

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Word I

Images

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Living Word 1 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 Word I is a Living Faith in Suffolk course providing opportunity to explore the different kinds of literature which make up the Bible in order to make Bible study more accessible. The following genres are included:

- Narrative (page 4)
- Law (page 7)
- Psalms (page 10)
- Wisdom (page 13)
- Prophecy (page 16)
- Letters (page 19)
- Apocalyptic (page 22)

Each session is complete in itself and, while it is written as a seven-session course the sessions could be used individually, or in any order, 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.

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.

Reading the Bible: Narrative

Read: Exodus 13:17-14:31

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- The events in this passage suggest a rollercoaster of emotions and the need for a significant level of trust in God. What reactions can you relate to here? Despite all that had gone before (see box 'Exodus – the bigger picture') the Israelites were not convinced that what God was doing was for their benefit. On what occasions have you had the same concern? What is there in this passage, and in the experiences of the group, that could help you to have more confidence in trusting God?
 - These events are told from the perspective of the Israelites as they remember their history as God's people. What might they be trying to convey about who they are? What aspects of God's character might they be wishing to portray in this telling? What can you take from this?
 - In what ways might you see your own story as being shaped by a relationship with God? How could this understanding of your experiences affect you as you continue on this faith journey?

EXODUS – THE BIGGER PICTURE

The book of Exodus comes early in the Old Testament. God's people, the Israelites, have spent several generations living as badly-treated slaves in Egypt; Exodus is the story of how God, using Moses as his spokesman, and through a series of plagues and miracles, brings the Egyptian Pharaoh to the point where he is prepared to set the Israelites free, events celebrated in the Jewish Passover festival. The final part of this episode is today's reading. The Israelites then live in the wilderness for 40 years as they learn how to be God's people, a free people.

- What importance do you think this story might have for Jewish people down the generations? In what ways could it be significant for you also?

READING NARRATIVE

A large amount of the Bible is narrative, or story. Both the Old and New Testaments give much space to retelling events of the past. These are not written objectively; they are intended to teach people their spiritual history, to tell the story of God's dealings with his people, to help people to understand the past and to give them a sense of their own story as part of the story of God's people. The narrative operates on several levels. There is the 'big story', running through the Bible, of God making and redeeming a people. There are the different 'chapters' in the narrative as the 'big story' is worked out through calling, promises, kings, judges, prophecy, Jesus and the early church. There are the hundreds of individual stories, of all the individuals and events that make up each 'chapter'. This is why context is important: to make sense of any passage it needs to be understood both in its cultural context and in its place in the 'big story'.

The writers tell a perspective on what happened, not what should have happened, so they present us with a whole range of positive and negative role models. It was designed to be heard, rather than read, and so is written using devices to make it memorable, rather than with the intention of dissecting small sections.

- To what extent do you have a sense of your faith journey being part of a bigger story? What could be the benefits of knowing the 'big story' and understanding your faith in this way?

READING THE OLD TESTAMENT

The narrative of the Old Testament tells the story of God desiring a loving relationship with his creation, and of the people of God repeatedly turning away from him and being called back to him again and again. An important thread running through the narrative is the idea of covenant, the relationship of promise between God and humanity: God promises blessing, freedom and a future in return for people's allegiance. God's character is demonstrated in the portrayal of the people's history, heroes are celebrated and hope for the future is given. Events are recounted from the perspective of God's people, they are not intended as objective historical studies.

- What is the value, for us, of understanding events from the perspective of a particular group of people?

TRUTH AND MYTH

Truth and myth are often seen as incompatible. However, myths are stories that are designed to convey truth, answering some of the great questions of life. The stories themselves may or may not be literally true, but the messages they contain are truths with deep meaning for humanity.

- What is the importance, to you, of literal truth in the Bible? In what ways is it useful to understand the role of myth? What questions does this raise for you?

READING JESUS' PARABLES

Much of Jesus' teaching was delivered in parables – stories intended to produce a response in the hearers by speaking to them in ways they would understand, and challenging them. Sometimes the meaning of the parables is obvious; on other occasions they are intriguing, even mystifying, and they invite further reflection. Some parables would have shocked their original hearers (for example, the Good Samaritan).

