



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living the Gifts of Love

Images

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Living the Gifts of Love 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 the Gifts of Love is a Living Faith in Suffolk course designed to support people in deepening their relationship with God. This course is based on three main ideas:

- there's always something more: always the possibility for a deeper relationship with God, always more to receive from God; this can be made real by practising the Christian disciplines;
- we go through these disciplines for the sake of others and creation;
- we are made in the image of God and God is Trinity (which is relationship) so we are made to connect with others and creation in love, and to recognise these connections.

This course gives the opportunity to enable us to practise the Christian disciplines as we learn the gifts of love that God has given to us.

- Session 1: Introduction to the Two Great Commandments
- Session 2: The Activity of Meditation
- Session 3: The Activity of Contemplation
- Session 4: The Activity of Intercession
- Session 5: The Activity of Service
- Session 6: It is finished

For facilitators

- Each session should last around 90 minutes
- There is no recommended group size
- Giving people the opportunity to be listened to, and to be heard, is important – people should not feel pressured, rushed, have their sentences finished for them or have their contributions reworded
- Each session includes a time of silence; this is integral to the session and not an optional extra
- It is important to remember that when we use the word 'God' we are talking about the Trinitarian God.

Session 1: Introduction to the Two Great Commandments

Resources needed:

- Bibles

Our language is very

limited when talking about God. While some language is univocal (having only one meaning), language used about God often has a different meaning when applied to God than when applied to humans (for example, God may not be good in the same way that we are good). Often, then, we use analogy or metaphor when talking about God.

We are made in

God's image – but we are fallen beings: broken; creating idols; with our own errors, fantasies, projections and 'demons'. Only when we participate in Christ, through the work of the Spirit, can we be transformed. We are made in God's image – the image of utter self-giving love. Therefore to be fully human is to be utter self-giving love, and to be free.

This session aims to introduce people to an understanding of the different types of relationship with God.

Welcome people and allow time for introductions: if there are people who do not know each other then perhaps use some kind of ice-breaker such as asking everyone to give their name and a piece of information about themselves. Introduce the course.

Our faith is a mystery: not a puzzle to be solved but a relationship to go deeper and deeper into God's love. We suggest that one of the most important ideas about being made in the image of God is that God is Trinitarian. This is the image of utter self-giving love. In this session we are going to explore this.

Exploration 1: One way in which we know about God is through propositions – ideas about what God is like. These ideas inform, and are informed by, knowledge of God through our senses – what we hear from God, how we feel about God, for instance. They also inform, and are informed by, what we 'know' of God through our intuition – that is, the convictions we have about God that we 'just know', without the use of reason or from analysing information we have been given. We can only know God as God reveals himself. This revelation is understood through prior teaching and through the lens of culture and experience.

- What are some of the propositions we have about God (e.g. God is a judge, God is a spirit)?
- What is the difference between seeing God as a commander who punishes us when we fall short, versus the mother who bore us (Deuteronomy 32:18)?

Exploration 2: The language we use provides a framework for what we think we understand – about God and about ourselves – and so describing God in these propositional ways can limit our understanding and knowledge of God. Our faith tells us that it is possible to know God far more deeply than this. God is not just an idea, but is real, the creator who searches us out. This means that relationship with God can be personal; to 'love God' (as in Matthew 22:37) is the invitation given by a lover, rather than a commander who will punish us if we do not comply.

Read aloud Matthew 22:36-40. In silence, spend some time

The God we worship is the Trinity: the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. One God, one 'unit', but three distinct characters within that unit. In Trinity, God models relationship: a relationship of love that is not hierarchical but where each person of the Trinity is loved and valued by the other persons of the Trinity and where the love they express towards each other is self-giving love.

Jesus spoke often of the Kingdom, and demonstrated what it meant to live as part of that Kingdom – living out this relationship of oneness with God. Because we cannot do this perfectly we see only glimpses of the Kingdom breaking into the present – but we have the hope that eventually this will be fully realised.

Psalm 42 describes this crying out for God as the soul thirsting, and as the deer panting for water. It paints a picture of longing, of the soul aching to draw closer to God.

with this passage. Read it through two or three times more. Take note of any words, phrases or images which stand out for you.

