

**reimagine**  
Leading the church out of lockdown



**restore**

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**Small Group Sessions**

*“Christ is the Lord of a history that moves. He not only holds the beginning and the end in his hands, but he is in history with us, walking ahead of us to where we are going.”*

*Thomas Merton*

*“Beware of harkening back to what you once were, when God wants you to be something that you have never been.”*

*Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest*

# 1 Reflect

## The Importance of Reflecting

*“The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.”*

**Mark 1:15. Repent for the Kingdom of God is near**

### Introduction

The pandemic has brought us fresh perspective on our life and faith. David’s statement that because the Lord Almighty is his shepherd he lacks nothing is a challenging perspective for us to reflect on. The aim of this session is to establish an openness to how everyone is and to begin a journey of reflection together.

### Welcome

Ask the simple question: How are you and how has lockdown been for you?

If the group is already established, give people a chance to talk and catch up on how they’ve been during lockdown. If this is the first time you’ve met, ask everyone to introduce themselves and tell the others a bit about themselves and their current circumstances before going on to the question.

If you are together in person you could ask people to write down the thing that they are most grateful to God for, and the thing that has been the hardest aspect of lockdown? Or if you are on zoom ask them to write this in the chat.

Then ask them: What are the things that you have learned during lockdown: about yourself, about life, about God?

## Worship

Read the 23rd Psalm together. You could read one verse after another with a different person reading each verse. Then ask each person to reflect on the verse that they read and to pray a prayer of thanksgiving about what it reveals about God and his relationship with us.

## Word

Read the single verse: "The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing" Ps 23:1

Explain that David here gives us an example of his reflections on how our relationship with God transforms our perspective on life. He was pursued by Saul who was attempting to kill him and yet he takes time to remember his experience as a shepherd and to connect the way that God cares for him with the role of a shepherd. This reflection allows the Holy Spirit to inspire him to write this profound truth that Jesus picks up as speaking about him.

Ask people to pause for a moment and read the verse again. Ask people – do you think you could make this statement over your life?

How might this challenge your perspective on your life?

This week we are being invited to begin to reflect on what our experience of the pandemic has taught us. To help us we are going to read Mark 1:14-15

Jesus arrived in the midst of God's people who were oppressed and compromised by the Roman rule of Jerusalem, failing to care for the poor and marginalised, and fighting among themselves. Nothing of any note spiritually had happened for over 400 years. Jesus declares "Repent for the kingdom of God is near."

Repentance (the Greek word *Metanoia*) is an action and it is not meant to be about feeling shame or feeling bad. It is instead about thinking differently and therefore acting differently. *Metanoia* is not about just changing your mind quickly without reflection. *Metanoia* is about making a deeper and more mature decision to stop, to examine one's choice of direction, recognize the need for change and turn around, to face a new direction. And new directions are full of potential, loaded with new possibilities. And new possibilities bring new beginnings.

Questions to ask to explore the passage:

- What aspects of the kingdom of God do you think the pandemic and lockdown have revealed that we need at this time?
- What things have been challenged in our attitudes during this time where we need to repent and change our mind?
- Jesus arrival brought challenge to religious institutions and rules and requirements. What aspects of church life and worship might God be challenging at this time?
- What changes to church life would you like to see come from this experience?
- People have described the pandemic experience as a 'stress test' in which a system's strength is tested to see how it stands up to that pressure. In your life personally what has this revealed about yourself, your faith and your practices of following Jesus?
- What changes are you hoping to make personally going forward?

### **Prayer Response**

Give people a candle to light (at home on their own online or in person if this is possible) and invite people to pray silently and humbly for God to come and bring his love and light into all that they have discussed. Conclude by saying the following prayer.

## **Thomas Merton's Prayer**

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen*

## **Witness**

So much of Jesus ministry with people began when he asked someone a question. This week why don't we think who we could connect with and simply ask the question "how was your lockdown? What do you think you have learned through it?" or if you see someone regularly simply asking them "how are you?" and really listen.

You can do this casually in a conversation or you can plan to do it by arranging to meet up with someone. One of the things that the pandemic exposed was our lack of community and an epidemic of loneliness in our culture. Planning to connect and asking someone how they are is an act of love.

Pray for those people before you connect with them and ask God to open them up to his love and to use you to begin that process with your question. See what conversation emerges and what insights you receive. Share with the group who you think you could do this with and have a time of praying in pairs for God to use this. Be prepared to share how that goes in next week's meeting

# 2 Refresh

*“He leads me beside still waters he restores my soul”*

**John 7:37-40. Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink**

*(If you choose to use the suggested prayer response later in the session you will need to ask people to have a glass of water ready for later in the meeting)*

## **Welcome**

Give people the chance to share how their week has been.

From this ask how people got on connecting with friends and neighbours and asking that simple question “how are you? / how was lockdown for you?”

## **Worship**

Explain that this week we will read Psalm 23 twice (choose two different people to do this). The first time ask people to listen and see which verse or phrase that they feel drawn to. Pray for God to lead and speak to you as you read this together. Read it once and after the reading finishes encourage people to capture the verse that they are going to focus on. But if they are not sure we will read it again.

