

Living Faith

Spring Term



Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week & Easter

Living Faith (2020) was prepared by Lindsey Hall. This Course contains some material from the previous Bishop's Certificate Course, Prepared for the Ministry Division by Pauline Shelton, David Heywood and Elizabeth Jordan.

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Epiphany

Lent

Holy Week

Easter

1. Truth and Insight
2. Temptations
3. Suffering and the God of Love
4. The cross of Christ
5. Film Week
6. The Passion of Christ
7. Transformation
8. The Christian hope
9. Breakfast with Friends (John 21)
10. Group Meal and Faith-Life Conversations

Living Faith is an introductory course for people who want to learn more about the Christian faith and discipleship. It follows the seasons of the Christian year, and looks at some key aspects of Bible study, belief and the work of the Church. It ties in with the worshipping life of the Church as we journey through the Christian year and mark the key seasons and festivals. It is possible to start at the beginning of any of the modules, and you may want to adjust the times to fall in with Lent and Easter in particular.

By the end of this course, participants should be able to:

- Identify some of the distinctive features of each of the four Gospels
- Outline some of the core doctrines of the Christian tradition
- Reflect on the relationship between belief and practice
- Demonstrate an understanding of faith-life conversations

Facilitators Notes:

You do not need any particular qualifications to lead this course; however, it is useful to nominate someone to be the facilitator. Their role is:

- to make sure that everyone gets chance to speak
- to move the discussion on when necessary so the rest of the material is covered
- to set up a screen/sound to watch the YouTube clip or download the clip (or to nominate someone else to!)
- to ensure that every member of the group has a copy of the module
- to look through the material for each session before it starts so that you can allocate the time appropriately
- To organize the film week (there are some films available to borrow from the Vocations Team) and the end of module meal.

⇔ Indicates a discussion point

Session One

Truth and Insight

Aims of this session:

- ❖ **To reflect on the idea of epiphany, the discovery of truth**
- ❖ **To consider the meaning of profound truth**
- ❖ **To think about what it means for Jesus himself to be truth**

Opening Prayer:

Lord God, at the start of this new year, help us to focus on you. Help us to follow the path on which you lead us and dedicate ourselves to your service. As we meet together to reflect on your Word, help us to see the truth of your Gospel and give us the desire to share this with others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Spring 1**

One definition of 'Epiphany' is 'the discovery of great truth'. In the Christian calendar Epiphany refers to the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus, and particularly their discovery of great truth. This event is a very important part of the nativity story in Matthew's Gospel, not least because it suggests, right from the very beginning of the account of who Jesus is, that he is significant not only to the Jewish people, or those in his own homeland, but also to visitors from exotic lands far away! The wise men, or Magi, show how significant the birth of Jesus is, both in terms of his universality – that he has come for all people - and also that such learned, respected people should seek him. The wise men did not exactly find what they were looking for. They found something rather different than the royal baby they first looked for in a palace, and yet they had the insight to know that the baby they found in a manger was the one they had been led to.

'Magi' comes from a word of Latin origin, and means people who are able to read the stars, more like astrologers than astronomers! The word does not appear in Matthew's Gospel, but has been commonly used to refer to the visitor's from the East, since the medieval period.

The discovery of the great truth of Jesus Christ was not only an epiphany for the wise men but is an epiphany for every person who hears the Good News of Jesus. In this sense we could talk about an epiphany as being a moment or process of transformation, significant change because of the discovery that has been made.

Epiphany moments happen in all sorts of ways. In literature, love epiphanies are a common device in stories when one character suddenly realises that they love another. In *Pride and*

Prejudice, Elizabeth Bennett, realises she loves Mr Darcy when she thinks he will want nothing to do with the family because of her sister Lydia's elopement. Another of Jane Austen's heroines Emma realises she loves Mr Knightley when her friend Harriet announces that she is in love with him; and LM Montgomery's Canadian heroine Anne of Green Gables finally realises she has always loved Gilbert Blythe when she learns he is dying of scarlet fever. In these moments of epiphany, the truth of their feelings becomes so evident that they have no choice but to acknowledge them and the acknowledgement of this truth allows all sorts of other things to fall into place.

Each of us will have experienced epiphany moments, whether about love, or finding Jesus, or understanding how a problem can be solved, or seeing why somebody behaves the way they do. When these moments of insight happen, they allow us to see the situation a bit more clearly.

⇔ **Can you think of a moment of epiphany you have experienced?**

These sorts of experiences, these moments of epiphany point to another level of truth. They are not just about facts, but about becoming convinced of something that goes beyond the factual. Understanding who Jesus is, is not just about knowing or even believing a set of facts; it is about a realisation that who he is matters, and that somehow understanding that means other things also fall into place. The Christian faith raises a whole number of questions – of logic, proof, reason, but there is also a completeness about it that means it can make sense even without satisfactory answers to these questions. Christianity proclaims a profound truth, not a neat package of answers, but a sometimes disturbing, challenging and even uncomfortable truth.

What is truth?

There is a well-known scene in the film *A Few Good Men* in which Tom Cruise (a military lawyer) and Jack Nicholson (a colonel in the marines) play a scene which sees Nicholson's character giving evidence in a marine court. The exchange in which Kaffee (Cruise) and Jessop (Nicholson) gets more and more heated, goes:

Col. Jessep: You want answers?

Kaffee: I think I'm entitled

Col. Jessep: You want answers?

Kaffee: I want the truth!

Col. Jessep: You can't handle the truth!

Jessop follows on with a speech about how the world is a lot more complicated than either truth or lies. The lawyer Kaffee's pursuit of the truth is, he implies, unhelpful, naïve and irrelevant. The truth is only for those who can handle it!

This question about truth is not new, and not limited to fiction. We constantly see battles in politics, media and local governance about who should or needs to know the truth, and which truths are better off kept behind closed doors. When we talk about truth in this way, we don't just mean factual truth or forensic truth, we are talking about a profound level of truth which far surpasses mere fact! This can be difficult to understand but is key to the claims of religion and to understanding Jesus.

Truth is a significant theme in the Gospel according to John – of course it is important to all of the Gospels, but John in particular challenges our ideas about truth throughout his book.

Consider the following four short passages from John's Gospel:

1:14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

In John's prologue (the first nineteen verses of chapter 1 which introduce the Gospel), John describes Jesus as the Word (from the Greek. Logos) who has become flesh and dwells among us, "full of grace and truth". Right from the beginning of the Gospel, we are told that grace and truth are important things to understand about Jesus. This does not mean that he is graceful and truthful, in the way we might use those words today. Rather Jesus is grace and he is truth. This is made even more explicit in chapter 14:

14:6 Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Jesus's claim that he himself is truth, is not a way of grasping at status! Jesus is trying to explain that encountering Jesus is encountering God, there is nothing more fundamentally true than the presence of the one who created the world. And, Jesus explains that knowledge of this truth, will set us free:

8: 31-32 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'

Truth is not an abstract concept, or a vague idea, or an impossible ideal, truth is the reality of the presence of God. But of course, John understands that however clear that is made, not all people will understand. There are those who are blind but can see, and those who have sight but are blind to the truths of the Gospel.

18:37-38 Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

⇔ **In the light of the teaching about truth in John's Gospel, what do you think Pilate's question means?**

There have been many different interpretations of Pilate's question over the years. Many have thought of it as Pilate trying to wriggle out of the situation by claiming that truth is a slippery, elusive concept "What is truth anyway?! Others have argued that Pilate is trying to understand but is simply out of his depth. Still others have suggested that Pilate predicts a post-modern world view which questions whether there is any one thing that can be called "truth". Whilst all or any of these connotations may be present in the passage, at one level John is making a very clear point. Pilate did not recognize truth when it was standing right in front of him. Jesus himself is truth, and that is the thing that Pilate either fails, or chooses not, to see.

⇔ **What does John's Gospel tell us about truth?**

Truth is not about clever argument or complex logic. Although John's Gospel does contain some of both, it shows that truth is something at once far more complicated and far more simple than people thought. It is not a static concept or idea, but is embodied in the person of Jesus.

This radically changes what it means for us to be upholders of the truth. This is not just about lies, little white ones or otherwise! It is not just about levels of disclosure; upholding the truth or bearing witness to the truth is about living according to the values of Jesus.

It requires us to understand the world as created by and grounded in the presence of God, to see the truth of our reality in the light of Christ.

John's Gospel was probably the last of the four Gospels to be written, and may have been as late as 95 AD. Almost two generations after the death of Jesus, the Gospel of John is not a nuts and bolts telling of the story, but a poetic and philosophical account of the Jesus event, and its meaning for the Gospel-hearers. It is built around seven 'signs' or miracles which reveal who Jesus is. These are matched by seven "I am" sayings in which Jesus explains who he is.

There are several recurring themes in John's Gospel, darkness and light, sight and blindness and eternal life all reflect the difference between knowing Christ, and not knowing him. There are some lengthy passages in John. Some, which describe the relationship between Jesus the Son are dense and complex, and a bit confusing! Others are lengthy accounts of encounters between Jesus and those who end up following him. There is an incredible amount of detail in these passages, all of which invites us to understand something more about the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.