This understanding of God as a lover who creates and seeks us out for relationship still has its limits. Not only is God our lover; his Trinitarian love overflows into us and all of creation. We do not have words with which to express this and so we become silent and wait to experience this reality.

From this, we move from God's Trinitarian love flowing into and through us to God's Trinitarian love flowing as us, so that 'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me' (Galatian 2:20). We still have our specificity – we are called by name (Isaiah 43:1) – but we realise that we are not independent, autonomous and self-existing, but part of creation and therefore part of that overflowing love. From this comes the breaking down of apparent barriers between us and God, and between us and our neighbour, leading to our loving our neighbour not in response to a command but as an overflow of that love.

In Scripture we see this movement pictured as the change from being a slave to being a brother/sister/child, to being a friend, to being a lover/bride (becoming one with God but still remaining ourselves) (see Appendix 1).

Exploration 3: As a group, write words and ideas associated with each of these categories given as headings in Appendix 1 (slave, friend etc).

- How does each category view the world and God?
- How will each relate to and act towards the world and God?
- Re-read Matthew 22:36-40: how do you understand this passage differently in the light of the previous activity?

Song of Songs is an Old Testament book speaking of attraction, faithfulness, and the joys, pleasures and preciousness of love. One way of understanding it is as an expression of the love between God and his people: the soul cries out in love and God, her lover, responds. Spend some time reflecting on Song of Songs 1:1-4 as follows:

- Read, slowly, Song of Songs 1:1-4.
- Pause for around 10 minutes to silently reflect on this.

Exploration for the week: Repeat the exercise using Song of Songs 3:1-2.

Session 2: The Activity of Meditation

Resources needed:

- Bibles

The gifts looked at in this course

are so-called because they are gifts from a loving God to a creation which is immeasurably loved. They can also be thought of as disciplines in recognition of the disciplined approach necessary to cultivate them, or as techniques – particular skills to be developed.

This course looks at four gifts

which can help to break down the barriers between ourselves and God – but there are others; for example, *Lectio Divina*, study of the Bible and theology, learning to tell the stories of faith, and being a Eucharistic community.

This session aims to introduce meditation as a gift which uses words, pictures, stories and ideas to help us towards realising our relationship with God.

Welcome people and introduce today's session. Ask whether people have any reflections on the material from last session, now that they have had time to think about it.

Exploration 1: Reflect back to the group what you noticed when you did your 'Exploration for the week' exercise:

- How do you react to the metaphor of beloved and lover?
- To what extent is it part of your own experience to have this yearning for God as a lover yearns for their beloved?

In our last session we considered the movement from knowing God through propositions, to knowing God as a lover, to knowing God's Trinitarian love flowing into us, and then as us so that we are part of that overflowing love. This is a work in progress, a future hope of which we get glimpses now. There are a number of gifts which can help us to leave behind propositions and ourselves, and to begin to find ourselves in the overflow of God's love.

Exploration 2: At the present time meditation is a popular activity. An internet search of 'meditation' leads to articles about:

- Zen: focusing on freeing the mind, through stillness, to becoming unified with everything else
 - Mindfulness: recognising our mental, emotional and physical processes and the connectedness between people, and becoming more compassionate
 - Headspace: aiming to reduce stress and improve wellbeing, creativity and focus
 - Wellness: focusing on a healthy lifestyle, also including healthy eating and exercise
 - multi-step guides to learn to meditate
- Look up the following Bible passages and consider how these contrast to the modern understanding of meditation: Psalm 77:11-12, Psalm 143:5-6, Luke 2:19.

Exploration 3: Christian meditation is imaginative and creative. It uses ideas and images, often from Scripture, to lead us to see our place in God in new ways.

Practicalities: these gifts require a disciplined approach. It is necessary to set aside a predetermined length of time and to stick to this, even when we feel like giving up. When distractions come, rather than being disheartened it is best to return focus to what we were doing without recrimination.

Meditation can use any gospel passage. If you are using this during Lent, you could use John 12:1-8, for example; a passage suitable for Advent would be Mark 13:1-8.

