

Living Faith

Summer Term



Ascension, Pentecost & Trinity

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.

© 2020 Vocations Team, Diocese of Lichfield

Reproduction in whole or part is forbidden, whether for sale or otherwise, without written permission from: The DVE Strategy Enabler, 1 Three Spires House, Lichfield, WS13 6HX

Ascension

Pentecost

Trinity

1. New Starts
2. Presence and Absence
3. The Holy Spirit
4. The Triune God
5. Film week
6. Made in God's Image
7. The Parable of the Sower
8. Spreading the Word
9. I believe in the Church
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

New Starts

Aims of the session:

- ❖ To reflect on patterns of life and new starts
- ❖ To think about the resurrection of Jesus as a new start
- ❖ To understand that God constantly offers us the possibility of new starts.

Opening Prayer

God, you have promised us that you will make all things new. Help us to leave behind that which is broken, ugly and not worthy of you. Help us to allow ourselves to be re-created, made new by you, that we might live rejoicing in your gifts and promises. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Summer 1

The cycle of life is full of new starts and new beginnings, and the Christian year is no different. Every journey has starts and set-backs and new starts. Lots of stories in films and books are about journeys; the ups and downs and new starts which are part of the human experience. The 1994 Disney film *The Lion King*, the story of which was said to be inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, tells of rivalry, fear, destruction and also of the new opportunities and new starts which make up the *Circle of Life*.

The circle, or cycle, of life is about more than our individual new starts and beginnings - although these are important - it is also about a wider cycle of patterns that make up human existence.

⇔ What makes up the cycle of life?

From the day we arrive on the planet
And, blinking, step into the sun
There's more to see than can ever be seen
More to do than can ever be done
There's far too much to take in here
More to find than can ever be found
But the sun rolling high
Through the sapphire sky
Keeps great and small on the endless round
It's the Circle of Life
And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
Till we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the Circle
The Circle of Life

(Elton John
from *The Lion King*)

You may have mentioned a whole range of things including, birth, death, growing up, aging, starting a family, illness, setbacks etc. All of these are part of our shared pattern or cycle of life. Although the details differ from person to person, we experience a similar cycle of life to other people around the world and in the past.

There are lots of different psychological accounts of our development over the life cycle, but what they all have in common, is that we change over the course of our life time, and that the next generation, and the next and the next, will experience a similar pattern of development and change. This is important, because it tells us a lot about who we are and what life is like. And it is also important because it reminds us that we cannot necessarily expect to have the same views, experiences and beliefs throughout our entire life. They are likely to change and develop as we continue on the 'unwinding path' that is the cycle of life.

⇔ **What have been some of the significant ups and downs of your own life? Can you think of ways in which they changed your beliefs, ideas and attitudes?**

Resurrection and Re-creation

At the very heart of the Christian faith is the person Jesus, the Christ. Christians believe that he was a man who lived at a certain point in time, and in a certain place. They also believe that he is the Son of God who still lives today. Historical evidence suggests that there was indeed a man called Jesus who lived in Israel in the first century and that he was put to death by the Roman authorities.

After his death, Jesus was buried in a tomb according to the Scriptures and on the third day after his death he was resurrected. Jesus did not trick people into thinking he had died; he did not perform magic; Jesus broke through the laws of the natural order and overcame the force of death. This sort of miracle can only be caused by God, who set up the rules of the natural order in the first place. The story of resurrection is in a way, a story of re-creation. God made the world in the beginning, and through Jesus, He transformed it so that the original rules could be broken.

Have a look at what St Paul says about the importance of resurrection for Christians:

The writers of the Gospels used the phrase 'according to the Scriptures' to show how the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection fulfilled the hopes of the Jewish people; to show that Jesus was the Messiah they were expecting. They are referring to passages in the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, which foretell the events they are now reporting.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15: 12-22

The **First Letter to the Corinthians** is one of the types of book in the New Testament sometimes known as 'Epistles', which means letters. They were written by leaders of the Early Church to groups of people who had heard the Good News of Jesus and were beginning to live as Christians and form Churches. St Paul wrote this letter to the new church community in Corinth, Greece. It is one of two letters to the Corinthians in the New Testament, and it is thought that Paul may have written them another letter which is now lost. Paul's letters to the Corinthians try to explain to them what it means to live as Christians, and to put right any bits they have misunderstood. Here, it is clear that some were saying there is no such thing as resurrection, and Paul tells them that there is, and why it matters.

