Welcome

Welcome to the Place in the Crowd Lent Course. Taking part in this course leads us into a central paradox of living as the Church: we are called to be responsible disciples, stewards, heralds, leaders, agents of growth - and yet God’s ways are never subject to our control. To be a Christian is to sit lightly to outcomes and objectives, whilst exerting our best energies in kingdom service and witness. Rather than produce a course that radiates optimism and exhorts us all to try harder, we have tried to enter into the mystery of the Passion journey and see where points of connection emerge for our own context. Vitally, there needs to be space for the Spirit to nudge, reveal, challenge and transform.

The six sessions follow the journey of Jesus from his public ministry to the cross, using as a lens the crowds who accompany different stages of that journey. The sessions use the Gospel of Matthew, which is the lectionary Gospel for this year. But we begin at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, with the familiar passage from Matthew 28 sometimes called ‘the Great Commission’. We inevitably approach mission and discipleship from a post-resurrection perspective, and that is where we start this Lenten journey. We end by the well-sealed and guarded tomb, waiting for the power of God to break shackles and end death’s reign.

It is not necessary to use the material in Lent, but there will be particular resonances if the journey of the sessions is in step with the season. If your group does not have time to do all the sessions, our advice would be to ensure that sessions 1 and 5 are used, then either Session 2 or 3, and either 4a or 4b.

As a diocese, we are diverse in many ways, and no one course will be a perfect fit for every context. The material is not intended to be prescriptive, so please adapt any of the activities in order for your group to engage as fully as possible. In the ‘Living it Out’ sections we have tried to include examples of churches and communities making a positive difference in everyday ways from all round the diocese. The course aims to celebrate what is already happening, to put new heart into God’s people, and to acknowledge that it is God who is ultimately the one who is at work.

Our Conversation; Our Future

In the Diocese of Rochester, we are currently engaging as many people as possible in a conversation about our purpose and future direction. We have named process this Our Conversation; Our Future. These conversations will help us discern the will of the Holy Spirit as we seek to develop a new strategic framework – a vision, or set of goals, to guide us. We are actively seeking to hear from anyone with an opinion, not just those who currently worship in a Church of England church within the Diocese of Rochester.

Since the turn of the century we have collectively experienced 9/11, major wars, civil wars in big Arab states, the growing nihilism of religious violence, a global refugee crisis, developing climate change, a severe banking collapse which revealed deep and endemic flaws in the global economy, an era of austerity and lengthening inequality, a vote to leave the European Union and, across the so-called developed world, the re-emergence of demagoguery and extremist politics. This is taking
place against the panoramic scenery of a digital revolution which we imagine has taken place but which presently is no more than the slow taxiing of a plane to the runway. In the course of this century, which will belong to our children and grandchildren, they will travel to places so far away we could never imagine them. The two previous economic revolutions – agrarian and industrial – made unprecedented impacts on where and how people lived and related to one another. Our revolution in personal communication will alter the social architecture irrevocably, impacting upon lives more intimately than anything that has gone before. It is the biggest social experiment in human history.

But still we carry on as if nothing has really happened. For the Church this would be a mistake. Its historic calling is to a dual listening role. It should open its ears to the world: to make sense of the changes taking place. And to the Holy Spirit, to enable the Church to respond to these changes, that its people may live more fruitfully as disciples of Christ. The creation of a diocesan strategy is a response to the many remarkable things that are happening around us. In the midst of rapid and volatile change, we need to shape our mission – through evangelism and community action – in a way that demonstrates the coming Kingdom of God.

‘Place in the Crowd’ has been designed to encourage and enable engagement with this changing world around us, to look at these issues in a spiritual and reflective way. Once you have completed the course, we welcome you to respond to ‘Our Conversation; Our Future’ by answering (individually, or as a group) to the questions in the back of this book.

You can find out more about Our Conversation; Our Future on our website www.rochester.anglican.org/strategy/conversation

Course Format
The six sessions offer a variety of styles of interaction, including bible study, prayer, conversation, activity and creativity. You are welcome to pick and choose the elements which work best for your context. Each session is made up of the following:

- Introduction
- Warming Up
- Entering the Story
- Living It Out
- Praying It In
- Going Further

Additional resources, including stories to bring our modern context into focus, are available on www.placeinthecrowd.org.uk
Session One – The Great Commission

Matthew 28. 16-20

Introduction
It would be naïve to go into a Lent Course without being honest about where we are struggling and what feels difficult. At the start of the course, the opening activity is an opportunity to name some negatives and offer them to God as part of the reality of where we are. It is important that this does not turn into a litany of blame, but rather is experienced as an honest way of expressing some doubts and anxieties about where we are as churches, as communities, as a diocese, and as a national church, after which we can move on to hear God afresh. The Bible passage for this week reflects the range of responses of the disciples as they gathered to receive Jesus’ final commission; we are told that ‘they worshipped him; but some doubted.’ It will be the same for our congregations, and it is important that we are sensitive to this, as well as being rightly expectant that Jesus will bless, inspire and guide us anew as we gather as his people.