- Why are stories such a useful teaching technique? In what ways might it be useful to 'rewrite' the parables for today?

READING THE GOSPELS

It is important to remember that the gospels are not biographies, but rather selected accounts arranged to meet the purposes of the authors as they write for later communities of followers. They focus on Jesus' bringing in of the Kingdom of God/Heaven which is already here but will not be fully realised until the future age. The gospels contain a mixture of sayings and narratives – teachings of Jesus and stories about Jesus. They contain a mixture of Jesus' teaching techniques – parables, overstatements, proverbs, similes and metaphors, poetry, biblical interpretation, questions and irony.

- Why is it important to remember that the gospels are not biographies?
- What is the importance of understanding the different teaching techniques used by Jesus?

READING THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

This book tells the story of the early church. It was written to encourage and inform, to enable people to understand how God was at work. There is a temptation to want to use the information as a model, to attempt to return to the state of the early church, but the diversity it includes suggests that there is no 'one way' of being church, and the original purpose of the writer is useful for us too.

- How can we be encouraged and informed by reading about the early church?

Reading the Bible:

Law

Read:
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-8, 12-17; Leviticus 11:1-4, 7-8;
Leviticus 19:17-19; Mark 12:28-31

- As you read these passages, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- The first three readings come from the Old Testament, so they are part of the framework God gave to the Israelites to help them to be God's holy people, free and different from the surrounding tribes. How do we show, in the way we live, that we are God's holy people? What encourages you in this? What do you find most challenging?
- Jesus gave two commandments to sum up the Law. In the Sermon on the Mount, he added a reference to enemies (Matthew 5:43-44). What do you think this love means? How does it prevent the world you know from returning to chaos?
- How has your attitude to the place of law in Christian faith changed as a result of this session? Where might this make a difference to your activities and relationships over the next month?

Old Testament laws should be understood in relation to their context: for example, Leviticus 19:19 addressed the temptation to participate in Canaanite fertility practices which involved mixing animal breeds, seed or materials (Fee and Stuart *How to read the Bible for all its worth* Michigan: Zondervan 2003, pages 177-9).

Christianity started as a Jewish sect but soon included non-Jews too. We know from Acts and Paul's letters that this began to put pressure on the interpretation of the laws that highlighted the distinctiveness of the Jewish people. The story of Peter's meeting with Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11 is a good example of this.

- Why is it important to understand the context of the laws in the Bible? What are the implications of this?
- How important is 'law' in defining the identity of the Christian community?

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The laws (or 'the Law' to refer to the whole package) are written in the context of the narrative of the big story of God's interaction with the world. They are an essential part of Israel's story and we need to read them in this context, asking ourselves 'Where do they fit into the big story?' and 'What do they tell us about God?'

The giving of law is part of a bigger story that goes back to creation. In Genesis 1 creation is understood as bringing order into chaos. Law helps the people of God to order their lives according to God's holiness in a world that always has the potential to return to chaos.

The laws were given when the Jewish people had been set free from slavery in Egypt (read the story in Exodus 3-14) and were learning how to be a community, how to be free, how to be God's people, and how to set aside the Egyptian culture in which they had grown up.

The Law is to teach them how to do this, to set boundaries on their relationships with the surrounding cultures, to teach them to live in a way that displays God's character, and to restore the relationship with God each time it is broken. It contains civil laws, ritual laws and ethical laws. Some of these are general, giving examples of what it means for them to live as God's people – for example, Leviticus 19:1-4. Others are case-by-case laws, applying to specific situations – for example, Deuteronomy 15:12-17 applies specifically to care for slaves – but still implying underlying principles, teaching about God's nature.

- What could Deuteronomy 15:12-17 teach us about God? How could this be translated into a principle to live by?

GOD'S COVENANT

A covenant is a binding contract between two parties which has obligations on either side. In Old Testament times these were often between someone powerful and their subordinate. The powerful party guaranteed benefits and protection in return for the subordinate's loyalty which was demonstrated by their keeping of specified rules.

The Old Testament laws form the rules to be kept by Israel as their side of their covenant with God, in return for which they would be God's people – see Exodus 19:5-6.

- How might it feel to be part of such a covenant relationship? To what extent do you see yourself as part of a covenant people?