Session Two

Temptation

Aims of this session:

- ❖ **To reflect on the temptations Jesus faced**
- ❖ **To think about what temptation means**
- ❖ **To reflect on the things that really tempt us away from following Christ**

Opening Prayer:

Lord you know us inside and out, our triumphs and joys, our failures and sorrows. As we think about the way in which Jesus was tempted, help us to be honest about the things that tempt us. Give us the strength to turn back to you in the face of each temptation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Spring 2**

Adverts for luxury products or things that are bad for us often use the idea of temptation as a selling point. We should give into temptation and indulge in this particular chocolate/ bubble bath / car/ new kitchen because after all, we are worth it! When temptation is talked about in these sort of contexts, the suggestion is that it is not really to be avoided, but embraced. The consequences of embracing temptation will involve all sorts of pleasure we will otherwise miss out on unnecessarily. "I can resist anything except temptation" says the character Lord Darlington in Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windemere's Fan*. This sort of talk of temptation operates on a rather superficial level. Temptation is not about extreme self-denial or just avoiding fun, giving in to temptation is about following paths that are destructive to us and to other people.

⇔ **What do you think are the biggest temptations people face in today's world?**

The recent banking crises and related economic depression give us an insight into the temptations that face people who work in the economic sector, as well as those who use their services. The temptation to borrow, without knowing how it can be repaid, to take risks and ignore potential consequences is an example of a temptation that was no longer regarded as serious. The consequences, however, have been far reaching.

In the 1970s an American psychologist called Walter Mischel conducted a series of experiments that became known as the "marshmallow test". In the experiment, children were left alone with one marshmallow with the promise that if they didn't eat it, they would be given 2 marshmallows when the experimenter returned. Most of the children ate the one that was available to them, rather than waiting for the abstract promise of 2. Psychologists use this experiment to illustrate the human preference for instant, rather than delayed gratification. Many commentators say that we live in a culture which prizes instant gratification.

↔ **Can you think of examples of our preferences for instant gratification?**

You might have thought of credit cards and systems of buying goods where you get them now and pay for them over the next four years. At one time, it would have been the norm to save up for four years and then get the goods, but this tends to be more of an exception now.

Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent focus on the temptations and exile of Jesus in the wilderness. Immediately after Jesus is baptised, the meaning of being God's Son is worked out through his testing by Satan. We echo this journey as we move through lent towards Good Friday and Easter Sunday as we try and understand what it really means that Jesus is God's Son.

The three synoptic Gospels all tell the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan after he has spent 40 days fasting alone in the desert. Mark's Gospel does not give any details of the temptations, only that they happened. Matthew and Luke both describe the particular temptations that Jesus faced.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 4:1-11

⇔ What do you think about the particular temptations that Jesus faced?

The temptations which Satan puts before Jesus, may seem strange to us. They are not our temptations, they are not real options for us, but the point is of course, that Satan judges exactly what will really tempt Jesus. Each of the temptations involves defying the laws of nature. This in itself, is not a temptation, Jesus defies the laws of nature when he performs miracles, but these are demonstrations of the Kingdom he proclaims. Satan asks him to act in a way which goes against, rather than fulfils God's good creation. The temptations invite Jesus to follow a path which is destructive, rather than building up of the kingdom. Satan offers to give Jesus all of the world but taking it in this way would mean it was no longer the realm of God, it would not be the Kingdom which Jesus looks to. Jesus rejects the wrong understanding of his power. Earthly glory is not what he claims, flash displays of power are not what he has come to earth for.

Perhaps the hardest temptation for Jesus here is not one of the three things that Satan names. Jesus must have been tempted to crush the devil, to take his kingdom by force. Although Jesus does not fall into Satan's trap, he does engage with him. He allows him to put the questions to him and responds to him. He does not silence him; he does not compete with him and he does not destroy him. Jesus proves his character, but he does not engage in power play, he does not attempt to prove position or status. This episode is a picture of how Jesus will bring in the Kingdom of Heaven. All that is opposed to the Kingdom will be defeated by methods which embody that Kingdom. Satan will not be crushed by violence or force, or humiliated and destroyed. Rather he will be overcome by Truth and love.

Matthew's Gospel has many parallels and echoes with the Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament) and particularly with the first five books, the Pentateuch. Matthew is made up of 5 major speeches of Jesus, (chapters 5-7, 10, 13, 18 and 23-25) which scholars suggest echoes the pattern of the Hebrew Scripture. In this particular passage, there are important resonances with Old Testament tradition. The 40 days that Jesus spends in the wilderness echo the 40 years the Jewish people spent in exile. However where they failed God, and gave in to temptation, Jesus succeeds. This is one of many demonstrations that he is representative of the whole people of Israel, the chosen one of God. Further, the Scriptures which Jesus quotes in this passage all have the Exodus as their setting (Deuteronomy 8:3, 6: 16 and 6:13). After the exile comes the chosen land, and the fulfilment of God's promises.

Jesus' resistance to the temptations comes from a place of certainty that has been confirmed at his baptism. He is God's son and has nothing to fear from Satan, and so Jesus is free to resist the temptations he puts before him, in a way which honours both the reality and the absurdity of those temptations.

Each instance of temptation may not be significant in itself – it doesn't really matter whether the child has one marshmallow or waits for two –but it all contributes both to an expectation of immediate gratification, and to diminishing skills in 'playing the long game'.

This is very relevant to the temptations Jesus faced. Effectively, Satan offered him short cuts to the kingdom, or at least what Satan thought were shortcuts, what he didn't understand was the nature of the kingdom that Jesus wanted to establish. Jesus chose to stick with the long and difficult path, that included suffering and humiliation, rather than the instant gratification of being given all lands or demonstrating that the angels served him. These shortcuts could not have led to the kingdom of God but could have resulted in kingship. Resisting temptation is about living the way God calls us to, even when other paths seem more appealing, easier, or more instantly gratifying.

In the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples, he says:

And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

Matthew 6:13

In the most familiar versions of the Lord's prayer we say "do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil".

⇔ **What do you think this line of the Lord's prayer means?**

Try and find time this week to reflect on your own temptations. Be really honest with yourself about the things that you are drawn to which do not fit with the values of the Kingdom of God. Ask God to help you with this and pray for all who are facing struggles with temptation.

It is easy for us to think of temptations as something which are difficult for other people. When we look at public figures or Christian Leaders who have been caught giving in to temptation, we tend to distance ourselves from such people and such behaviour. Although we may not share their particular weaknesses, we each have weaknesses which make it hard to resist certain types of temptation. Often the things which really tempt us are much less dramatic or newsworthy than the things we point to as representing "temptation". Being honest about our own

Only when we are really honest about ourselves, can we acknowledge what our own temptations are.

temptations is difficult, in order to do that we have to be really honest about ourselves. Our own temptations may be everyday attitudes or behaviours for example. It may be preferring that which is familiar to us, even if that is to the detriment of others, or making ourselves feel safe by leaving others more vulnerable.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, it orientates us towards God our Father and the values of God's kingdom. The world is full of temptations that draw us away from God and may seem to offer easy paths to follow. No matter how many times we take these paths, there is always a way back to God and God's kingdom.

Recap on ... Temptations:

- ★ The temptations are an exploration of what it means for Jesus to be the "Son of God" as confirmed at his baptism.
- ★ The temptations Jesus faces are real to him, but he has not come to grasp power and force worship
- ★ Each of us face temptations unique to us; things that draw us away from following Christ and living according to the values of God's Kingdom. .

Follow up reading ...

- Eugene Peterson *The Jesus Way* (Hodder & Stoughton) 2009

Session Three

Suffering and the God of Love

Aims of this session:

- ❖ To reflect on the reality of suffering
- ❖ To think about the Christian claim that God is good and all-powerful
- ❖ To consider some Christian responses to suffering
- ❖ To engage with the story of Job

Opening Prayer

Lord as we gather together, we come mindful of our own suffering past and present. We come mindful of all who suffer today and all who live with the consequences of pain and loss. We pray for those who spread hurt and hatred and for those who feed off the suffering of others. We ask that in all of the dark places of the world, your light would continue to shine. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Spring 3

It is not unusual to hear people say that they no longer watch the news or read a paper because it is so depressing. Very often the news is bad news – about the economy, the NHS, wars across the world, terrorism, natural disasters and local tales of suffering and sadness. There is no doubt that all sorts of bad things happen and we all experience suffering in our lifetime, and some people endure extreme amounts of suffering. For Christians, this reality raises a particular question about the goodness and power of God. If God is completely good and completely powerful, why is it that suffering still happens?

There are different causes of suffering, and these are sometimes referred to as types of evil.

Natural or **Physical** evil is that caused by nature – for example, floods, earthquakes, volcanoes, illness and disease. **Moral** or **Human** evil is that caused by human action, this would include the holocaust, terrorist acts, acts of war and murder etc. Some people add a third category of evil, supernatural evil, that which is caused by forces of evil or the devil.

⇔ **Can you think of situations of suffering that are a result of natural/physical evil and moral/human evil? What about supernatural evil?**

It can be helpful to think about the cause of suffering if we are trying to understand how it relates to a loving God. The distinction between types of evil is not always as straightforward as we might think. Often there is not a rigid distinction between human and physical evil. So for example, when a natural disaster happens, it is often much worse because we fail to respond to it with compassion and apply money and resources to it. Or we have allowed a situation to arise which compounds the suffering.

⇔ Can you think of an example of human behaviour making a natural disaster worse? Or better?

This blurred distinction is quite important because it means that it is not only appropriate to ask the question 'where is God in this?' or 'why does God allow this to happen?' it is also necessary to ask the question 'where are we – what do we do to overcome evil and suffering?'

When people experience personal tragedies, or when large-scale disasters happen, there is often conversation trying to make some sense out of what has taken place. The questions that arise will obviously depend on the particular instance of suffering. However, there are many phrases and responses that become familiar to us, as the sorts of things that are said in the face of a tragic situation.

Below are two press articles reporting on Christian responses to two very different tragic events. There are various different types of responses contained within these reports. There is a significant focus on prayer and solidarity, standing alongside those who have suffered. There are also some different ways in which readers are encouraged to hold on to their faith, even in the face of such tragedy and suffering.