In Christian meditation we are to focus on the action of Trinitarian love revealed in the scene we are pondering. This pondering is not analytical, or discursive. We look at the self-giving love shared between the persons of the Trinity overflowing in, and as, the world and us.

Christian meditation is about being transformed from the natural, cultural way of being, to loving God. This is not an activity centred on ourselves; it is for the sake of others. We are changing the perspective created by our natural, unreflective environment where 'I' is at the centre of things, independent, isolated, autonomous and self-existent; and we do this for the sake of the other. We look forward to knowing and participating in the overflowing love of the Trinity as God creates everything and us in each moment. We are invited to join in Christ's love for the other (his creation). We put ourselves in the position of moving from what our culture has told us to seeing what our Christian faith shows us: the source and sustaining presence of the love of the Trinitarian God; that God in Christ redeemed his creation, which reveals God's utter self-giving love.

In our culture we often expect to be at the centre of things, and therefore it is a good discipline to meditate with us not at the centre. It is useful to meditate on scenes from the church's year, entering into the life of Christ. That is, rather than focusing on what Jesus can do for us, we enter into his life on behalf of others. We participate in what Jesus is doing for the world. So it is important to concentrate on Jesus and what is happening around him: this is the good news of Christ. As we meditate on a scene, then, we can place ourselves as one of the onlookers if we wish, but our focus is on Christ, not on ourselves.

- Discuss: to what extent do we expect to have our needs satisfied by what happens as we come together as church?

Exploration 4: There are four stages to this meditation:

1. Ask the questions below
2. Read the passage
3. Ask the questions again
4. Spend time in quiet.

In a group context such as this, steps 1, 2 and 3 are read aloud by members of the group but there is no discussion around these; the questions are for reflection on the passage in step 4. Take around 15 minutes to reflect on this.

This passage from Luke's gospel raises questions about Jesus' identity as he pronounces forgiveness of sins. In addition, disease and disability were seen as punishment for sin – one's own or one's ancestors' – and thus carried a stigma. Healing would mean a return to society, rebuilding of relationships, restoration.

Passage: Luke 5:17-26

Questions:

- Look at what is happening around Christ at this moment?.
- Pay attention to the relationship between Jesus and those around him.
- Notice how people are reacting to Jesus.

As a group, reflect on this experience.

Exploration for the week: Do this exercise again, alone, using a different gospel story.

Session 3: The Activity of Contemplation

Resources needed:

- Bibles

The value of

contemplation was understood by people such as Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and the writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, all of whom are historical figures whose writings are prevalent in the twenty-first century.

The *Via Positiva* uses analogy and metaphor – drawing comparisons – to talk about God. In contrast, the ***Via Negativa*** attempts to describe what God is not, rather than what he is. It attempts to stop us in our tracks, to purge and chasten us and our thinking, and to allow us to see how deep our participation in God is.

This session aims to introduce contemplation as a gift which helps us to find ourselves in God's love without relying on words, pictures and ideas.

Welcome people and introduce today's session. Ask whether people have any reflections on the material from last session, now that they have had time to think about it.

Exploration 1: Reflect back to the group what you noticed when you did your 'Exploration for the week' exercise.

In our last session we learnt about, and practised, meditation as one of the gifts which can help us to find ourselves in the overflow of God's love. Today we are going to consider another: contemplation.

The ideal of contemplation is held out to us as a regular and significant time, being in silence, on our knees. Is this ideal possible for many of us in our busy lives, with different personalities, or is contemplation only for the spiritual 'elite'? Our Gospels reveal that Jesus spent significant time alone in prayer. They also reveal that Jesus was busy and often exhausted by life and people. But even when he was busy meeting people, Jesus appears to have been attentive to others. He appears to have attended to others in the light of his relationship with the Father in the presence of the Spirit. So if we do find it impossible to set aside specific times for contemplation we suggest, tentatively, that at points in our day or week, we attend carefully to the event or the person. As we give full attention to the moment or person we recollect the presence of God the Holy Trinity as:

- the source of this moment or person;
- the life flowing through and around this moment or person;
- the lure of Love calling this moment or person towards the bliss of wholeness by being in and with the Holy Trinity fully and forever.