Warming up: The Elephant in the Room
If the group has not met before and members may not know one another, allow time for names and hopes for the course to be shared.

Explain that when we come to learn and listen, it is often helpful to get some of our doubts and worries off our chests at the outset.

You could use Resource Sheet 1, make available suitable paper – or even a pack of elephant-shaped sticky notes (available from online retailers)

Invite group members to write on a post-it note any doubt or question they are coming with as they approach the course. It can be on the level of personal faith and life situation, to do with life in the church at local or diocesan level, or worries about the global situation.

Give people the opportunity to write on their elephants and place them somewhere central – perhaps beneath a cross or around a candle.

When all are gathered, you may want to use your own words or the following prayer:

*Risen Lord, we lay all these things before you
at the start of our journey together through Lent.
By your Holy Spirit, open our eyes to see beyond our doubts,
And lead us into new places in our walk with you. Amen.*

Entering the story
This is a familiar passage, but we may not have spent time with all its dimensions. It is a passage which lends itself to a Lectio Divina approach in order that ignored details and words may surprise us again. Those that have used the Pilgrim course will be familiar with this approach; we’ve used it again here.

- Read the passage through once
Keep a few moments silence
Read the passage a second time with different voices
Invite everyone to say aloud a word or phrase that strikes them
Read the passage a third time
Share together what this word or phrase might mean and what questions it raises

Living it out
Read or watch our stories from Christians across the Diocese of Rochester, living out the Great Commission in different contextually appropriate and creative ways. We celebrate the big and small, and everything in between.

[These materials will be available in early 2017. We want to ensure they are as up to date as they can be]

Praying it in
Enable everyone to become still, perhaps with some calming music or breathing exercises. Ask each person to imagine Jesus standing in their church building, with the local congregation gathered to listen to his final words before leaving.

Spend some time in silence, being aware of the presence of God, and listening for any words, images, flashes of insight.

Invite people to use creative means such as paints, coloured pencils, modelling-clay, to explore their sense of what Jesus might be saying and what it might mean. Invite group members to share their thoughts, however unformed.

Offer all that has been said and unsaid to God, and spend time reflecting on Jesus’ final promise to be with us until the end of the age.

Going further
‘When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.’
(Matthew 28.17)

Multi-Media Option - Read or watch the monologues Sceptics Corner (script and video link resource online.)

The disciples are back in Galilee. The place where Jesus had first called them is now the place of their final instructions. God has given all authority to the Son to make disciples of all nations, yet after all they had witnessed, after all they had seen and heard whilst walking alongside Jesus, some of the disciples still doubted. Surely then, there has to be hope for the rest of us? And there needs to be hope. We live in the uncertain reality of our time, with all of its contradictions, brokenness, hatred and greed.

How, in this time, do we respond to the command of Jesus to make disciples of all nations?

Rowan Williams describes part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus as being in a state of awareness: ‘The disciple is where she or he is in order to be changed; so that the way in which she or
he sees and experience the whole world changes. To follow Jesus is to care for the poor, to live our lives with integrity, to love our neighbour, to forgive those who wound us, and to show compassion to others; especially those who are different from us, or indifferent to us. The disciple, by God’s grace, is an agent in this process of change and changing; change of self and changing the world around us.

A helpful exercise can be to remind ourselves that we are not starting from zero in our desire to respond faithfully to Jesus’ command. Ask the group to consider the following, if possible using a visual way of tracking responses such as a long roll of wallpaper:

What are the stories in your community of past mission and action? What’s the legacy?

Can you think of a time when something new came in (something that’s now an accepted norm, such as having coffee in church, all age services, chairs not pews)? What were the feelings and concerns at the time? How has that worked out since?

Imagine that in 20 years’ time, the Christian community in this place is writing to thank you for what you did today which has left a lasting legacy. What would they say? Try writing the letter together.

---

1 Rowan Williams, Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life, p3