Read through the two press reports below and consider the following questions:

⇔ What sort of explanations are offered about what God has to do with this event?

⇔ How helpful or convincing do you find the explanations?

⇔ What is being presented as a Christian response to the incident described?

⇔ To what extent do the conversations change depending on whether it is a natural disaster, or the result of human action?

Japanese Church mobilizing tsunami response, Pope 'deeply saddened' by disaster

Vatican City, Mar 12, 2011 / 08:03 pm ([CNA/EWTN News](#)).

Pope Benedict XVI expressed his solidarity with the dead and their families in Japan, as the Japanese Church makes quick plans for relief efforts following a deadly earthquake and tsunami.

On March 11, an 8.9-magnitude earthquake off the coast of Japan and a lengthy series of aftershocks sent enormous waves up to two miles inland in some low-lying areas, uprooting houses and obliterating entire towns.

... Initial estimates put the number of dead after the disaster at around 1,000. The final number is expected to rise as the water recedes.

... Fr. Daisuke Narui, executive director of Caritas Japan, told the Vatican's Fides news agency on March 12 that the Church's focus for the moment is on the most vulnerable. "Currently," he said, "we are called to give a testimony to unity and closeness to all human suffering."

Caritas and the local Church are collecting information on affected areas to plan their response efforts, he said. He was particularly concerned about the city of Sendai, hit hard by a wall of sea water, because he had not yet been in contact with the Caritas director there.

On a national level, the charitable association will kick start a solidarity campaign in all Japanese churches on March 13, with Masses being dedicated to the memory of the victims.

Bishop Marcellinus Daiji Tani of Saitama, one of the areas struck by the tsunamis, told Fides that Catholics "will respond to the tragedy of the earthquake and tsunami that struck northern Japan, with prayer and solidarity." He said they "must take courage, with the help of the Holy Spirit."

Bishop Tani added that the catastrophe is a reminder "that life is in the hands of God, and that life is a gift from God."

Holy See secretary of state Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone transmitted the Pope's condolences and prayers for the Japanese people in a March 11 telegram to the president of Japan's Catholic bishops, Archbishop Leo Ikenaga of Osaka.

"Deeply saddened by the sudden and tragic effects of the major earthquake and consequent tsunamis which have struck Japan's north-eastern coastal regions, his holiness Pope Benedict XVI assures all who have been afflicted of his closeness at this difficult time."

"He prays for those who have died, and upon their grieving families and friends he invokes divine blessings of strength and consolation," wrote Cardinal Bertone.

"The Holy Father also expresses his prayerful solidarity with all those providing rescue, relief and support to the victims of this disaster."

For his part, Fr. Narui of Caritas told Fides that the "painful event" could also be an opportunity to share the Gospel values of fraternity, building common good and recognizing human dignity.

"If, with our work and our witness," he concluded, "we can communicate that, then from this evil will come good."

Aurora Shooting: Pastors, Churches Open Hearts to Grieving Colorado

By [Alex Murashko](#) , Christian Post Reporter *July 21, 2012|9:07 am*

Churches in the city of Aurora and much of Colorado held special prayer services and vigils Friday night in response to a mass shooting in which 12 people were killed and 58 were wounded inside a theater during a midnight showing of the new Batman movie. Pastors and ministry leaders are making not only their churches available, but their spiritual counsel as well.

The gunman identified by police as James Holmes is reported to have committed one of the deadliest mass shootings in recent U.S. history.

In addition to a two-hour open time of prayer in its chapel Friday evening, church leaders of Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch announced that this coming Sunday's message to be given by Lee Strobel has been changed due to the tragedy. "The community has been terribly shaken by the tragic shooting in Aurora. Christians have been responding with prayer vigils and reaching out to hurting families with support and counselling," Strobel told The Christian Post Friday evening. "Our church swung open our chapel for prayer and scrapped plans for our Sunday services. I was supposed to speak on the topic of marriage, but we've postponed that so I can address the question on many minds: Why does God allow tragedy and suffering?"

"Obviously, the affected families don't need a theological treatise right now; they desperately need the very real presence of Jesus in their lives, and that's what our church and many others are helping them experience," he added. "But still, many folks want to know why there's so much violence in the world if God is good. It's a legitimate question. I'll be turning to God's Word for guidance on how we can process this issue."

...

The Rev. Gil Caldwell was pastor of Park Hill United Methodist Church in Denver, when the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School occurred, UMNS reported. The church is just 20 miles from Aurora. "Today, regardless of who we are, where we live or what our politics may be, we are all 'family,'" Caldwell said. "And even though it is a greater challenge, my Christian faith compels me to remember the one who did the killing as well as his family. Tragedies like this evoke anger, questions and doubts in most of us. But my faith keeps me from falling victim to hatred."

In an email to CP, Strobel gave further detail about the focus of his message for this coming Sunday. "We may not have the entire answer in this life (1 Corinthians 13:12), but there are some things we can know. For instance, it's important for people to understand that God is not the creator of evil and suffering; that even though suffering isn't good, God can use it to accomplish good; that the day is coming when suffering will cease and God will judge evil; that our suffering will pale in comparison to what God has in store in eternity for His followers; and that we need to decide whether to turn bitter or turn to God for peace and courage (John 16:33)."

"These are difficult times for Colorado, in light of the shootings as well as the recent wildfires that have ravaged the state. Fortunately, we have hope through Christ. A lot of people are finding out that's not just a cliché; at times like this, God is all we have to cling to," Strobel said.

Read more at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/aurora-shooting-pastors-churches-open-hearts-to-grieving-colorado-78639/#YlksSP3M82RKgRGM.99>

The Old Testament book of Job tells the story of the man Job who is faithful to God and is enjoying his life and counting his blessings. Satan suggests to God that Job is only faithful because his life is so pleasant. The story that unfolds from that point, is a little bit like the film *The Truman Show*, as Job is experimented on to see how he responds to different experiences of suffering.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Job

Job 1: 6 - 12

The book of Job tells the story of a righteous man who suffers severely and tries to understand his unjust suffering. His story is recorded as a poetic conversation with three friends. Job, along with the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are 'wisdom literature' – a style of writing which was found in other ancient Middle Eastern cultures of the time (especially Egypt and Assyria).

At the end of the book, Job has a life-changing encounter with God after which he is restored to prosperity. The wisdom that God reveals to Job is greater and deeper even than the wisdom of doing right, of being a pillar of society. God reveals that the 'wisdom language' of uprightness, integrity, virtue and moral responsibility is limited – and that there is a greater language of power, awe, mystery, amazement, daring, miracle. Job has said, 'I will hold on to my integrity till I die!' But God shows him that integrity and virtue, while fine in themselves, can nevertheless be a screen against the awesome reality of God. Being right is no substitute for being amazed. In the light of this understanding, Job is once again restored to prosperity and a position of social prestige, but seeing it now in a new dimension: 'I knew of you then only by report, but now I see you with my own eyes' (Job 42:5)

When bad things start to happen to him, Job is no longer sure how to relate to God, now that he can't thank God for all of the good things in his life. He thought of God as the source of his happiness and prosperity but now that has gone Job has to rethink his whole understanding of who God is. The point is, that it wasn't exactly because of the suffering he was enduring that Job was troubled, his problem was more specifically what this meant for his relationship with God.

The Bible emphasises the love of God, particularly in the New Testament. 1

John 4:8 states that "God is Love", not that God is loving, or loves but that the being of God is love itself. This of course is why the Gospel is Good News! But it can be hard to continue to believe in the God who is love when we see some of the atrocities that take place in the world and the levels of suffering that some people endure.

Christians have always struggled with how to respond to evil and suffering whilst proclaiming belief in a God who is good and all powerful. The explanations they put forward have been theodicies – theories which explain how a God who is good and all-powerful can allow evil to exist.

Theodicies focus on different reasons why suffering is compatible with a God who cares about us. Some examples of theodicies are:

1. Pain, suffering and disease make possible sympathy, kindness, heroism and working to find cures. These are positive endeavours which bring out the good in people. In other words, the evil brings about a further, or greater, good.

⇔ What do you think of this argument? Are there any situations you can think of in which it may not be persuasive?

2. Evil teaches us the difference between good and evil. It is only through experiencing bad things that we recognise how different they are to good things and we are able to identify the difference between the two. In other words, a world which contains evil and good allows us to be morally free. The Free will defence, as this is called, argues along the lines that if there was no evil, we would only ever be able to choose good things, and this would not actually be a genuine choice. Thus, for humans to be free, we need to be able to choose between good and evil.

According to this theory, it is not necessary to offer an explanation for the purpose of each and every evil, but rather to accept that in a general way, the existence of evil is part of the purposes of a good and loving God.

⇔ What do you think of this argument? Is our freedom worth the cost of suffering it seems to involve?

Part of the difficulty of debating this topic is that everybody has experience of suffering, and by definition these are painful and sensitive areas to talk about. It is not enough for us just to think

about logical arguments, and to suggest theories which satisfy the questions we raise in our heads; we also need to have responses which touch the hearts of those who are experiencing suffering, or which go some way towards offering practical help.

Practical Responses to Suffering

One thing about theodicy is that it isn't really designed to help those who are suffering in a pastoral sort of way. In other words, if you are in the middle of some tragedy, an argument as to why it doesn't disprove the existence of God probably isn't going to help very much. Theories that have a more practical relevance in times of suffering generally focus around the idea that God suffers with us. They argue that God is present in our suffering that we are not alone in it but that God experiences our suffering with us in some way. These theories also shift the question asked about suffering from being a theoretical one – along the lines of 'Is it illogical to say God exists because I am suffering?' to a much more immediate and practical question, like 'Is this God a God of salvation - is this a God who can help?'