Now encourage people in silence to think of five things to thank God for that flow from that verse and to write a prayer or reflection on that verse.

While they do this play a sung version of Psalm 23 to create an atmosphere of worship.

At the end of this time invite anyone who would like to share.

## Word

Read the following verse from Psalm 23:

*“He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.”*

Here David expresses how a shepherd knows the needs of his flock and takes them to green pastures and a safe place to rest and drink and how God knows our needs and wants to do this in our lives.

### Ask People

As we talk about refreshment this week how would you express your spiritual needs at the moment and what would you ask God to do for you at this time?

### Read John 7:37-40

The context of this passage was the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. This was the annual celebration of the time when Israel wandered in the wilderness. One of the things that they commemorated and celebrated was the water that God gave from the rock in the wilderness. And each day the priests would pour out water before the altar to remember that gift of water. It was in this context that Jesus said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.”

In what ways does being in relationship with Jesus satisfy our spiritual thirst?

John explains that Jesus was talking about drinking and being filled with the Holy Spirit. What has been your experience of the Holy Spirit filling you?

It is by believing in Jesus that we experience this spiritual renewal (which actually is more about trusting in Jesus than an intellectual belief). What can we do to deepen our trust and relationship with Jesus and continue to receive spiritual refreshment from the Holy Spirit?

In what ways have we seen people outside of the church expressing spiritual thirst during the pandemic?

Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit flowing out of us as a stream. How can we offer spiritual refreshment to people who may not recognise their need of it?

### **Prayer Response**

If you are comfortable with this form of prayer you could pray individually for the Holy Spirit to come and fill and refresh each person.

You could invite people to take a drink of water (you will need to have arranged this in advance) and as they do encourage them to pray for spiritual refreshment.

### **Witness**

Discuss together who each person could invite to have a coffee or a meal with them to show love and friendship to? Agree who each person will invite and pray God's blessing on those times.

Or you could ask each person to text a friend or family member "I was just thinking of you and wondered if there was anything I could pray for you at the moment?" get people to send texts while they are in the group together.

Could you design a prayer card with prayers people can pray and with a link to a page on your website / QR code. Create packs with a card, candle, greeting from church for people to give to their friends and neighbours.



# 3 Rejoice

*“You set a table before me in the midst of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil and my cup overflows”*

## **John 2:1-12. Water into wine**

*(If you choose to have an agape meal in the worship section you will need to arrange for a candle and bread and wine (or an equivalent) and if you are doing this online each person will need to arrange this.)*

### **Welcome**

Ask people how their week was and whether they met up with someone or had a reply to the text asking for prayer requests and how that went. Ask each person to share a time when they shared a significant meal with someone or had a party / or meal to celebrate a significant event. Ask them- ‘why do meals have such an important part of significant social occasions?’

### **Worship**

Jesus gave us a meal to remember him by – bread and wine. While we cannot share in Holy Communion.

The Love Feast, or Agape Meal, is a Christian fellowship meal recalling the meals Jesus shared with disciples during his ministry and expressing the koinonia (community, sharing, fellowship) enjoyed by the family of Christ. It is not the same as Holy Communion or the Eucharist.

The Love Feast has often been held on occasions when the celebration of the Lord's Supper would be inappropriate—where there is no one present authorised to administer the Sacrament, when persons of different denominations are present who do not feel free to take Holy Communion together, when there is a desire for a more informal service or some other setting to which it would be difficult to adapt the liturgy.

Light a candle and pray this prayer at the beginning (if you are doing this online encourage everyone to light a candle):

*Be present, be present, Lord Jesus, as you were in the midst of your disciples; and make yourself known to us as we share this food together: for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.*

### **Read Luke 24:13-32**

Pause for a moment and recognise the presence of Jesus with you by his Holy Spirit.

Encourage people to remember Jesus and his love shown for them in the cross and encourage them to remember his resurrection, that he is alive and will come again.

Invite people to eat bread and drink wine encouraging them to do so with faith that God will nourish them spiritually by his Holy Spirit as they do this.

Conclude with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

## **Word**

Read this verse from Psalm 23:

*“You set a table before me in the midst of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil and my cup overflows”*

This verse feels like a good description of planning parties and celebrations as we come to the end of the Covid pandemic in our country – a table in the midst of a threat.

What was / will be the first way you will use your freedoms to celebrate the end of all the lockdown restrictions?

**Read John 2:1-12.**

Wedding festivities generally lasted for 7 days and to run out of wine on 3rd day would have been a matter of shame and Jesus' mother wants to save their friends from this shame.

What is your favourite part of this story?

Cana is an insignificant town in Galilee where Jesus performs his first and second miracles in John's Gospel. What does Jesus' attendance at the wedding and his miracle providing better wine for the celebration say to you?

This is the first of seven signs that John records in his gospel and he records that the result is that it revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him (v11). What does this miracle reveal about Jesus?

How can hospitality be an expression of the grace of God?

How can we be used by God to bring blessing to those around us?

## **Witness**

How could your group / church help create a place of community and party and celebration for the community around you?