THE NEW COVENANT

Jesus was clear that his intention was not to do away with God's covenant, but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17). Jesus saw this in terms of love for God, neighbour and enemy. Instead of law-keeping as the way of demonstrating loyalty to God, what is necessary is belief in Jesus (John 3:16-17).

- What is your response to the idea of the new covenant?
- How might this understanding of the covenant impact on how you read the Bible?

JESUS' APPROACH TO THE LAW

At the time of Jesus some laws were used to sharpen the identity of God's people in a world that undermined their sense of being a holy people. These included laws around eating, the Sabbath, and male circumcision. Jesus' attitude to the interpretation of these laws often caused controversy. He broke the rules about working on the Sabbath (see, for example, Matthew 12:1-14 and Luke 13:10-17). He challenged the idea that people were defiled by not following the dietary or ritual hand-washing rules (Mark 7:14-23). He directed people's attention towards what he called the weightier matter of the law (Matthew 23:23), its underlying principles, producing a stricter morality (Matthew 5:21-24, 27-28) yet exercising compassion (John 8:1-11).

- Look at each of the above passages. Was Jesus really changing the teachings, or was he pointing people back to the teachings' original intentions?
- Why were people challenged by Jesus' approach? What is there here that you can relate to?

Reading the Bible: Psalms

Read: Psalm 3

- As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- There are a number of emotions portrayed by the graphic language in this psalm; what are they? What other feelings might the psalmist be experiencing alongside these, in this situation? On what occasions have you experienced a similar mixture of reactions?
- How easy is it to remember, and call out to, God in a time of crisis?
What have been your experiences of the results of doing this?
- Alongside his distress the psalmist expresses trust in God, enough that it is possible, in the face of such turmoil, to sleep (verse 5).
What kinds of experiences can lead to this level of trust?
How far can you relate to this?
- What steps could you take, in the coming month, to draw on the psalms and on the example of the psalmists to help you develop your relationship with God?

PSALM 3

This is the first psalm of lament in the book of Psalms. The heading suggests that it is 'of' (so, by or for) King David, when his son Absalom created an uprising against him and David ran for his life (you can read the story in 2 Samuel 15). The psalmist expresses the feeling of everyone being against him, while at the same time declaring his trust in God to keep him safe, using images of God as a shield, sustainer and deliverer.

- If you were to write a psalm today, what emotions, experiences and responses to God would you want to express? Have a go at doing this and then discuss: what has been the value of this experience?

WHAT ARE THE PSALMS?

The psalms are some of the musical poems, hymns, prayers and laments of ancient Israel. They date from the tenth to the third century BC and have a variety of authors, including court poets, prophets, priests and scribes. Some are headed 'A psalm of....' however the 'of' does not denote authorship but can indicate who the psalm was written for.

As literature, the psalms have a formal structure and each needs to be read as a whole in order to understand its pattern of development as ideas are presented, reflected upon and brought to a conclusion. In their original Hebrew they contain poetic features but some of these are lost in their translation.

The psalms are not intended to teach doctrine or morals but rather to describe beliefs about God, to reflect on God's ways and character and to express people's faith and emotions, using a wide range of images. As such they include expressions of praise, lament, complaint, confession, wonderment, anguish, oppression and protest. They are intensely personal, using the language of relationship rather than objective, cognitive language.

- How important is it to express feelings to God?
- Which emotions is it difficult to express to God? Why is this? In what ways might the psalms provide a way forward?

TYPES OF PSALM

There are a number of different types of psalms and understanding these types can be helpful in order to make best use of them.

Many of the psalms are laments, expressing suffering or disappointment. Some psalms are thanksgiving psalms, either community psalms or expressing personal thanksgiving. Some psalms are hymns of praise, focusing on a wide range of God's characteristics. A few are salvation-history psalms, reflecting on the dealings of God with his people during history. Some are psalms of celebration and affirmation, dealing with renewal, the covenant and the monarchy (with psalms for particular royal occasions) and celebrating the importance of Jerusalem. A few are wisdom psalms, to be understood in the same way as the wisdom literature. Some include elements of prophetic oracle. Many centre on the trustworthiness of God.

- On what occasion[s] might each of these types of psalm be useful today?