Love gives love to love and from that comes creation. Love is central to our attending to the other. The 'other' is both God and/or creation, the moment, the other person.

Exploration 2: Whereas meditation uses words, pictures, stories and ideas, contemplation moves away from this, recognising that God is so different from creation that all words

and ideas are inadequate.

There is a view that those such as monks and nuns, who shut themselves away from the world in order to contemplate, are wasting their time. But another way of understanding this is that they are doing this on behalf of the whole world; the effect of their silent prayer is felt by the whole world through the interdependence of all things.

There is also a view that contemplation is for only a minority of Christians, those who are spiritually 'elite'. However, it is for all of us as we are all part of the body of Christ. The word 'contemplation' means 'together in the temple for paying attention'; for Christians as the body of Christ the temple is not a building, it is Christ.

Discuss:

- How do you respond to the idea that monks and nuns are contemplating on behalf of the whole world?
- How do you respond to contemplation being for everyone and not just the elite?
- How do you respond to the comments on page 9 that talk about being able to contemplate in a very busy life?

Exploration 3: *Via Positiva* - think of a statement about God and write it down so that everyone can see it. Let this idea spark off other ideas. Add more and more statements to your initial one.

- Notice how these ideas support each other.
- Notice how these ideas contradict each other.

Exploration 4: *Via Negativa* - starting with a proposition such as 'God is Father', ask yourself 'How is God not like a father?' As you consider these ideas, let them lead you into the silence of not knowing.

Exploration 5: Contemplation is something which cannot really be known about unless it is tried. This session is an invitation to try it out.

In the contemplative story we begin by reaching out to God in love, and eventually realise that there is nothing else but God. We who are not God are invited to participate in the love that is shared within God.

One way of relating to the eternity and infinity of God is to allow oneself to be in this infinite and eternal love that is God. All created things will crumble into nothing. In the eternal and

infinite present of God we can let go of all created things and fall, even dive, into the eternity and infinity of God. We can just be in this love.

The Jesus Prayer is an ancient prayer from Orthodox Christianity, originating probably with the Desert Fathers. It is often used repetitively in prayer.

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
have mercy on me,
a sinner.*

Instead of the Jesus Prayer we could use a single word, such as 'Jesus'. This is said silently with each slow breath, and is repeated inside the eternal, infinite shape being created within us.

In contemplation our unruly minds will most certainly wander. In order to help the mind to keep focused we can concentrate on our breathing. Or we can choose a phrase such as the Jesus Prayer. There are many ways of using this prayer. One way is to breathe slowly and on each breath to say one phrase of the prayer: Lord Jesus Christ (breath), Son of God (breath), have mercy on me (breath), a sinner (breath). This is repeated in the infinite, eternal shape being created within us. As our minds find other things to think about, rather than getting cross with ourselves we can just come back to our phrase or word or breathing, back to the infinity and eternity that is being created within or around us as we reach out to God in love.

In contemplation we start by finding a comfortable position. Our bodies need to be trained to know that this is what we are doing now. We set ourselves a time – say 20 minutes to start with. This is because our minds need to be trained to wait for that length of time; they will play tricks on us and quite often want us to get up before the time of contemplation is over and so we need to train and be kind to our minds.

- As a group, using the directions above, agree a length of time and enter silently into the love of God.

If you wish, as a group reflect on this experience.

Exploration for the week: Try to do this at least once at home during the coming week.

Session 4: The Activity of Intercession

Resources needed:

- Bibles

The laying on of hands

is more common in some churches than others. It can be used formally by clergy, but also informally among fellow Christians praying for one another.

In the Bible it has a number of uses: Jesus did it in some of his healings (e.g. Luke 4:40) and in blessing (e.g. Mark 10:16); it was used to give the Holy Spirit (e.g. Acts 8:17) and spiritual gifts (e.g. 1 Timothy 4:14); and it was used to commission into a role (e.g. Numbers 27:18 and Acts 6:6).

However, the laying on of hands is not a prerequisite for these things; for example, Jesus also healed without laying on hands (e.g. Matthew 8:5-13).