An important part of the Christian response to the problem of evil is the promise of the life to come. The promise of life with Christ after death, in which there is no more suffering or pain does not mean we should accept any wrongs now in the hope of better things eventually. But it does offer us a different lens through which to view the trials and horrors of this life. Somehow, all of our experiences, good and bad are paving the way for the next world.

Recap on ... Suffering and the God of Love:

- ★ Christians make a variety of responses to experiences of suffering and tend to differentiate between natural and moral evil.
- ★ Christians believe that God is love
- ★ 'Theodicies' are theories which aim to show how the experience of suffering is compatible with a God who loves us
- ★ Theodicies also try to make practical responses which may be of help to those who are experiencing suffering

Follow up reading ...

- Lewis B Smedes *A Father Grieves the loss of a child* available at <http://www.religion-online.org/article/a-father-grieves-the-loss-of-a-child/>
- C. S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain* (lots of editions, first published in 1940)
- Kenneth Surin *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Wipf and Stock, 2004)
- Peter Vardy *The Puzzle of Evil* (Fount Books, 1999)
- Peter Vardy and Julie Arliss *the Thinker's Guide to Evil* (O Books, 2002)
- William Willimon *A Waiting Church* (a short article on suffering and Lent) available at <http://www.religion-online.org/article/a-waiting-church-isa-259/>

Session Four

The Cross of Christ

Aims of this session:

- ❖ **To reflect on the significance of Jesus' death**
- ❖ **To understand some different accounts of atonement**
- ❖ **To think about how St Paul understood the death of Jesus**

Opening Prayer

Lord you have created us, and you know us. Even when we fall away from you, you seek us out. Through the death of your Son Jesus Christ, you have offered us salvation. As we reflect on the meaning of the cross, help us to know more of you and to be assured of your love for us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Spring 4**

The cross is the most recognisable symbol of Christianity and indeed is at the heart of the Christian faith. Christians believe that Jesus' death on the cross brought about a new state of affairs that something happened when Jesus died that has consequences not just for Jesus, his family and friends, but for all people who have ever lived. Some of the earliest formulations of the Christian faith, the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, make clear that the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus was "For us and for our salvation". What they do not explain, is how this is so. In fact, although Christians have always taught that Jesus' death brought about our salvation, there is no one agreed on explanation of how this happened.

In his letter to the Romans, St Paul is clear that Christ's death was for us:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The Nicene Creed was developed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and added to in 381. It was intended to offer a definition of Christian belief that all orthodox Christians could agree with. The Apostles Creed has a less clear origin. It was based on the teaching of the Apostles and seemed to have also been formulated by the fourth century.

Paul's longest letter, **The Letter to the Romans** mainly consists of an extended theological argument about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the Church. Paul also deals with the question of the basis for salvation, is it through obedience to the Jewish Law, or faith in Christ? **Romans** has been extremely important in the development of Christian theology since Paul's time, and is one of the books that has most influenced later thinkers such as St Augustine, Martin Luther and Karl Barth. Probably written around 55/56, Paul had not been to Rome at this time (see 15:22 ff) and so sets his teaching out for the Christians in Rome in a quite systematic way. He wants them to understand the faith thoroughly so that they will not be confused by false teachers.

In this passage, Paul is clear that Jesus' death is a remarkable event and that it matters. He explains that through this death we have been "justified", put right with God. Although Paul is clear about the new possibility of reconciliation, he does not really offer an explanation of how this has come about.

Lots of different theories or models, that have been developed over the years by people trying to make sense of what the Bible says about Jesus' death, what the Church has taught, as well as their own experience of salvation or redemption. These theories are often called models of atonement.

Atonement usually means the death of Jesus on the cross and explores what that meant for us. It implies that there is some significance 'for us' of Jesus's death. Different theories focus on different ways of understanding the death of Jesus.

Atonement is an English word (one of few theological words of English origin) which literally means 'at -one- ment': bringing together humans and God.

Most discussions of atonement will involve use of some or all of the following words:

SACRIFICE	SALVATION	VICTORY	LOVE
RECONCILIATION	TRIUMPH	SUBSTITUTION	DEVIL
DEMONSTRATION	DEFEAT	RANSOM	REDEMPTION
FORGIVENESS	MORAL EXAMPLE	PAYMENT	SCAPEGOAT
ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES		PUNISHMENT	CONQUER

↔ **Which (if any) of these words or phrases do you associate with the death of Jesus?**

⇔ **Select four of the words or phrases and discuss what you think they mean in the context of Jesus' death.**

The Old and New Testaments both contain a lot of imagery and description of the death of the Messiah. It may well be the case, that the atonement is such an amazing event, that no one theory or model would ever be sufficient to explain it. The different focuses of the following understandings do not necessarily exclude other explanations also being true.

Qorbanot, sacrifices and offerings were made at the Temple in order to give thanks and praise to God and to become closer to God. The sacrifices were often animals, but other produce and goods would also be offered. Since the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, Jews have not offered sacrifices, as they do not have a proper place to offer them.

The foretelling of **suffering** and **sacrifice** is a frequent theme in the Old Testament and echoed in the New Testament. The Son of man is born to suffer and be put to death. In Judaism, ritualistic sacrifices were part of the pattern of life in the Temple. An offering was made in order to draw closer to God and give thanks. Jesus who is the perfect sacrifice can achieve once and for all what these sacrifices achieve only temporarily. Much of the imagery of the sacrifice of Jesus through his death is drawn from the Jewish tradition of sacrifices, such as our belief that Christ is the Passover lamb who was slain for us.

Jesus' death on the cross is also described as a **victory**. This event was a decisive and ultimate victory over the devil and forces of evil and oppression. There is a great deal of difference in how this victory is explained by different people. The early Christian bishops and theologians, known as the Early Church Fathers, often thought of Christ's death

as a ransom (see Mark 10: 45 and 1 Timothy 2:6). Origen, a third century theologian, argued that the ransom must be being paid to somebody. He did not think it could be paid to God, because God was not holding sinners to ransom, God was not being asked to be paid, so it must have been paid to the devil. This has been developed further in Christian theology. The devil, it is said, acquired rights over sinful humans which God was obliged to respect. So, in order to buy people back from the devil, the devil had to be made to forfeit his right to sinners. Gregory the Great (a sixth century Pope) said this would happen if a perfect person – therefore one over whom the devil had no claim - entered the world as a normal person and was claimed by the devil. The devil would not realise until it was too late that he had no rights over him, and the devil would then be forced to give up his rights over all humanity. In this way victory over the devil is achieved, and the benefit of that stretches to all who find salvation in Christ.

This theory of the atonement is echoed in C.S. Lewis's book *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. The boy Edmund is to be put to death by the Witch, to whom all traitors' lives are forfeited. However, when Aslan dies in Edmund's place, he activates deeper magic from before the dawn of time, which states that when an innocent, willing victim is killed by a traitor, the death is reversed.

⇔ **What do you think of this explanation of why Jesus' death is 'for us'?**

An obvious difficulty with this account is that it is rather a sneaky way that God reclaims humanity for Himself. The deception involved does not necessarily fit with our understanding of what God is like. This account is also, of course dependent on the resurrection; otherwise it is not clear how the victory has been won. With the changes in culture and thinking that happened in the period of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, this model went out of favour. The emphasis moved to rational, logical, scientific thinking and this kind of account of atonement was regarded as a akin to a fairy tale, involving characters who they did not believe really existed.

Some have argued that what happened on the cross was that an example was set. This model of atonement, **the moral example**, fits with an understanding of Jesus as the greatest teacher or preacher ever, but not as the Son of God. In the cross, Jesus the perfect human shows us something that is already true – that God loves us – and demands that humans likewise show their love for God. Jesus teaches us by both word and example that God loves us and further that we should love God.

According to this view, what is important about the cross is the impact that it has on humanity; it sets us an example and influences us. If any change is bought about it is in us rather than in God or in the cosmic state of affairs. Although this view may be helpful alongside others, if you try to make it stand alone it is not at all clear how Jesus' death is a demonstration of God's love. Nothing has actually changed through his death

One of the major themes in much of the discussion about the death of Jesus, is that Jesus died in our place. There are three main ways that this model has been used:

1. *Representation*: Christ represents all of humanity. This view is often linked to the covenant that God had with Israel; as Israel represented the rest of the world, so Jesus represents the whole of Israel, and therefore the whole world. The benefits of this accrue to those who join in the covenant relationship that Christ has established between humans and God.

2. *Participation*: believers receive the forgiveness gained by Christ by uniting themselves with him, thereby participating with Christ in his death and resurrection.

3. *Substitution*: Christ stands in for us and receives the punishment we should have had. Jesus is literally the substitute for each of us, but because Christ has gone in our place, we can benefit from his deeds. Broadly, substitution means that Christ has stood in our place before the judgement of God and so we are not condemned. When God sees us, he sees us perfected in Christ.

A specific version of the substitution model of atonement which has attracted a lot of attention in recent years is the idea of penal substitution. This theory depends on the idea that a debt is accrued by sinful humanity which needs paying to God. In Christ, God pays this debt to Godself. Thus, Christ is the substitute for all who have incurred this debt.