USES OF THE PSALMS

Because the psalms cover such a wide range of human emotions, experiences and responses to God, from life at its best down to the depths of despair, they were and are a tremendously important tool for individuals and communities to express their faith and doubts, whatever the circumstances.

The psalms were intended not only as personal expressions of faith but as having a function in corporate activities. After the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple, they were made into a formal collection as a 'temple hymnal'. They formed a part of temple worship; they were used at festivals, and in royal celebrations such as celebrating a king's accession, commemorating a victory in battle or lamenting a defeat.

- To what extent do the psalms form a part of the corporate worship in your church? In what ways could they become a better tool for integrating faith and life?
- How much do you use the psalms in your individual faith journey? What could encourage you to draw on them more widely?

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Because there are so many different types of psalm, and because of their poetic imagery, there are some important things to consider when reading a psalm. What kind of psalm is it? What imagery is used and what is this saying about the psalm's setting (for example, culture)? How is God portrayed and what response to God is expressed? How do the ideas in this psalm link with other ideas in the Bible?

- To what extent is it necessary to understand the situation in which a psalm was written in order to use it today?

Reading the Bible: Wisdom

Read: Ecclesiastes 3

- As you read this passage, what do you notice?
What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- The first 14 verses put forward a measured, balanced view of life in which all activities and experiences have a place and are valuable. How does this view speak to you? What do you find encouraging here?
What do you find most challenging?
- What do you understand by the Teacher's perspective on judgement (verses 15-22)?
How does this fit with the view of life put forward in the preceding verses?
 - In what ways might you see the shape and rhythms of life put in place by God as being beautiful (v.11) and a gift (v.13)?
What changes might you make to your priorities and decision-making as a result of this?

ECCLESIASTES

Like the book of Job, Ecclesiastes is written as a discourse – this time a monologue by 'the Teacher'. As with the rest of the wisdom literature, it needs to be read as a whole in order to get the full sense and context of its message. Much of the book seems quite negative, acknowledging that much in life is rarely as it should be, life is repetitive and nothing lasts long with death eventually coming to all. But it promotes the viewpoint that life should be lived as a gift from God and enjoyed as such (see, for example, chapter 3:12-14; 12:13-14), even if all is futile (meaningless, vanity, vapour – chapter 1:2) because all die in the end.

- What do you think the Teacher means by saying that everything is meaningless? To what extent do you agree with this view?
- In what ways is it possible to live all life as a gift from God? What could help you to do this?

WHAT IS WISDOM?

The Wisdom writings in the Bible (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs) are reflections on some of the 'big questions' of life, about evil, suffering, life, death and love. In ancient times, wisdom was about making the right choices in order to have the best possible life. Most ancient cultures therefore had wisdom literature, which focused on people and their behaviour. It was recognised that some people were wiser than others; some devoted themselves to gaining wisdom while others not only learned wisdom but also taught it to others, and so were designated as counsellors (1 Chronicles 27:32), teachers (Ecclesiastes 1:1), wise men (Ecclesiastes 2:16) and wise women (Proverbs 14:1). Some people sent their sons to be taught by these wisdom teachers, who would assume a parental role.

For the Israelites, wisdom was not about intelligence or skill. The best life choices were seen as being the godly ones: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10). The first step in becoming wise was seen as knowing God, having an appropriate fear (awe, wonder and respect) for him. This was personal and practical, rather than abstract and theoretical: individuals needed to think and act in a particular way, working towards living in the way desired by God.

Each book of Wisdom writings needs to be read as a whole, in order for its assertions to be read in context; to read in small portions separates sayings from their line of argument and leads to misunderstandings concerning what each book is about.

- How does the Israelite understanding of wisdom differ from ideas about wisdom inside and outside the church? What do you think about this understanding?
- What could be the value, to us, of such ancient wisdom writings?

PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs is nine collections of sayings giving guidance about practical attitudes and behaviours to develop in everyday life in order to grow into responsible adulthood. It was not intended to suggest that behaviour will always lead to a particular outcome, but rather points towards likely outcomes and generalised truths. It was written to give practical and memorable guidelines for godly living, drawing a contrast between choosing wisdom and making foolish choices.