Paul is adamant that belief in resurrection is essential for Christians. It would be easy to get the impression that Christianity is only concerned with the spiritual: things we can't touch or see; that Christianity does not set much store by the physical things of earth, the ground, the seas, animals, plants, our own flesh and bone bodies.

This is not so!

The story of resurrection, which is at the heart of the Christian faith, is a story of the transformation of the physical as well as the spiritual (and also the mental, emotional, etc etc). The New Testament promises that all things shall be made new! God values creation so much, that one day it will all be made perfect, including us!

↔ **What would it mean to you to have a 'new start' at this stage in your life? How do you think this relates to God's promise that all things will be made new?**

What all of this means, is that the cycle of life is not just a dreary trudge towards the grave! It is not just a case of enduring your setbacks until you die and disappear into nothingness. Christians believe that our life on earth is only part of our cycle. Because Jesus has defeated death, our dying will not be the last thing that happens to us, but rather we will experience life with God for all eternity. This is sometimes called The Christian Hope. In this sense, our death will be our ultimate new start. This doesn't mean our suffering isn't real, but it does mean that we don't think it can have the last word. There is nothing more powerful than God's promise of new life, of a new start with Him.

Recap on ... New Starts:

- ★ The New Testament teaches us that Jesus was raised from the dead – that His death was the beginning of a new existence, not just for him, but for all people and all of creation.
- ★ Humans experience a cycle of life with ups and downs, but God is always with us in that journey, and promises us the chance for a new start whenever we need it.

Follow up reading ...

On Life cycle...

- D. Levinson, (1978) *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, New York: Knopf.
- Erik Erikson developed an influential theory about human development that is widely available on the web. You could start off here: <https://www.learning-theories.com/eriksons-stages-of-development.html>
- Doug Fields *Your Fresh Start with God Begins Today* (2009) Nelson

On Resurrection ...

- Paula Gooder *This Risen Existence: The Spirit of Easter* (2009) Canterbury Press
- Samuel Wells *Power and Passion – Six Characters in search of Resurrection* (2006) Zondervan
- Rowan Williams *Resurrection – Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (2002) Darton, Longman and Todd.
- N.T. Wright *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) SPCK (long and quite challenging!)

Session Two

Presence and Absence

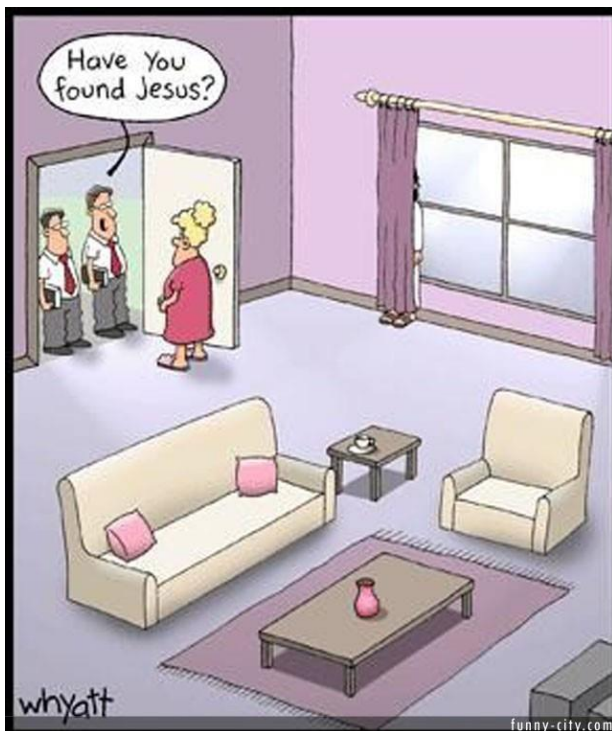
Aims for this session:

- ❖ To think about the difference between faith and knowledge
- ❖ To reflect on the way in which Christ is alive
- ❖ To understand the teaching about the ascension of Jesus
- ❖ To reflect on the way God is present with us

Opening Prayer:

Lord we ask that you would open our eyes to your presence. Help us to see you at work in the world, your care for creation and your love for all of your people. Help us to know you in our minds and in our hearts. In Jesus' name, we ask this. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Summer 2



People often talk about an experience of God becoming known in their life as having "found Jesus". Famous people whose lives have changed dramatically because they have become Christians - like George Foreman, Jane Fonda, or ex-Eastenders actress Daniella Westbrook - report that they have 'found Jesus' and that everything now seems different.