⇔ **Can you think of any problems with or objections to this theory?**

The criticism has been made that it is morally suspect to transfer guilt on to one who has not committed the offence. A further criticism that has sparked debate in recent years is that the death of Jesus in the place of others is akin to divine child abuse. This idea has been associated with the well-known evangelist Steve Chalke; however, it seems that whilst he may have coined the phrase, he never intended to make this accusation. The argument goes that a Father who sacrifices an innocent Son for the sake of others has committed a form of child abuse. However, this is to misunderstand the Trinity. The Father and the Son do not have competing wills, wanting different things, but are in perfect accord; thus, the Father cannot make the Son an unwilling victim.

Penal substitution takes the wrath of God completely seriously. However, like any theory of the atonement, it could not function if the most basic reality was not God's love and grace; without that God would not have sent Christ to save sinners at all.

Recap on ... The cross of Christ

- ★ The Scriptures and tradition place a great emphasis on the death of Christ being "for us".
- ★ Christians believe that something changed when Jesus died that meant our relationship with God was restored. This is where the word "atonement" comes from.
- ★ There are lots of different theories or models of atonement, and it may be they each offer us an insight into what happened on the cross.

Follow up reading ...

- S Mark Heim How Jesus put an end to Sacrifice available at <http://www.religion-online.org/article/how-jesus-put-an-end-to-sacrifice/>
- S Mark Heim Why Does Jesus' Death Matter? available at <http://www.religion-online.org/article/why-does-jesus-death-matter/>
- Rowan Williams *The Lion's World: A Journey into the heart of Narnia* (SPCK) 2012
- William Willimon Drawing all to Himself (a short reflection on the cross of Christ) <http://www.religion-online.org/article/drawing-all-to-himself-john-1232/>

For those who want to do some more serious reading on the Atonement:

- Gustav Aulén *Christus Victor* (SPCK) 2010
- Colin Gunton *The Actuality of Atonement* (T & T Clark) 2003

Session Five

Film Week

This week, you might like to watch a film which picks up on some of the themes of this term. You may have your own ideas, or you could pick one from the list below. Some films are available to borrow from the Vocations and Training Team but do arrange that in good time. It may be useful to do a bit of research about the film before you watch it and think of some questions relating to the theme you particularly want to draw out. IMDB is a good website for finding out further information about films (www.imdb.com).

Opening Prayer

God, your presence is woven through history, throughout the world and in every atom of creation. Your presence is also woven through our past, our present and our future. As we hear and reflect on the stories of others, help us to see your presence in their lives and experiences. Make yourself known to us as we share in this film together. Amen

Babette's Feast (1987) Director: Gabriel Axel

The film focuses on the idea of a transforming feast, [see 1 Corinthians 11:17-18, 20-26, 33-34] and explores a range of themes including grace, incarnation and sacrifice. The film is about a small pietistic community led by a minister whose daughters, Martina and Philippa, renounce their talent, their beauty and all chances to attain success or advancement in the world in order to continue their father's work after his death. Consistent with their piety and their impoverished view of the world the guests determine to suppress their tastes and any sense of pleasure in order not to draw too near the evils of the flesh. The community is joined by General Loewenhielm (a former suitor of Martina's) and his aunt, making a table of twelve. The general, although very successful, has become despondent about the triumphs of his life. The film is very gentle (slow moving!) but beautifully shot and raises some important questions about the goodness of the physical creation, joy and human relationships, with each other, the environment and God.

Dead Man Walking (1995) Director: Tim Robbins

This film is based on a book written by Sister Helen Prejean about her experiences of ministering to a man on death row. The title is of course based on the phrase that is used when death row prisoners are escorted to their execution. The film explores the power of sin and redemption, Christian duty, sacrifice, and what it is to be a human in the sight of God. There are some gruelling scenes in the film and it is about 2 hours long, but it raises some key issues and offers some very powerful performances.

Conversations with God (2006) Director: Stephen Simon

This film is based on the autobiographical writing of Neale Donald Walsche and tells the story of his life - from hitting rock bottom after a car accident and the rocky road to recovery, to becoming a widely recognised speaker and writer. Walsche experiences the presence of God with him at some of his most difficult times. The film lasts 1 hour 45 minutes. Some questions you might like to explore are: what do you think of Neale's view/experience of God? How do God's answers to Neale fit with the beliefs of Christian faith? What do you think about the way in which wealth and financial prosperity are talked about and shown in the book? How does this compare to the Old Testament story of Job?

The Truman Show (1998) Director: Peter Weir

This film tells the story of a man who is living a pretend life! Truman thinks that he is living a 'normal' life when in actual fact his whole world is a television set and he is being manipulated by the producers of the show who constantly film him. Truman gradually finds out that this idyllic life is fake, and his existence begins to unravel. This raises the question of what freedom is, and how high a price we should pay for it. The film lasts 103 minutes.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962) Director: Robert Mulligan

This Oscar-winning film is adapted from the book by Harper Lee. It tells the story of a lawyer, Atticus Finch and his children Jem and Scout and what happens when Atticus takes on the defence of a black man accused of raping a white woman. The story explores a range of issues of truth, integrity, prejudice, purpose and right and wrong. The title comes from a moving line in the story when Atticus tells the children that some birds just entertain and enhance and cause no problems, and it is "a sin to kill a mockingbird".

Themes: conflict, racism, truth, sacrifice, suffering, integrity

Romero (1989) Director: John Duigan

This film tells the story of Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador and his resistance to the savage dictatorship that took over the country. Romero's resistance to the terror campaign the people are subjected to is regarded as disloyalty and there is an increased focus on priests and churches as targets for attack. The film tells the story of Romero's journey through incredible pressure and a clear sense that he must not be complicit in actions he believes to be wrong.

Themes: conflict, sacrifice, suffering, resistance

Shadowlands (1993) Director: Richard Attenborough

This film is based on the story of C.S. Lewis and his wife Joy. The film charts their first meeting and Lewis' gradual journey of accepting her and his feelings for her. After they are married Joy became ill and the film explores the effects of her suffering and death on Lewis, as he attempts to hold onto hope and joy in the face of their suffering.

Themes: suffering, death, love, God's purpose for us

Follow up Reading ...

If you want to read more about films as a way of exploring theological themes you may be interested in these books:

- Robert K Johnston 'Reel Spirituality' (2006) Baker Academic Books
- Catherine Barsotti and Robert K Johnston 'Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith' (2004) Baker Books
- Clive Marsh 'Theology Goes to the Movies' (2007) Routledge
- Gaye Ortiz 'Explorations in Theology and Film' (1997) Wiley Blackwell

For blogs and resources, visit: <https://www.cmu.ca/faculty/gmatties/ONLINE%20ARTICLES.htm>

Session Six

The Passion of Christ

Aims of this session:

- ❖ To reflect on the narratives of Jesus' passion
- ❖ To consider what is distinctive about the way each Gospel presents the passion of Christ
- ❖ To understand why the crucifixion story is so important to the Gospel writers
- ❖ To reflect on what this means to us

Opening Prayer

Lord God, you have made yourself known to us through Jesus Christ your Son. Through his death and resurrection, you have called us back to you. Help us to understand the significance of Jesus' passion, so that we may share the Good News, and understand more and more of your Word. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Spring 5

The crucifixion of Jesus is probably one of the most recognisable images in the world. Millions of churches display sculptures, carvings or paintings of Jesus nailed to a cross. Millions of people have participated in services, walks, processions and other events which mark Good Friday or re-enact the story of the passion. Thousands of artists have interpreted the crucifixion through all sorts of mediums.

'Passion' comes from a Latin word meaning to suffer. In the middle ages, it became synonymous with the sufferings of Jesus or Christian martyrs. Passion plays re-enact the events of Holy Week.

⇔ Can you recall seeing an image of the crucifixion that particularly struck you? What was it about the image that you were drawn to?

If no images come to mind, there are some interpretations of the crucifixion in the Methodist Modern art collection. They can be viewed online at

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/reflecting-on-faith/the-methodist-modern-art-collection/>

Each of the four Gospels has a very distinctive character. Although they all tell the story of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection, they each tell it in their own way, according to the different themes and focuses of their Gospel.

The Gospel According to **Matthew** was written for a Jewish church coming to terms with the spread of the Gospel to Gentiles. It emphasises the teachings of Jesus, and includes the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7). Matthew's prologue is long, covering at least two chapters. He starts by giving us Jesus' family tree, showing His royal pedigree from King David, and His ultimate descent from the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Matthew is the gospel which owes most to the Jewish heritage, quoting frequently from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew urges his readers, the followers of Jesus, to be even more righteous than the most law-abiding members of the Jewish community

John is different from the other three gospels. Most scholars agree that it was the last to be written, probably around 90 AD, so almost two generations after the death of Jesus. The Gospel is often described as sophisticated, both in terms of literature and theology. It is built around seven 'signs' or miracles which reveal who Jesus is. These are matched by seven "I am" sayings in which Jesus explains who he is. There are several recurring themes in John's Gospel, darkness and light, sight and blindness and eternal life are all referred to by John explicitly and implicitly. Jesus in John's Gospel is portrayed in very kingly terms.

Mark's Gospel is generally agreed to be the earliest written and used as a source for both Matthew and Luke. Mark is also the shortest Gospel and does not include any narrative of Jesus' birth. This Gospel focuses on the Kingdom of God and the way in which Jesus both teaches and demonstrates the values and qualities of the Kingdom. Almost half of Mark's Gospel is about the passion narrative; indeed it has been described as a passion narrative with a long introduction! For Mark, it is only when we understand that the Messiah is one who must suffer and die, that we can really understand who Jesus is.

Luke's Gospel is the only one written by a Gentile (non Jew). Luke contains many parables and stories that do not appear anywhere else such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the account of the walk to Emmaus. A strong theme throughout Luke is Jesus' concern for the disadvantaged, women, the poor and other social outcasts. His gospel contains a great deal of teaching on money. Luke's Gospel also has a particular focus on the Holy Spirit, and the way in which the Spirit inspires visions and dreams.

