43-46). As a member of the ruling Council these could have seemed controversial, even risky. Why do you think he decided to do this? When has your faith been risky?
- Our reading ends with Jesus' burial before the Sabbath and the next verse picks up the story after the Sabbath; however, in between comes the Sabbath itself, Holy Saturday. What might have been going on for the disciples on that day? What is there here that you can relate to?
- As you finish this Lent course and move forward through Easter, what are you taking away from the course? What has encouraged you? What will you do differently?

LIVING IN A HOLY SATURDAY WORLD

Jesus came to bring in God's kingdom, and his teachings, actions and resurrection give glimpses of this, but until his return it will not be fully here. So for now we live in a "Holy Saturday world", knowing the reality of our own crucifixion experiences, having the hope of resurrection and glimpses of the kingdom, but caught in between, sometimes being a bit fearful and feeling that we have to apologise for our faith, waiting for our own resurrection and healing, trying to live out what the resurrection means in a world that is still living through its own Good Friday experiences.

- What difference could it make to reflect on your Good Friday experiences with the hope of resurrection?
- To what extent are you fearful and / or feeling that you have to apologise for your faith? To what extent do you live out the resurrection? What could help you with this?

CHANGE AND LOSS, LIVING AND DYING

Not only had the disciples just lost their leader and friend, but they had experienced a rollercoaster of events in the week leading up to this. They had a great deal of loss and change to adjust to.

Every second, millions of the cells in our bodies die and are replaced. Every day, thousands of people die. Death is a part of life. It is also a part of growth - the death of childish ideas and dependencies in order to grow into new, mature, ways of life; the letting go of old ideas, experiences and securities in order to move on. This means that we are always dealing with loss.

Change is also necessary for growth. Changing jobs, evolving relationships, moving house, shifting priorities are all part of how we grow but, again, all involve loss. It is essential – the caterpillar that does not go through the painful process of being cocooned and pushing its way out does not become a beautiful airborne butterfly – but it is painful. We all have to learn how to let go.

- What major changes have you experienced? Remember that we are all different and what may not seem significant to you may be major to another person.
- How willing are you to let go in order to grow and move forward?

You might like to look into the work of a group / charity (local, national or international) which works to alleviate some of the human distress and suffering that is part of living in this Holy Saturday world. What could you offer (time, skills, money) to support them in their work?

WAITING

As noted in session 2, a key theme in Mark's Gospel is that of waiting – and being ready for – the end time when Jesus will return in glory. For the disciples in their waiting during Holy Saturday there was a lot of uncertainty about their safety, what would happen next and what they should do. Our waiting, in the light of the resurrection, is different but still difficult. Any kind of waiting can be challenging, especially now that we live in a fast-paced world with an expectation of immediacy.

- How do you deal with waiting that you find challenging?

God's timing is so different from ours (2 Peter 3:8-9) that learning to wait effectively is important. Rather than waiting passively, waiting is an activity: keeping our focus, being prepared and living expectantly.

- How easy do you find it to keep focused and live expectantly when life is so full of distraction? What could help you to do this?

GRIEF AND HOPE

Grief is a natural response to any kind of loss. People express their grief in different ways but underlying it are common threads of denial, anger, guilt and depression. Hope can help to find a way through this but can also add to the pain because hoping includes becoming vulnerable to the risk of the hope not being fulfilled. Jesus had told his disciples that his death would be followed by resurrection but they did not seem to hear this, so it is difficult to know whether their grief included hope. But we can hope because we know the next part of the story (Mark 16).

- What part does hope play in your faith?