- Much of Proverbs is very practical, down-to-earth wisdom. Why is it important that wisdom literature covers all aspects of life?

JOB

The book of Job is a drama written about a follower of God trying to work through the question of why God is allowing him to suffer. Satan (an angel in the heavenly court) challenges God about the relationship between God and humans, suggesting that God has followers only because of the rewards they receive. God allows Satan to put Job to the test by causing him to suffer. Job is then visited by his friends and, in the course of the ensuing dialogue, a conventional approach to suffering is aired: that God is just, suffering is the deserved result of sin and therefore Job needs to identify his sin and confess it. Job protests throughout that he doesn't deserve his suffering and that God is treating him unfairly. Finally God joins in the dialogue, pointing Job to the understanding that what happens is not always because God desires it or because it is fair, that there are no easy answers and that ultimately God is not obliged to explain; rather, he should be trusted. The text needs to be read as a whole in order for each character's perspective to be appropriately understood.

- How useful is it that the Bible addresses difficult issues such as the problem of suffering? What other issues would you like to see addressed? Can anyone in the group suggest how the Bible might help us to address these?

SONG OF SONGS

This book is written in the style of Near Eastern lyric poetry which would have been used at wedding banquets. It speaks of attractions, faithfulness, and the joys, pleasures and preciousness of love. It celebrates love and sexuality as a part of God's good creation, portraying the wisdom of choosing sexual fidelity, of romance, of responding to and fulfilling the needs of a partner. As well as celebrating human love it has been interpreted as a symbol of the love between God and his people.

- How do you respond to the idea that the Bible contains love poetry?

Reading the Bible: Prophecy

Read: Hosea 1:2-10

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- Hosea's personal life is a dramatic illustration of God's message (see box 'Hosea – the big picture') – what do you make of the analogy between Hosea's unfaithful wife and Israel's unfaithfulness to God? What do you find appealing in this kind of imagery? What do you find uncomfortable, even disturbing? What does this say to you about how God views his relationship with his people?
- What are the advantages of speaking of God in this way? What are the risks involved?
- What might it mean to 'commit adultery' in our relationship with God? In what ways do we (as a church, as individuals) do this?
- How has your understanding of your relationship with God changed as a result of this session? Where might this make a difference in your life over the next month?

HOSEA – THE BIG PICTURE

At the time of Hosea there was political unrest and the threat of destruction. People had turned away from God and adopted a pagan lifestyle. The book of Hosea is an example of an enacted prophecy. It uses marriage breakdown to show the breakdown in Israel's relationship with God, God's pain and judgement of this, and his love for his people and desire for them to return. This message is illustrated by Hosea's marriage to a promiscuous woman (whose children are then named to express God's judgement) who commits adultery and is then received back by Hosea (chapter 3) as an illustration of God's love for his returning people. Much of the book describes the ways in which Israel has been unfaithful to God, God's judgement and Israel's punishment, and God's enduring love and compassion for Israel (see especially Hosea 11:1-9 which uses positive female imagery of God to convey this).

- What do you think people made of this method of communication? What do you make of it? What emotions does this graphic message evoke in you?

BACKGROUND TO PROPHECY

Prophets existed not only in Judaism but also in the surrounding cultures and religions (the 'answerers' and 'ecstatics' of Mesopotamia; the 'shouters', 'revealers' and 'ecstatics' of Assyria and the 'prophets' of Syria; the 'prophets of Baal' in I Kings 18). Many early prophets lived in (sometimes nomadic) communities of prophets and their families. Many served alongside the priests, being regarded as experts in prayer, interpreting the meaning of events and communicating between God and the people. Over time there became a separation between priests and prophets as the prophets increasingly spoke out against misguided religious practices or over-reliance on religious performance at the expense of justice.

HOW CAN WE READ THE PROPHETS TODAY?

Reading the prophets enables us to hear what God was saying to the people of Israel at different points in their history, and to see how foretold blessings and curses were fulfilled. Because they are therefore not foretelling our future, they need to be read in the context of their place in the big story. We can then draw out the underlying principles that can speak to us.

Isaiah (1-39), Micah and Jonah were prophets in the southern kingdom in the 8th century BC. The cities were prosperous but the poor were oppressed. The country and its faithless king were under threat from Assyria, leading to proposed alliances with Syria and Damascus.

Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah (in that order) were successive prophets in the southern kingdom in the 7th century BC, through a time of occupation by Assyria domination by Babylon and pending exile. They called people back to God and attempted to help people make sense of the circumstances.

Amos and Hosea were prophets in the northern kingdom during the 8th century BC. They addressed the social inequalities of the time, and attempted to bring Israel back to an understanding of God's faithfulness in the face of their unfaithfulness.

Ezekiel (1-24) and Isaiah (40-55) attempted to renew people's faith after they had lost their land, king and temple when the land was conquered and they were taken into exile.

As people returned from exile to their homeland, rebuilt their homes and the temple and returned to temple worship, **Ezekiel 33-48, Isaiah 56-66, Haggai, Joel, Malachi, Daniel, Zechariah and Obadiah** pointed people back to God, to correct worship and to the future Day of the Lord.

- How useful is it to have an understanding of the context in which each prophet spoke?
- What does the prophets' context remind you of in the world in which you live out your faith today?

WHAT WAS THE PROPHETS' ROLE?

The primary function of the prophets was to communicate between God and the people, conveying God's will about national and domestic matters, addressing and making sense of crises and outlining judgement and necessary change. Although they did announce the future, this was largely the immediate future – much of which has therefore been fulfilled – rather than our future. They reiterated the covenant, with its accompanying blessings and curses (see, for example, Micah 6:1-8); thus they spoke out about the people's sin and about God's love for his people.

- Who might be considered to have a prophetic role today? How do they convey their message of hope and judgement?
- How is the message of sin, and God's love, conveyed?

HOW DID THE PROPHETS COMMUNICATE?

People learn and communicate in diverse ways, and the prophets were no different.

- Often they gave their message through poetry and song, which was easy to remember because of its (Hebrew) rhythm (see, for example, Isaiah 44:21 onwards).
 - They spoke oracles. Some used the image of a lawsuit, with God as accuser and judge giving evidence of the people's covenant breaking and their corresponding punishment (e.g. Isaiah 3:13-26). Some were woe oracles, announcing imminent disaster (e.g. Habakkuk 2:6-8). Some were promises of future blessing and restoration as a result of radical change (e.g. Amos 9:11-15).
 - Sometimes they enacted their message, doing something physical to illustrate their words (e.g. Jeremiah 19:1-12).
- How do you think people today would respond to these different methods? How could you best be communicated with?
 - What do these different forms of communication remind you of in our own world?

Reading the Bible: Letters

Read: Philippians 1:27-2:16

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What questions arise?
- What do you feel particularly drawn to in what Paul writes about the example of Jesus? How does he expect the character of Jesus to shape the life of the Philippian church?
- Paul talks about the importance of unity – in the face of suffering, and as the living out of the faith. What might achieving that unity look like in your setting? What are the challenges presented by this vision?
- Paul sees this as working out your salvation with fear and trembling. In what ways does this happen for you?
- How has your understanding of the outworking of your faith changed as a result of this session? Where might this make a difference in your life over the next month?

THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Philippians is one of the shortest and least complicated of Paul's letters and its meaning is easily accessible to the modern reader. This letter was written while Paul was in prison (Philippians 1:12-14), somewhere around 53-63 AD. The Philippian Christians were under some kind of pressure because of their faith, there was quarrelling going on, and there were people insisting that in order to be proper Christians it was also necessary to observe Jewish customs and Law. Paul writes to thank them for their care and support (see box below), and to encourage them in the face of their suffering, to remind them of the need for unity, and to clarify that their relationship with God is based on faith, not observance of the Law. He seeks to persuade people to behave in a Christ-like way by appealing to the power of example (his own, his co-workers' and Christ's).

- What are the similarities between the Philippian Christians' circumstances and yours? What are the differences?
- In what ways might what Paul has to say in this letter be useful to you (as an individual and as a church)?

THE AUTHOR: PAUL

Paul came from Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia in Asia Minor (now the southern coast of Turkey). Cilicia was a large university city; Paul (born around 5 AD) was well-educated, a Roman citizen, and a Jew, a Pharisee who had studied in Jerusalem under one of the greatest rabbis of the time. Passionate about meticulous observance of the Jewish Law, he avidly persecuted the followers of Jesus until his dramatic experience narrated in Acts 9. From this point he became just as fervent a promoter of the Christian faith for about thirty years, until he was martyred in around 67 AD.