It is thought that the Gospel writer Luke may have been a doctor who travelled with St Paul and particularly wanted the gentile world to hear the Good News of Jesus. Luke's introductory verses (1:1–4) begin in the style of a history-book of the time, with a dedication to 'most excellent Theophilus', and a claim for the orderliness and authenticity of what is to follow. Luke's aim is clear: 'So that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed'.

The Four Gospels all record the events of Jesus' return to Jerusalem and his trial and crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. One of the least controversial of the claims about Jesus is that he was executed by the Romans. The passion accounts draw out some of the different focuses and themes of the four Gospels, and remind us that each of the Gospel writers are telling their story in a very deliberate way. They are not primarily interested in reporting facts, their main concern is to make us understand why the story they are telling matters!

The Jewish historian Josephus, who lived in the first century, wrote a book of Jewish history in AD 93. In it he wrote:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

Jewish Antiquities, 18.3.3

As you can see, Josephus, who is clear that he is writing a history book, does not just stick to the facts; he offers his own interpretation of who Jesus was. There is no such thing as a 'plain' account of history that records just the facts. As human beings, everything we see, hear, witness, observe or feel we interpret and absorb in some way. We can never tell "what happened", but we always tell "what we think happened". The idea that you could strip away the levels of interpretation to get back to the bare facts is really a preoccupation of the modern mind. The historian Josephus and the Gospel writers would not have been troubled by this notion of fact. That is not to say of course that they did not believe it had really happened. Each of them records their account of Jesus' crucifixion because they understood that event had actually happened. And much more importantly, they understood that event was of great significance. The Gospel writers didn't record it so that future generations would know that a man named Jesus had been executed by the Romans. They recorded it so that future generations could come to understand why this event was so significant.

↔ **How would you explain the significance of Jesus' death?**

Each of the Gospel writers draws out different details and understandings of what happened when Jesus died. As you read through the four accounts, consider the following questions:

⇔ **What is distinctive about each account?**

⇔ **How does this reflect the major themes of each Gospel?**

<p style="text-align: center;">Matthew 27: 45</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Mark 15: 33-39</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Luke 23: 44-48</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">John 19: 28-30</p>
<p>From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'</p>	<p>When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'</p>	<p>It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'</p>	<p>After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.</p>

Some points you may have noticed:

Matthew is the longest account of the four, in particular, what is included here that is not found in Mark's version is the description of the dead bursting forth from their tombs and the earthquake. Matthew wants to make sure we understand the enormity of Jesus' death. This event could not be any more significant, the world shakes and the dead are raised – these are about the most dramatic events possible!

All three synoptic Gospels detail the darkness from noon until three in the afternoon. Noon of course, should be the brightest point of the day – midday.

⇔ What do you think the darkness symbolizes?

The darkness here draws our attention to several things. Darkness is the opposite of light, or the presence of God. The darkness – absence of sun – also reminds us that this event was not just a human event, but was a cosmological event, one that matters to the whole of the created world. It also represents how much more significant Jesus is than even the sun.

Both Matthew and Mark record Jesus crying "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." These words are the beginning of Psalm 22, it is very likely that the Jews who heard Jesus say these words would have known the Psalm, and would have associated his cry with the whole Psalm which talks of suffering and sacrifice but also God's deliverance.

⇔ Read through Psalm 22. Do you think of Jesus' cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" differently in the light of the Psalm?

In Luke and John, Jesus' words on the cross are different. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit" and in John's Gospel "I am thirsty (or "I thirst") and then "it is finished".

⇔ Can you think of any ways in which these words reflect the themes of Luke and John?

In Matthew and Mark, the Temple curtain is torn in two as Jesus takes his last breath. In Luke, it is just before Jesus' final cry. This sort of discrepancy would be considered to be a good sign in eye-witness reports! Stories that are too similar tend to be regarded as having been agreed, rather than being each teller's actual recollection!

The Temple curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple and only the priests could go behind the curtain. The tearing of the curtain has generally been understood in Christian history to describe something important about our access to God; it used to be through the priest, but because of Jesus's death we can each have a direct relationship with God.

Notice the language of John's Gospel: "he bowed his head and gave up his spirit". This is a very elegant, graceful and controlled way of describing the horrific death of crucifixion. In John, Jesus is portrayed throughout the passion narrative as being completely in control. It is Pilate and the other leaders who run backwards and forward not knowing what is happening, Jesus is center stage and calm, even regal. Indeed the account of the crucifixion in John is more like an enthroning than a death. He does not focus on the brutality or humiliation of the event, but shows Jesus as the true king.

Recap on... The Passion of Christ:

- ★ Each of the Gospels tell the story of Jesus' death in a slightly different way
- ★ The Gospel writers don't want to just record facts, they want to explain why it matters!
- ★ All of the Gospels regard Jesus' death as earth shattering!

Follow up reading ...

- Matthew Myer Boulton The Problem with 'The Passion' (A reflection on the Mel Gibson film) available at <http://www.religion-online.org/article/the-problem-with-the-passion/>
- Arthur Pink the Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross (Baker Books) 2005
- John Stott The Cross of Christ (IVP) 2006

Session Seven

Transformation

Aims of this session:

- ❖ **To reflect on the possibility of transformation**
- ❖ **To think about the way in which Christ enables transformation**
- ❖ **To consider what it means to live as transformed people**

Opening Prayer

Lord God, you came that we might know life in all of its fullness and become more and more like you. Help us to grow into your likeness, to live out your values, and to follow in your way. Help us to see and celebrate signs of transformation. We pray for all those longing to shed their old skins and pray that they might be transformed into your image and likeness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Spring 6**

Ultimately, the Gospel of Jesus is about transformation. If you look through the Gospels at the encounters Jesus has with different people, starting with the disciples and ending (in Luke's Gospel) with the thief on the cross and the centurion, each of them go away from the encounter changed.

↔ **Can you think of any stories from the Gospels of people being changed by their encounter with Jesus?**

You may have talked about any of the disciples or followers of Jesus like Mary Magdalene. You may have mentioned any of the many colourful characters who experience Good News:

- Zacchaeus the tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus and ended up welcoming Jesus to his home, giving half his money to the poor and repaying those he had swindled four times over (Luke 19:1-10).
- The Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus talks to and drinks with against all of their societal and religious rules, and who ends up telling everyone about him. (John 4)

- The man possessed with demons who they called Legion. Jesus commanded the spirits to leave him and gave the man his life back. (Mark 5:1-20)
- The Canaanite / Syrophenician woman who debates with Jesus and reminds him that even the dogs eat crumbs from their master's table and whose daughter is healed because of the woman's great faith. (Matthew 15:21-27)
- Nicodemus, the Pharisee who comes to Jesus by night and is told that he must be born again. (John 3:1-16)
- Lazarus who is brought back to life when Jesus calls him out of the tomb, four days after his death. (John 11)
- The paralysed man who was healed when his friends lowered him through a roof to meet Jesus, much to the amazement of the gathered crowd. (Mark 2:1-12)

There are lots more examples, but what we see even from these stories is that Jesus did not leave people as he found them! Each of them experienced a profound change when they encountered Christ. To a degree, they all, like Lazarus, moved from death to life. Meeting Jesus is a life-giving experience.

⇔ How would you describe the transformations that happen when people meet Jesus?

Many of the people who met Jesus during his earthly ministry had a dramatic reaction to what he told them or did for them. But not all. The Gospels are very clear that Pharisees and Sadducees and other members of the Synagogue – the very ones who should recognise the Messiah did not respond to him at all well. Encountering Jesus does not override one's capacity to decide but is a powerful invitation into the fullness of life.

Of course, these invitations did not stop with Jesus's death and resurrection. St Paul's conversion is perhaps one of the best-known stories of the New Testament outside of the Gospels, and this happened after Jesus had died. Saul, a faithful Jew and fervent persecutor of Christians, was walking the road to Damascus, and he was struck by a dazzling light and heard the voice of Jesus. Saul was blind for three days. God sent his disciple Ananias to lay hands on Saul, and when he did the scales fell from his eyes. Saul, was renamed Paul, was immediately baptised and began to proclaim the works of the Lord.

Paul felt so transformed by his conversion experience that following it, he regarded himself as a new creation, a being whose life is in Christ. For Paul, this transformation meant a whole new identity, symbolised by his change of name.

⇔ **What might you have thought of this if you have been a contemporary of St Paul's?**

For the Christians, there must have been some nervousness as Saul a persistent persecutor and torturer of Christians, became one of their leaders. For the Jews, there must have been confusion that such a devout man was now professing belief in the Lordship of Christ. While Paul knew what had happened to him, he also had to persuade others that it was for real!

⇔ **Can a leopard change its spots?**

We often hear the view that change is not possible – once a badden, always a badden! Leopards can't change their spots. But that does not seem to be the message of the Gospel. The Good News of Jesus seems to be that change is possible.

As Paul reflects on transformation, he explains that such significant change happens because of what Christ does for us:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-20

The second of Paul's letters to the Corinthians deals further with Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth. In it, he responds to challenges to his authority by giving a lengthy and heartfelt explanation of the significance of suffering and weakness in Christian service.

During his three-year stay at Ephesus in the mid-50s, Paul received bad news about the Corinthian church. He wrote a letter, now lost but mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, warning them of the dangers of immorality. The Corinthians may well have written back to Paul, with news and questions – and it's thought that the letter we now know as 1 Corinthians was a reply to this. That's why Paul goes through a series of subjects (e.g. 1 Corinthians 7 starts, 'Now concerning the matters about which you wrote . . .') – as if he's ticking off the points they've raised with him.