Could you plan an event / party that you could invite people to (have a look at the reimagine resources for more ideas)?

What could be the sign that pointed to Jesus from this event?



# 4 Remember

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil”*

**John 11:17-37. I am the resurrection and the life.**

*(If you choose to use the prayer response suggested people will need a small amount of oil ready to use then)*

## **Welcome**

Ask people to share how they are.

Ask them what their experience of loss was during the lockdown – lost freedoms, lost special moments, loss of relationship, death of loved ones, loss of finance / job?

Read out this verse from Psalm 23:

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me, you rod and staff comfort me”*

How does knowing God is with us protect us from fear?

What difference did your faith in Jesus make during the pandemic?

## **Worship**

Have a go at writing your own psalm. It can be about sheep like this one, or about somethings else. It does not have to rhyme. Pick a characteristic of God. Think about how you could express it. Write some lines that describe God in this way and write some lines of praise and thanksgiving.

## Word

Read John 11:17-37.

Jesus could not have arrived in time to prevent Lazarus' death. He delays only two days before going to Bethany (v. 6), but by the time he arrives in Bethany Lazarus has been dead four days (v. 39). Had Jesus departed immediately—two days earlier—Lazarus would have been dead two days before Jesus' arrival in Bethany. It is likely that Lazarus died even before the messenger reached Jesus. Assuming that the messenger took one day to locate Jesus—and Jesus delayed two days—and Jesus took one day to travel to Bethany—it would appear that Lazarus died shortly after the messenger began his journey to Jesus. Jewish people believed that the soul remains in the vicinity of the body for three days, hoping to rejoin the body. On the fourth day, the soul finally faces reality and departs. The fact that Lazarus has been in the tomb four days means that there can be no possibility of his soul rejoining his body. Four days is shorthand for "hopeless."

Where in your experience have you seen Jesus' answer prayers and turn around apparently hopeless situations?

What difference does it make to read that Jesus wept at the grave of his friend?

What does Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus reveal about who Jesus is?

Jesus resurrection of Lazarus is the last 'sign' recorded in John's Gospel and is a picture of the resurrection he will one day perform for everyone who believes in him. Having been surrounded by the reality of death in this past year what difference has Jesus' resurrection made to you?

In what ways has the covid pandemic changed your understanding of the call of Jesus to share the Gospel with others?

## **Prayer Response**

Hold some silence and encourage them to remember that they have been baptised into Christ – his death was so that they need not fear death and his resurrection promises their resurrection.

Then invite people to dip their finger in oil and sign the back of their hand or their forehead with the sign of the cross as a way of personally receiving this truth again.

Then pray this prayer:

*Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life. Thank you that we have been baptised into your death and resurrection and we have the hope of eternal life. We receive afresh all the benefits that flow from your death on our behalf. As this oil rests upon us we pray that you would anoint us with your Holy Spirit and enable us to carry the hope of the Gospel into the world. For your glory's sake. Amen.*

## **Witness**

Who do you know who is in need of comfort and how could you offer that?

If you have begun to plan any party or event to invite people to make sure you give time to this and to pray for this.



# 5 Recover

*“He guides me along the right paths”*

**Matthew 11:28-30** Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden

## **Welcome**

Ask people to share how they are.

Ask them what they feel will be the hardest things from the experience of lockdown for them to recover from.

## **Worship**

Read Psalm 46

Then play some music to listen to that releases the peace of God such as ‘Be still for the presence of the Lord’ or ‘The Lord’s my Shepherd’.

Pray for God to draw close to you and minister his grace and peace to you.

## **Word**

Read Matthew 11:28-30.

These are among the most beloved and quoted verses in the Bible, because all of us feel burdened and in need of rest. In their original context, these verses spoke specifically to those burdened by the Jewish law. Religious professionals prided themselves on their observance of the law, and burdened ordinary people with unbearable rules and requirements.

Jesus said “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” (v. 29). Rabbis often likened the law to a yoke. Here Jesus uses it to offer an alternative picture of the yoke across his shoulders as well as ours in which he leads our lives but also shares our burdens. His yoke is ‘chrestos’ (the Greek word meaning manageable or easy). Then he describes his heart towards us - “for I am gentle and lowly in heart” and “you will find rest for your souls”

Weary seems to be the word that sums up the last year. What effect does this have on a person?

What does it mean for us to come and find rest in Jesus? How does this happen in your experience?

The image of the yoke in Jesus words implies that we become overwhelmed when we carry things in the wrong way. How can we learn to live and pray in a way that Jesus carries our burdens with us?

In what ways does Jesus heal and restore us by his Holy Spirit?

### **Prayer Response**

Ask people – how can we pray for you today? Pray in the way that is appropriate for your group. You could (actually or via zoom) gather around each person and pray for the Holy Spirit to minister to them. You could ask each person to write down their prayer, then light a candle and hold it before God and after a time of silence conclude with a general prayer.

## **Witness**

What are some of the things that people are recovering from in your community?

Have a time of discussion and then prayer about what God might be calling you as a group or your church to do in response to this.