The cartoon here (© Whyatt) shows two men, literally, on a mission to share the good news about Jesus with others. If you look behind the curtain, we see the joke about what it means to find Jesus!

When St Paul famously "found Jesus" on the road to Damascus (you can read an account of it in Acts 9:1-19) it was as though he found something which was previously lost to him. The well-known song Amazing Grace was written by John Newton in 1779 after he "found Jesus". He also believed that God had found him.

*Amazing grace! (how sweet
the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am
found,
was blind, but now I see.*

This might lead us to wonder why Jesus needs to be “found”! Was he lost? Has he been hiding? Why is it that Jesus is evident to some people and not to others?

Jesus was present in a particular way during his earthly life. During his earthly life, Jesus was present to those whom he met with, taught, challenged and encouraged. Following his death and resurrection, Christian tradition teaches that Jesus “ascended into heaven”. He stopped being physically present on earth, because he is in heaven. Yet, his presence is still with us, even though that now means something different than it did before Jesus’ death. This is how the writer of the Acts of the Apostles describes Jesus’ ascension to heaven:

‘Ascension’ refers to the belief that the resurrected Jesus ascended, or rose, to heaven where he reigns with God the Father.

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Acts 1: 6 - 11

The Acts of the Apostles is the fifth book in the New Testament and gives an account of the way in which the Church was established and Jesus’ work was continued when He was no longer physically present on earth. “Apostle” comes from the Greek word ‘apostolos’ which means messenger, or one who is sent. The Book of Acts records the activities of the key apostles Paul and Peter, as well as following the work of Stephen, Philip and Barnabus. It is thought that this account was written in the second half of the first century, by Luke, who also wrote the Gospel. He was believed to have been Paul’s physician and to have travelled with him on many of the journeys recorded. The book shares some common themes with the Gospel of Luke, including and emphasis on the Holy Spirit, care and concern for the poor, and the relevance of Christianity to the Gentiles (non-Jews).

This may seem like a strange story, but Christians believe that Jesus is alive; that He still lives. Not in the way that you and I are alive, but as a resurrected person in heaven. And so Jesus is both present and absent. This is one of the tensions that are at the heart of the Christian faith. There are lots of aspects of Christianity that seem difficult to explain rationally, and sometimes we need to explore different parts of our minds, different ways of understanding, to appreciate the profound truth of what may sound like a logical contradiction.

⇔ Can you think of ways in which God seems present in the world, and ways in which God seems absent?

The Bible tells us in various places that God's presence is constant, and indeed Jesus promises his disciples, "I am with you until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). God is not sometimes present, and sometimes not, but it can feel like that. In this life, we are not perfectly in tune with God, we may sometimes feel God's presence very strongly, and at other times not feel it all. In church, we sometimes talk about those who have died as "worshipping in God's nearer presence". Christian tradition has always suggested that in the next life, after our death, we will know God more fully and experience God's presence perfectly. At the moment, we experience it brokenly, or in fragments, but then we will know the fullness of God.

This means that our experience, or feelings, can only tell us part of the picture. We need to rely on a combination of what we have experienced, and what the Bible and the Christian tradition teach us. This is a big challenge and takes us to the heart of what it means to have "faith". Christian tradition has generally taught that God made humans to be free beings. We have real choices to make, and one of those choices is whether or not to believe in God. The world is created in such a way, that although there are signs of God's presence, evidence of God is not imposed on us, so that we are free to see the world as the work of a good creator, or as the random result of a chance process of evolution, or in any of the other ways that people have come up with over the centuries. In other words, God is both present and absent in the world.

When we are talking about God, and we consider what we 'know' about God, we are probably using the idea of knowledge in a particular way, a way that relates to faith.

⇔ What is the difference between faith and knowledge?

It is probably quite easy to define 'knowledge', it is something we know, or know about, information we have. It can be much harder to define 'faith'.