- Paul talks about the difference between his former life and his present experience in Philippians 3:4-16. What might his 'about turn' tell you about this experience? Has any experience ever had a similar effect on you? – share what you can about this.

READING NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

From the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) Christianity spread quickly, both by the witness of the early Christians in their local communities, and by their travels, both missionary journeys and dispersal at times of persecution. When the leaders moved on (as in the case of Paul on his missionary journeys) it was important for them to maintain contact with these early churches. For those churches which began with very little knowledge of the faith it was also important to ensure that they were given opportunities to receive further teaching.

The letters we have in the New Testament are a sample of those written during the first decades of the early church. They were essentially pastoral responses to situations that had arisen in the churches, and include teaching, advice, and emphasis on the importance of worship and spiritual knowledge, tackling issues of worship, behaviour and doctrine, and attempting to resolve conflict and refocus faith.

Some of the letters are written to individuals and are therefore quite personal, while others are addressed to the whole church community, either in a particular place or as a circular letter carried to several communities in a locality. They were intended to be read publicly and to be authoritative; they represent their author in his absence. Their authorship is sometimes uncertain; of the twenty-one letters in the New Testament, the first thirteen are attributed to Paul, the author of Hebrews is unknown, and the remaining letters bear the names of their likely authors. Although presented as individual letters, it is possible that some of these are compilations of a number of letters.

- The letters were written with particular people and circumstances in mind; what makes them useful to us?

WHY DOES CONTEXT MATTER?

As with the letters and emails we write today, the New Testament letters are 'occasional' documents – each arose out of, and was intended for, a specific occasion. One thing we know for certain is that they were not written with us in mind. We do not always have information about their circumstances; we have answers without knowing the questions, explanations of belief without knowing the concern being addressed. This means that the beliefs contained in the letters do not provide a complete picture of the Christian faith. It also means that instruction cannot automatically be transferred from these first-century letters to our twenty-first century church. It is necessary to read each letter as a whole, and each one in relation to the others, to ensure that we do not interpret them in order to fit our beliefs, and to consider what the text might have been saying to those for whom it was intended.

- What are the dangers of reading these texts with no knowledge of the circumstances being addressed?
- What can you do to ensure that you read the letters in an informed way? What resources are available to help with this?

THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH

Philippi was a Roman colony in northern Greece, with a large Greek population but few Jews. Paul and his companions went there in around 49 AD and received a warm welcome from some women who were open to the message they preached. They quickly ran into trouble when they cast a spirit out of a slave girl, and were beaten and imprisoned. Their jailer came to faith when an earthquake released them from their chains and, instead of escaping, they preached the gospel to him. After this they were released but were requested to leave Philippi. You can read the story in Acts 16:11-40.

Paul continued with his travels, and the Philippian Christians supported him in this (Philippians 4:10-18) and sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, to help him (Philippians 2:25). It was Epaphroditus who was to bring this letter to the Philippian church on his return.

- What can you tell from this about the likely relationship between Paul and the Philippian Christians?

Reading the Bible: Apocalyptic

Read: Daniel 7

- As you read this passage, what do you notice? What stands out for you? What do you feel about the imagery in the visions? How much does it appeal to your imagination?
- The vision refers to earthly events (v.23-27). What is their character? How do they affect the people of God (the holy ones of the Most High)?
- The vision also refers to things that happen in heaven (v.9-14). Where can you see the connections between what happens in heaven and what happens on earth?
 - How do you think the vision would have encouraged the book's first readers?
 - Jesus taught his disciples to pray 'Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.' How does this apocalyptic vision encourage you in your faith today?

WHAT IS APOCALYPTIC?