Touch is symbolic of acceptance – we are the body of Christ, a community – but for some it is difficult to be touched.

This session aims to introduce intercession as a gift which helps us to put into practice the second great commandment, to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39).

Welcome people and introduce today's session. Ask whether people have any reflections on the material from last session, now that they have had time to think about it.

Exploration 1: Reflect back to the group what you noticed when you did your 'Exploration for the week' exercise.

In our previous sessions we have considered how we can come to know God more closely, finding ourselves in God's love through the gifts of meditation and contemplation. As we realise that the perceived barriers between us and God, and between us and our neighbour, are being broken down by this overflowing love, this session aims to introduce intercession as a gift which enables this love to be expressed.

Exploration 2: Discuss: what have been your experiences of intercession? Encourage people to think about both personal intercessions and those in church services. Try to also include some discussion around the use of laying on of hands (see information box).

Exploration 3: Read aloud Psalm 139:1-16. In silence, spend some time with this passage. Read it through two or three times more. Take note of any words, phrases or images which stand out for you.

'Where can I go from your Spirit' (verse 7) applies not only to Christians but to all people. God's Spirit is present in those we meet at church, at work, at the supermarket, in the Syrian baby, in the members of a terrorist group...

- Discuss: what difference does this understanding make to the way we view intercession?

Divide up into two groups. Ask each group to read one of the Bible passages listed below and to discuss what this passage says about being 'in God'. Passages: Colossians 1:15-20; Matthew 6:7-8. Ask each group to then report back, and together use these findings to make a composite picture of what it means to be 'in God'.

Read Romans 8:26-27. If we - the Church - are Christ's body

and he is head, what does this passage say about intercession?

Eschatology refers to the 'end times' – when Jesus returns, there is judgement, and a new heaven and a new earth. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus demonstrated, is good news, a transformed version of the present order, in which God is King over all people. His rule is evidenced by justice and healing, a radical inclusion of the 'outsiders', an acceptance of God's love, power and authority. This Kingdom is partially present as we live it out; but it is an eschatological hope because it will not be fully present until Jesus returns; hence it is a 'now but not yet' Kingdom.

Exploration 4: In intercession we are not telling God what to do, or reminding him of his perceived obligations, or trying to persuade him to do what he otherwise would not do, or trying to change ourselves, or presenting him with a list. In intercession we are joining in with the loving, healing movement that is the Trinity. God is love, and draws all suffering into his love; in participating in intercession we share in the loving presence of God in places of suffering.

The healing, or wholeness, for which we intercede is eschatological. We may see glimpses of that wholeness now, as the new creation shows itself, but we still live in a time of 'now but not yet' in relation to the Kingdom. So although Jesus' work is finished (John 19:30) or, as Paul says, God is in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19) or making all things new (Revelation 21:5), it remains an eschatological hope; the old creation still suffers (see Romans 8:22-23) until the Kingdom is fully present.

- Discuss: how does this make a difference to our understanding of intercession?

Exploration 5: In order to share in the loving presence of God in places of suffering, intercession begins with using the senses – listening and watching, being silent in order to become aware of how suffering affects our senses – in order to be receptive to God. While silence can seem uncomfortable, there is nowhere we can go where God is not present (Psalm 139:7-12).

Allocate a leader. Set 20 minutes aside. Start with a time of listening to God. Towards the end of the 20 minutes the leader invites each person to offer one person or situation (one name/phrase only); as each is offered it is held before God in a time of silence. End by praying for each other in the Grace.

Exploration for the week: do this exercise again – alone – at least once during the week.

Session 5: The Activity of Service

Resources needed:

- Bibles

This session aims to introduce service as a gift which provides ways of demonstrating the love for neighbour. This results from the breaking down of barriers between God, ourselves and others.

Welcome people and introduce today's session. Ask whether people have any reflections on the material from last session, now that they have had time to think about it.

Exploration 1: Reflect back to the group what you noticed when you did your 'Exploration for the week' exercise.

In our last session we considered intercession as a gift which enables us to express, and participate in, the overflowing of God's love between us and our neighbour. Today we are going to consider another way of expressing this love: service.