When the Corinthians took no notice of this letter, he seems to have made a short and 'painful' visit to them, and then to have written another and much stronger letter, mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:4. Many think that this too is lost – though some believe it to be preserved as chapters 10–13 of 2 Corinthians. Then, when news got through to Paul that there had at last been a change of attitude among the Corinthian Christians, he wrote once again, expressing his joy and offering further teaching – probably the material we know as 2 Corinthians chapters 1–9.

This idea of being 'in Christ' is one that Paul refers to several times in his letters. He argues that in a profound sense we are united with Christ. This does not just mean that we are in his gang, that we are his followers, or we have joined his club. It means that our very existence is in Christ, so that when God sees us, he sees us as we are because of what Jesus has done for us.

Each of us has already been perfected through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and God already regards us as that perfect being. The journey of discipleship, the path of following Christ is a process of bridging the gap between 'us' as we are now, and the 'us' who is a new creation in Christ. This is the way Scottish theologian and clergyman Thomas F Torrance explained it:

'This Tom Torrance you see is full of corruption, but the real Tom Torrance is hid with Christ in God and will be revealed only when Jesus Christ comes again. He took my corrupt humanity in his Incarnation, sanctified, cleansed and redeemed it, giving it new birth, in his death and resurrection.' In other words, our new birth, our regeneration, our conversion, are what has taken place in Jesus Christ himself, so that when we speak of our conversion or our regeneration we are referring to our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake. In a profound and proper sense, therefore, we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion, so that we must think of him as taking our place even in our acts of repentance and personal decision, for without him all so-called repentance and conversion are empty. Since a conversion in that truly evangelical sense is a turning away from ourselves to Christ, it calls for a conversion from our intuned notions of conversion to one which is grounded and sustained in Christ Jesus himself.

T.F. Torrance The Mediation of Christ

⇔ What do you think Torrance means? Do you agree with him?

Torrance uses some quite theological language to express the way in which he believes both that Christ's death and resurrection matters to each of us, and that our very being is found in Christ. All that is wrong with the earthly Tom Torrance, has been absorbed and made new by Christ. The possibility of a new, perfect Tom Torrance has been made a reality through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Transformation, Torrance is arguing, is from self-centredness to Christ-centredness; it is from individual being, to being grounded in Christ.

The real 'you'
is hid with
Christ in God.

In Christian theology, many of the core concepts overlap. Salvation, redemption and transformation all refer to the move from our own life, to life in Christ.

⇔ What does it mean in practice, to understand ourselves as new creations whose identity is in Christ?

It is impossible to understand and explain all the consequences and implications of what God has done for us in Christ. However, it has profound meanings which we can begin to grasp when we understand that we are leopards who have been offered brand new spots! The invitation to the fullness of life which Jesus offers is for the present and the future, regardless of the past. Our salvation, our redemption is found through the transformation that comes when we are reconciled to God and find our life in Christ.

Recap on ... Transformation:

- ★ The Gospels are full of stories of the transformations that happen when people encounter Christ
- ★ St Paul's conversion is a transformation of identity, he believes that his life is now "in Christ"
- ★ Our lives are in Christ. The 'me' who lives in Jesus has been perfected through His life, death and resurrection.
- ★ Salvation, redemption and transformation are about accepting our life in Christ.

Follow up reading ...

- Edward Howells and Peter Tyler Sources of Transformation (2010) Continuum
- Thomas F Torrance The Mediation of Christ (1992) Helmers and Howard Publishing

Session Eight

The Christian Hope

Aims of this session:

- ❖ To reflect on hope
- ❖ To consider what is specific about the Christian hope
- ❖ To think about offering hope to others

Opening Prayer

Jesus Christ, light of the world, you promise us that the darkness can never extinguish your light. Help us to be lights in the world and to share the hope you give us with those who face darkness and despair. As we reflect on the hope of our faith let us thank you for your gracious gifts of hope, joy and peace. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip **Spring 7**

There is something about hope that touches human beings at a profound level and gives strength and will to carry on, even in the most horrendous of situations. Christopher Reeve, the former Superman actor who was paralysed after a horse-riding accident, said "Once you choose hope, everything's possible". To him, it was the presence or reality of hope that changed his situation around completely.

It is hard to define exactly what hope is. Although we might feel its presence and its absence, it is hard to put our finger on exactly what it is.

⇔ How would you describe 'hope'?

Barak Obama called his autobiography *The Audacity of Hope*; this is a stirring description of what was needed to change the world he was born into, to the world he governs. Hope is brave and courageous, imaginative, creative and persistent! There is something about the quality of hope that sets our sights beyond the present reality to the possibilities beyond them.

There is a marvellous scene in the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, based on a story by Stephen King in which one of the prisoners locks himself in the warden's office, and plays an aria from Mozart's Marriage of Figaro over the speakers to the whole prison. The invasion of this sound into that environment has a profound effect. The narrator says that for a moment, every man in there was free. All of the inmates stop what they were doing and look up. There is something in this scene that speaks of what it means to be given hope, even against the odds.

⇔ Can you think of any other examples from films, stories or life which to you, illustrate what it is to have hope?

There are many accounts from all sorts of episodes in human history of the triumph of hope. Accounts of those who have survived some of the worst of human cruelty for example in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, or the Gulags of Stalinist Russia often refer not just to the instinct for survival, but to the signs of hope even in the darkest of situations. There is something about this difficult to grasp concept, this sense that there is hope beyond our immediate circumstances that seems to be part of the human spirit. It means that we look to the way things could be, not just to the way they are, and sometimes we are audacious enough to try and make those possibilities our new reality.

The Christian Hope is at the very heart of the faith and sets our sights beyond our immediate reality. St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" [1 Corinthians 15:19]. The resurrection of Christ is the basis for the Christian hope; because Jesus was raised to life there is reason to hope that this will be the case for all those who follow Christ. The Christian hope takes us beyond this earthly existence into the realm of eternal life with Christ. It is firmly grounded in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through this we know who God is, and what God's kingdom will be like, and we also know that this reality is not just a hope for the future but for the present as well.

⇔ In what ways would you say that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus give us hope?

The last book of the Bible, Revelations records the vision given to John of Patmos, and was probably written towards the end of the first century AD. The style of Revelation is apocalyptic; this type of writing was often used to give messages of hope in times of persecution or struggle. There are many messages of hope in Revelation, but this section from chapter 21 is perhaps one of the most well known and most inspiring passages.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

Revelation 21:1-5

To the first Jewish Christians, **the Book of Revelation** would not have seemed as bizarre as it perhaps does today. It is an example of a type of writing, called 'apocalyptic' which would have been familiar to first century Jews. Biblical examples of apocalyptic writing occur in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Much apocalyptic writing was produced between about 100 BC and AD 100, at a time when God's people were suffering for their faith, and were asking the question, 'Why?'. Apocalyptists did not follow the main Old Testament tradition of seeing God at work in this world. Instead, they believed that God had made two different worlds – this world and a heavenly one. Visions, dreams and revelations were all connected with this heavenly world, and their stories were full of strange beasts and symbolic numbers. This writing was not intended to foretell future events or make predictions in the style of Nostradamus; they were not recording history at all, but giving a powerful imaginative account of God's grand, overarching plan.

Full of complex symbolism, Revelation appears to be chiefly concerned with the end-time and the role of Christ in the new world which will follow the end of this one. However, when the symbolism is deciphered it contains a message for all times about the victory of Christ over evil and death.

The first three chapters of Revelation are similar to many other New Testament writings: they contain seven letters to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. But they are not real letters, like Paul's – instead, they claim to come from the risen Jesus himself. John says their content was given to him in a vision – just like the rest of the book. Chapters 4 and 5 introduce the main body of apocalyptic material with a vision of heaven. Here, the author sets out the way in which he understands God's workings in history. God is high and exalted, beyond human understanding (as represented by the 24 elders) – and the scroll containing God's revelation to the world can only be opened by the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. The chapters that follow present a series of visions describing how God judges all those forces which are implacably opposed to him.

This is what the Christian hope is about, the belief that God will bring all things to fruition and this will not be the end, but a new beginning.

This passage is often used at funerals and has a particularly comforting feel to it – we can look forward to a time when there will be no more pain or death. This is an amazing vision, but the lack of pain is only one of the many signs of the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.

The Christian hope is the hope that death and sin have ultimately been defeated and that the whole of God's good creation will achieve its telos - its ultimate purpose.

The passage from Revelation talks about a new heaven, and a new earth. Early Christian teaching focussed on the universal scope of the Christian hope, in other words it is not just humans who will be made new, but all of creation, including other species and fauna and flora. Over the centuries of Christianity, the focus tended to become more and more on humans, and ignore the rest of creation. Today, as we are more aware of environmental concerns, we have reconnected with a sense of the Christian hope being for the whole world.

↔ What are the implications of the universal scope of the Christian hope? What does it mean to say that ALL things will be made new?

One of the possible implications relates to the frequently asked question: Will there be dogs in heaven? Although we don't know what eternal life will be like, the traditions about heaven that involve angels on clouds, harps, or even endless golf, or lots of jelly and ice cream are not really biblical traditions. The New Testament focuses much more on the idea of the fulfilment of all things and perfect relationship with God. There is no reason for this to exclude dogs, or any other species of creation, but like us they may not be exactly the same as we are in this life.

The Christian hope is the foundation of faith and underpins the way in which we view even the most difficult situations. Hope means that even in really awful times, even in the worst of circumstances, we hold on to the hope that violence, despair, hatred and destruction will never be the last word. They will ultimately be overcome by love. This sense of hope, whether we label it the Christian Hope or not, has the power to infiltrate even the most desperate human experience.