The writing of apocalyptic literature, with its roots in the writings of the prophets and the wisdom texts, was very common between about 150BC and 70AD. After the exile, when prophecy had ceased to be so prolific, these writings encouraged a particular way of interpreting the world and the experience of history; they formed a new kind of reassurance, encouraging the persecuted faithful to stand firm. The term 'apocalyptic' refers to the revealing of something which was previously hidden. The writings aimed to look at events from the perspective of God and of the end of history, demonstrating how what happens in heaven and what happens on earth are connected, each side affecting the other, as history moves towards a climax in which God's enemies - cosmic as well as earthly - are defeated. Suffering was seen as the birth pains of a new age in which God will rule. In times of difficulty the writings offered hope that ultimately God will intervene and create all things anew.

- What do you understand by the idea that what happens in heaven corresponds to what happens on earth? How could this give encouragement and hope?
- What difference might it make to look at events from the perspective of God, and from the end of history?

THE BOOK OF DANIEL

Daniel contains two kinds of literature. The first part, chapters 1-6, is narrative: stories about Daniel and his three friends as they remain faithful to God in the face of persecution whilst in exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. Chapter 7 onwards is apocalyptic. It recounts a series of apocalyptic visions about a succession of tyrannical kings who would rule, the last one openly opposing God and oppressing his people, until God destroys these kings and establishes his eternal kingdom. Most scholars see the visions relating to the reign of Antiochus IV, around 160BC.

There is dispute about the book's authorship, with some scholars attributing it to Daniel at around 520BC, and others dating it around 164BC with the unknown author using the common practice of taking the name and setting it in the time of an important historical figure to ensure its authority.

Daniel's vision, in chapter 7, has similarities with the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar which Daniel interpreted in chapter 2. The vision uses beasts to symbolise the nations which would conquer Israel, and paints a picture of their judgement before God and the impact of this on earth.

- In successive years Israel was dominated by other nations as in this vision. What value does this give to this text?

SYMBOLISM

Apocalyptic writings are often given as visions and are full of symbolism (including fantasy creatures such as dragons and locusts with human heads), perhaps ensuring that those persecuting the believers would fail to understand this source of hope. Colours, numbers and creatures are symbolic. Some is easy to decode: white means victory and purity; red means killing, violence, the blood of martyrs; black means death, sin; seven is the perfect number, representing fullness; six is imperfection; 3½ (or a time, times and half a time) is imperfection, suffering and trial; 12 is Israel; four is the world (the four points of the compass); 1000 is an immeasurable amount; beasts are used to represent kingdoms or their leaders. Some symbolism seems much more obscure.

- What are the challenges of including this kind of literature in the Bible? How important is it for us to try to understand the meaning of apocalyptic literature?

HOW IS APOCALYPTIC RELEVANT FOR US TODAY?

Because apocalyptic writings demonstrate the connections between earth and heaven, they encourage us to think more deeply about the impact of our actions and inactions. In addition they are often eschatological – that is, they focus on the end times – and they provide us with pictures (symbolic pictures, not descriptions) of things that have happened and things that will happen; they demonstrate the impact in eternity of what happens here; and they can provide us with the same hope as that given to the original readers.

- Why might it be useful to have pictures of the end times? In what ways might they be helpful?

APOCALYPTIC IN THE GOSPELS

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke each contain eschatological apocalyptic elements in their portrayals of the end times. Matthew (ch.24) and Mark (ch.13) draw on imagery from Daniel and all three gospels draw clear parallels between what happens on earth – natural disasters, wars, persecution, betrayal, the darkening of the sun, moon and stars – and the corresponding movement in heaven as the Son of Man gets ready to return. The Lord's Prayer (in Matthew 6 and Luke 11), too, contains an apocalyptic element in its desire to see the coming of God's kingdom 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

- How might it change your understanding of the Lord's Prayer if you consider it as containing an apocalyptic idea?

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Revelation is the only book of its kind in the New Testament. It is a letter, from John to seven churches in Asia (1:4) and through them to the rest of the Church, but it is an apocalyptic letter, recounting John's vision of the end times. The vision contains pictures of God, judgement and hope, heaven and the future age. It is set partly on earth and partly in heaven, showing connections between events in the two places and telling a story of resolution to the ongoing conflict between good and evil, Christ and the devil. It makes much use of imagery, including some drawn from the Old Testament, and as such requires much study and interpretation in order to make sense of it.

- How useful is it to include in the New Testament a text which requires such a great amount of interpretation? To what extent should we make an effort to understand it?