Exploration 2: Discuss your responses to the following statements:

- Be careful what you pray for, you might be asked to act.
- Be careful how you act, you might be asked to pray – and be led into a position of greater truth.

It is sometimes the case that praying can show us difficult things about ourselves. For example, through our praying about a way in which we are helping the poor, God may shine light on our motivation for this activity and show us that we are wanting to help the poor but to keep them in the position of being helped, rather than helping them to a better situation, in order to maintain our own position of power.

- In what other ways might we find that we need to change, when we pray through our activities?

Exploration 3: In his Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus contrasts the difference in behaviour between those who go on to receive eternal life and those who receive eternal punishment.

- Read the story in Matthew 25:31-46.

There is an important point to note in this story, and that is the variance between translations. The New International Version of the Bible translates verses 40 and 45 as "whatever you did **for** one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you

When reading the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

we often take it as teaching spiritual rules. Perhaps a better way of considering it is as using hyperbole (exaggeration) to encourage motivation towards working out our prayer.

did **for** me”, whereas the New Revised Standard Version translates this as “just as you did it **to** one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it **to** me”.

- What is the difference in theology between seeing ourselves as doing things ‘for’ Jesus and doing them ‘to’ him?

The modern Church

has tended towards a great focus on individualism, therefore when we read verses like these it is easy to tend towards missing the idea of the one Word speaking each particular person. The Reformation wanted to emphasise individual choice and free will; in the attempt to do this another division was set up between what is natural and what is grace. Current Trinitarian thinking is bringing us back to realise that all creation is the gift of love, and the gift of grace isn’t necessarily an add-on.

Exploration 4: There are several New Testament writers who echo the same idea of a unity in Christ which means that what we do is more than ‘for’ Jesus: see Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 2:10, 1 Corinthians 8:6 and John 1:3-5.

- Divide into pairs; each pair takes one of these passages and paints a word picture for the rest of the group, of what this passage might mean.

Exploration 5: In our last session we saw that God’s Spirit is present in all those we meet across all walks of life. This has two consequences. Firstly, we need to reach a point where we can recognise that being a baptised member of Christ does not make us superior to the rest of the world. We will suffer and, as Paul writes to the Galatians, when one suffers we all suffer (Galatians 3:28). Secondly, as all things cohere in Christ, when any person in the world suffers, Christians will suffer.

There are many examples of how people of prayer have worked out their prayer in service to others: for example, Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier.

- It could be argued that these are extreme examples and we are not all called to serve others to this extent but to act in our own small way. On the other hand it could be argued that holding such a view is our attempt to tame the Spirit and we are called to be wild and extravagant with our lives. Discuss these views.
- How might prayer lead to serving others?
- What are the things that nudge/draw/lure you, which perhaps you should be doing? If you have a heart for this particular form of service, who around you might also be willing to join in that way of thinking and being in the world?

Exploration for the week: Where is the Spirit leading you/us? Spend time in reflection and prayer with this in mind.

Session 6: It is finished

Resources needed:

- Bibles

It is finished... The word translated as 'finished' means that God's work is finished in the sense of being complete, mature or full-grown, having achieved its objective. God has done all that is necessary for his Kingdom to be present on earth; we have no role in this. But because the Kingdom will not be fully present until Jesus returns, we do have a role in bringing it about, living it out in a way that transforms un-Kingdom-like situations: being 'salt' and 'light' (Matthew 5:13-16).

This session aims to draw together the themes of the previous sessions in order to understand our participation in what God has already achieved.

Welcome people and introduce today's session. Ask whether people have any reflections on the material from last session, now that they have had time to think about it.

Exploration 1: Reflect back to the group what you noticed when you did your 'Exploration for the week' exercise.

Exploration 2: Over the duration of this course we have begun to experience the move from knowing God through propositions, to knowing God as a lover, to knowing God's Trinitarian love flowing into us, and then as us so that we are part of that overflowing love. Based on the first great commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind", we have discovered how to find ourselves in God's love through the gifts of meditation and contemplation. In following the second great commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself", we have learnt how to express this love to others through intercession and service.