St Paul identifies faith, hope and love as the most abiding things. The three are strongly connected and are powerful forces when we see them at work in the world. Hope is not just a feeling inside that remains internal to us, it can become an external force, and indeed we can share it with others.

⇔ **Can you think of ways in which we can give hope to others?**

Christian hope is not meant to be kept to ourselves! As part of the Good News of God made known in Jesus, it is to be shared with all who are willing to listen. The Old and New Testaments reflect God's particular care for the poor, needy and suffering. Those whose situations seem hopeless, are the very ones with whom we are called to share the Christian Hope.

During the week, make time to reflect on how we can share hope with others. There may be opportunity through the work of charities, campaigns or by the words you speak to someone. All signs of hope echo the Christian Hope and are the foundation of our hope of things to come.

Recap on ... The Christian Hope:

- ★ Hope sets our sights beyond the present reality to the possibilities beyond
- ★ The Christian hope is grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
- ★ The Christian hope is for the whole of creation, not just humans
- ★ The Christian hope is about the present, not just the future.

Follow up reading ...

- Tom Wright Surprised by Hope (2011) SPCK

Session Nine

Breakfast with Friends (John 21)

Aims of this session:

- ❖ **To reflect on an encounter between Jesus and the disciples after the resurrection**
- ❖ **To think about the meaning of the resurrection**
- ❖ **To consider the way in which Jesus built relationships and community**
- ❖ **To explore some of the themes and styles of John's Gospel**

Opening Prayer

Lord God, through your death and resurrection you made all things new. As we reflect on the way you came to make peace with your friends and built up the community of those who love you, let us pray that we will experience the newness of life you bring and be part of the movement to build your kingdom and to bring peace among all people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Spring 8**

The idea of resurrection is extraordinary. Jesus is the only person to have been resurrected and so we have nothing to compare it to. Even when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead in John 11, we understand that Lazarus will still eventually die. When Jesus is raised from death, it is to eternal life. Having been tortured, humiliated, crucified and buried in a tomb, the disciples find that the tomb is empty, and the grave clothes have been abandoned. Of all the four Gospels, John tells us the most about the post-resurrection Jesus.

⇔ If you had been executed on a trumped-up charge, and then came back from the dead, what would you do?

Many of us might answer that we would go and visit the people who had wrongly convicted us, we would parade up a busy road and draw attention to this amazing event, or we would go and scare those who pursued and persecuted us! Or we may of course have answered that we would visit our loved ones.

One of the most remarkable things about Jesus' resurrection appearances, are that they are pretty unremarkable. Jesus does not present himself to the masses in the marketplace, or look up Pilate to show him what a big mistake he made. Jesus appears to his followers and makes peace with them.

We looked at some of the themes of John's Gospel earlier this term.

⇔ **What are the distinctive themes and focuses in John's Gospel?**

As you read through the following passage, take note of anything that strikes you as typical of John's Gospel.

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend

my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.

John 21:1-17

There are some interesting details in this passage!

↔ **What particularly struck you as you read the passage through?**

You may have noticed:

- a) The disciples had gone back to fishing
- b) Peter put on his clothes to greet Jesus
- c) The charcoal fire
- d) Jesus has made breakfast
- e) Until they followed Jesus' instruction, they hadn't caught any fish
- f) John states that they caught exactly 153 fish!
- g) Peter's three-fold affirmation of Christ

↔ **What do you think is the significance of these details?**

a) The fishermen disciples

The disciples have gone back to what they know. Amidst the hurt, disappointment, humiliation and fear of Jesus' death, they have done what humans do, gone back to what is familiar. When Jesus called them, they were fishermen and during the time that they travelled with Jesus, that was still who they were. Jesus did not call them despite them being fishermen, but because of it. Jesus used the disciples as fishermen. He released the gifts they already had for use on a wider stage. This is even clearer in Matthew and Mark's Gospels, when Jesus tells them, 'come with me and I will make you fishers of men'. Jesus does not try and teach them a whole set of different gifts; he works with the resources that he has.

↔ **What might this tell us about the way in which Jesus calls us?**

b) Peter gets dressed!

This seems like a very odd detail in this passage, that Peter puts his clothes on to jump into the water.

⇔ Can you think of anywhere else in the Bible that people putting on clothes is important?

When Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree of good and evil, they become aware of their nakedness and are ashamed before God (Genesis 3). As Jesus was crucified, Peter denied that he knew him. Putting on his coat to greet Jesus may well be a sign of his shame before the Lord.

c) The BBQ

John is very specific that it is a charcoal fire on which Jesus is preparing breakfast. In John 18:18, we learn that as Jesus' trial happens, Peter is standing by a charcoal fire made by the guards. This kind of detail helps us to 'inhabit' a scene, to feel the heat and smell the fire as well as just to hear or read what was happening. There are many echoes of Peter's betrayal in this passage, and neither Peter nor Jesus can just forget about what happened, but they can take the opportunity to put it right.

d) The Breakfast

Jesus, who was crucified by the Roman authorities, is on the beach making breakfast. The mundane, such as eating together, is a profound part of the Christian life. This also reminds us that Jesus provides for the disciples, he anticipates their needs and cares for them. This also has echoes of the one who came to serve and not to be served; even the glorious resurrected Christ is the servant of his friends.

e) The Empty Net

Seasoned fishermen know where to go for the best catch, but on this occasion, they have not caught a single fish all night. Yet, when they follow Jesus' instructions, the net is so full they struggle to haul it in. Jesus' provision is not just sufficient, but an abundance. Perhaps there is a lesson here about following Jesus commands. There may also be a play on one of John's favourite themes of light and dark- in the darkness of the night they catch nothing, but in the light (both daybreak and the presence of Christ) they catch plenty.

f) 153 Fish

This seems such an odd detail! It is not a rough estimate but a very specific number. Biblical scholars and commentators even those writing only a hundred or so years after Christ thought that this number represented something.

⇔ **What do you think the number 153 might be about?**

Most commonly agreed were that it was every known race of people at the time, or every known species of creature. Either way, there seems to be a reference to the universality of Christ's message and provision. All the peoples of the world can be caught in the net, and it will not rip.

g) In triplicate

Three times at the end of this passage, Jesus asks Peter "Do you love me?" This is one of the most touching moments in what has been quite a fraught relationship between Jesus and Peter. Here, Jesus gives him the opportunity to wipe out the three times Peter claimed not to know him, by affirming his love for him. This restores their relationship after Peter has betrayed him and restores Peter's role as the one Jesus trusts to feed his sheep and tend his flock. The putting right of the relationship between Jesus and Peter is not just about the two of them but has an impact on all the disciples and the whole community of the followers of Christ.

⇔ **How would you summarise John 21:1-17 or describe why it is important?**

John's Gospel does not include any accidental or irrelevant detail. The way it is written operates on many different levels and we are constantly being challenged to ask more and more questions about who Jesus is and what that means for us. This passage tells us a great deal about Jesus and what it means to follow him. Some of the key themes that are explored here are forgiveness and restoration, and the building up of community.

The restoring of relationship is an important theme here, but it isn't just about forgiveness for Peter and a new start for him, it is also about an understanding that humans cannot always respond instantly. The disciples followed Jesus when he first called them, and in this passage he effectively re-calls the disciples. He goes back to the scenario where he first found them and calls them again to discipleship. Even those who have responded quickly may still need to be invited again, and again. That the disciples, and particularly Peter, have made mistakes is not the end, it is not sticking around to put mistakes right that causes problems. By healing his relationship with Peter and eating with them, Jesus heals and restores the community of disciples. Jesus works to restore the disciples as a group of which he is part, not just to set them on their own individual tracks.

This is what discipleship is, to respond to the call to follow Christ time and time again; even when we have made big mistakes, denied Jesus and followed our own paths, he still comes to meet us, prepares a meal for us and finds a way to put right what has gone wrong.

Recap on ... Breakfast with Friends:

- ★ The resurrection appearances of Jesus are very mundane– Jesus meets with his friend, talks and shares food.
- ★ The passage in John 21:1-17 contains all sorts of extraordinary details which invites us to see what is going on underneath the surface of the account.
- ★ Jesus “re-calls” the disciples and restores his relationship with Peter and the whole community.

Follow up reading ...

- James C Somerville Encore available at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/encore-jn-211-19/>

Session Ten

Group Meal and Faith-Life Conversations

Aims of this session:

- ❖ **To share time together as a group and reflect on what you have done this term**
- ❖ **To get to know members of the group better**
- ❖ **To have space to talk about issues which may have come up for you over the last couple of months**
- ❖ **To share any questions you might have about faith and life.**

Prayer

Thank you God for all that you have given us. We thank you for our family and friends and all that is good in our lives.

We thank you for what we have experienced during this term; for the time we have spent together sharing, debating and trying to understand more about ourselves, the world and more about you. We pray that you would help each of us on our journey and bring us closer to you. Help us to recognise the grace that you give us, that means we don't struggle alone, but walk with you as forgiven and free beings.

We ask your blessing upon this group and upon this meal. We think of those who do not have enough to eat and pray that this time will be a blessing not just to us, but to others whose lives we will touch in the coming days and weeks.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

As you share food together, you could go around the group and give everyone a chance to share something they have learned during this module, a question they haven't had answered, or something that is going on in their life. For this module, you might consider making your meal a simplified Passover meal, an example of which can be found at

<https://www.foodandwine.com/holidays-events/passover/how-to-cook-simple-passover-meal-easy-fast>