The knowledge we have changes over our lifetime. For example, we learn all kinds of things when we need to know them for a job, or because of circumstances in our life. Often our medical knowledge increases as we, or someone close to us manages a particular illness; or we learn a huge amount of information about human development, nutrition and other aspects of welfare if we become parents. Until we encounter these situations, we might not ever think about that type of knowledge.

⇔ **Can you think of a quick example of knowledge that you have now, that you didn't have at an earlier stage in your life? You may even be able to think of knowledge that you used to have but cannot recall anymore!**

Likewise, faith changes over our lifetime. It evolves as we encounter different circumstances and experiences in our life.

Recap on ... Presence and Absence:

- ★ Christ is both present with us, and also absent from us because he has ascended into heaven and is no longer physically present on earth.
- ★ The presence of God is constant, but we may also feel its absence as we do not yet experience it perfectly.
- ★ There are some things that we know to be true, and some things we believe to be true. God does not take deny us the freedom to choose whether or not we believe in God.

Follow up reading ...

- Lawrence Wood Above and Beyond an article from the Christian Century, can be found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/above-and-beyond-lk-2444-53-acts-11-11/>
- Douglas Farrow Ascension Theology (2011) T & T Clark (quite academic)

Session Three

The Holy Spirit

Aims for this session:

- ❖ **To reflect on the presence and work of the Holy Spirit**
- ❖ **To think about the significance of the Spirit at Pentecost**
- ❖ **To reflect on what we say about the Spirit in the Creed**

Opening Prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit. Breathe life into us and draw us closer to you. Breathe fresh life into our thinking, our ideas, our knowledge. As we think about you, make yourself known to us here and to all in need of your life-giving power. In Jesus' name, we ask it. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Summer 3

In the Old Testament, the words wind, spirit and breath are all translations of the same Hebrew word: *ruach*. This is the life-giving power of God. The Scriptures often describe the Spirit as breathing life and being into things. Wind, spirit and breath have various things in common: they are all a type of energy or power; they are all dynamic – they move; and they are all hard to see in themselves, but it is evident whether they are there or not.

The Holy Spirit also appears in the Bible in various forms, as a dove, and as tongues of fire. The Spirit can take on certain appearances, and the effects of it can be seen, but the Spirit itself cannot be seen. People in the Church often talk about the ways in which the Holy Spirit is 'at work'. By this, they generally mean that the Spirit can be seen by the effect it is having on people and situations.

⇔ Can you think of any ways in which you see the effects of the Holy Spirit being at work, or breathing life into a particular person or situation?

In the Bible, the Spirit being 'at work' in a particular situation tends to bring quite dramatic results! Have a look at this well-known passage from Ezekiel, in which God gives Ezekiel a vision:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' ⁴Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Ezekiel 37

The book of Ezekiel is the 26th book in the Old Testament and is thought to have been written by the Prophet Ezekiel, who may have been a younger contemporary of the Prophet Jeremiah. It was probably written about 570 years before the birth of Jesus. The prophet Ezekiel, who lived among the exiles in Babylon, tells the people of Israel both of the ways in which they have let God down, and of the blessings that God has for them.

The Exile was a very significant event for the Jewish people. The books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles tell the story of the Exile. In 586 BC, Jerusalem had been under siege for two years, the King Zedekiah had been murdered, and the Jews had surrendered. They were marched away to Babylon, where they lived in exile. It was during these forty years, when they were exiled from their holy place, denied their Promised Land, that the Jews formed a significant part of their identity as God's chosen people.

In this passage the breath (*ruach*) brings life to the dry bones. Ezekiel understood this to be a message about the people of Israel, that if they allowed God to breathe life into them, they too would live. They would survive the difficult circumstances they were in and would once again rejoice in being the people chosen by God. The effect of this would be as dramatic as it was in Ezekiel's vision, where dry bones are covered in flesh, given breath and brought to life.

A similarly dramatic account of the work of the Spirit is given in the New Testament in the *Acts of the Apostles*. The account describes the events at what we call Pentecost.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' ¹³But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

The word 'Pentecost' means the fiftieth day, and the celebration of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is so called because it is celebrated 50 days after Easter. This is regarded as the birthday of the Church.