The purpose of these two commandments is not for us to bring about the Kingdom, but to enable us to participate in what God has already done, is doing and will do. As we saw in session 4, God's work is finished, completed, perfect – but because we live in a time of 'now but not yet' in relation to the Kingdom, we are participating in the working out of what has been done.

- In groups look at each of these passages and discuss what they are saying: Psalm 96; John 19:28-30, Revelation 21:5-6.
- Feed back your discussions: what picture do we get when all these passages are taken together?

Exploration 3: The story of the Exodus is the story of God setting his people free from slavery in Egypt and forming them into his own people with an identity distinct from the surrounding tribes. In the story there are a number of miraculous occurrences which achieve this freedom: as Pharaoh refuses to respond to Moses conveying God's instruction to 'let my people go', a series of plagues come upon Egypt, culminating with the death of all firstborn Egyptian people and livestock, while God's people are saved from death by the

sacrificing of a lamb. On leaving Egypt, and confronted with the Egyptian army behind and the Red Sea ahead, God's people are understandably afraid, and are told: 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today... The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.' They then witness the parting of the sea so that they can pass through on dry land. In the wilderness on the other side, they are led by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. When they find themselves with undrinkable water, the water is made pure; when they find themselves without water God brings water from a rock; when they have no food God sends them bread (manna) and quails.

You might like to consider this as a way of understanding the passage from John's gospel: We abide in God, God abides in us. We participate in that Trinitarian, self-giving, loving relationship that is God. Our spirituality and all aspects of our Christian faith reflect this.

In this story God's people do not know where they are going or what the future holds. Frequently they grumble about their circumstances, as if forgetting all that God has done for them so far. Their primary task, during their years in the wilderness, is to learn that God has achieved their freedom, God is taking care of them, and they 'have only to keep still'. It is finished, it is accomplished. They are free, and need only to learn to live as free people, with the different ways of being and doing that this entails.

- As a group, spend some time reflecting on John 14:20-27. What does the imagery here say to you?

Exploration 4: Reflect on each of the sessions of this course:

- What was important for you in each of the sessions?
- How do the sessions relate to each other?

At the end of this session pray together:

Lord, send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory. Amen.

Appendix 1: the movement in relation to God (see page 5)

LORD/MASTER SERVANTS/SLAVES	PARENT CHILDREN	FRIEND FRIENDS	LOVER BELOVED	BRIDEGROOM BRIDE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God is to be obeyed - Law is all important - Disobedience is met by punishment - Justice trumps love - Creator and creature are very separate - We hide behind the tree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family characteristics but still separate and hierarchical - Disobedience but now met with 'I cannot let you go!' from God - Love trumps justice - Forgiveness is a real experience - Relationship with God is now very important - Adopted into Christ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God and we walk together in a much less hierarchical way - Put on the mind of Christ - Wills become like-minded - Punishment is a 'falling out' of friends - We do things on behalf of our Friend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Holding hands and kissing as God and we walk together - Waiting for the wedding - We love being in the company of the Lover even when God seems most absent - Punishment is the pain of feeling away from our lover 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One flesh - Union - Moments (foretastes) of heavenly bliss
<p>Desire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God/us/desires are very separate - Our desires are corrupt and sinful - We seek God - God supplies our needs 	<p>Desire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Desire for God is stimulated by God's desire for us 	<p>Desire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Desire and love become shared moments - We can begin to see that our desire is fulfilled in God's desire - God starts to become our full desire 	<p>Desire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We begin to recognise that our desires (even physical needs and erotic needs) are actually God loving God in us - The Holy Spirit prays through us and loves through us - Christ in whom and for whom and through whom... - We do things in the 'name' of Christ i.e. in the essence of our Beloved 	<p>Desire:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God only desires God... nothing created will supply any needs in God. God has no needs outside of God - We, the created, are the recipients of the gift of God flowing and eternal desire for God - God's desire for God is the eternal essence of our being and desiring in God - God will be all in all
<p>God and creation are SEPARATE ...</p>	<p>....Gradual unveiling of....</p>	<p>....what is at first hidden..</p>	<p>.. We are stewards of the..</p>	<p>....mysteries of God ...UNION</p>
<p>ALPHA OMEGA</p>				