Acts 2

⇔ Why does the Holy Spirit enable the Galileans to speak in a language which is not their own? What difference does it make?

The list of the different nations and races involved here introduces us to places and peoples we may not be familiar with. This is the sort of reading that people might dread being asked to read out loud, because there are so many unfamiliar words in it! But the information about all the people who were there is really important. It is making clear that the work of the Holy Spirit did not just happen amongst the Jews, but among people from all different places. Barriers between different nations were broken down as the people heard the Good News about Jesus in their own language.

The Galileans were given an amazing gift – that of communication. They were able to share the Good News of Jesus with people whose language they could not normally speak. This shows us a couple of important things. 1) The Holy Spirit empowered people so that they could share the Good News, 2) The Good News is for all people – no one should be excluded because of their race or the language they speak.

The gift given to the people by the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost is sometimes referred to as 'speaking in tongues'. In some churches today, particularly in charismatic churches, people still 'speak in tongues', they feel that they have been given a special language to communicate with God.

⇔ **What do you think the purpose of the gift of speaking in tongues is, in the passage from Acts 2?**

⇔ **Do you think that is the same thing as 'speaking in tongues' in the church today?**

Speaking in tongues, as described in Acts 2, or in the church today is quite dramatic. The Spirit of God is powerful, but the gifts of the Spirit are not all dramatic ones. St Paul describes gifts of the Spirit that are given for the good of the whole community:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

1 Corinthians 12

⇔ **How is the Holy Spirit at work in you or in your life?**

Paul also talks about the fruits of the Spirit, the results of the Spirit being at work in us.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Galatians 5: 22,23

These things are not dramatic but make an enormous difference. When we, as a Christian community show these signs of the Spirit, we are living in a way characterised by the presence of God, rather than according to the rules of the world.

The Holy Spirit could be described as the 'life force' of the Church or the 'active power' of God, or in a whole host of different ways. Any of the ways in which we describe it can only touch on the reality of what the Spirit is; it is far more than we can find words to describe.

During the coming week, think about one of the 'fruits of the Spirit'. Notice when and where you see it at work, and what difference it makes. Which of them might you try and make more apparent in your own life, with the help of the Holy Spirit?

Recap on ... The Holy Spirit:

- ★ The Hebrew words for spirit, breath and wind, are all the same - ruach. The Spirit is the power, or force of God.
- ★ The Holy Spirit is active in the world in all kinds of ways. The Spirit is not confined to what we recognise as the church, but blows through all of God's creation.
- ★ When the Spirit acts in a particular way, dramatic events happen; but the Spirit is also active in the everyday events of life.
- ★ The fruits of the Spirit are the virtues that are necessary for us to love as Christians.

Follow up reading ...

- Amos Yong Discerning the Spirit from Christian Century found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/discerning-the-spirit/>
- Billy Graham The Holy Spirit: Activating God's Power in your Life (2003) Zondervan
- Jane Williams (Editor) The Holy Spirit in the World Today (2011) Alpha International
- Michael Green I Believe in the Holy Spirit (2004) Eerdmans

Session Four

The Triune God

Aims for this session

- ❖ To try and understand the Christian teaching of the triune God
- ❖ To think about the implications of a God who is a community
- ❖ To reflect on what we say about the Spirit in the Creed

Opening Prayer

God, you are Father, Son and Spirit. Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. We give you thanks that you want us to know you. Lord help us to believe when we do not understand and help us to understand that which we believe. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Summer 4

Christians believe that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but one God. Three in One and One in three. This belief in the Trinity is unique to the Christian tradition and is a difficult one to grasp.

It came to be explained this way because the first Christians believed that God had shown Himself as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. Not just as different ways of being, in the way that we could be a sister - doctor - grandmother all at the same time, or a father - footballer- friend; these are different modes of being - one person acting in different ways. The first Christians believed not just that God was made known in different ways, but that God was revealed as distinctly, but inseparably, Father, Son and Spirit.

The well-known hymn, probably from around the 8th century 'St Patrick's Breastplate' ends with this dedication to the Triune God:

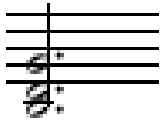
*I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.
By whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word:
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.*



St Patrick, the 5th century saint, is believed to have brought Christianity to Ireland. One of the ways in which he explained the triune God to the natives, was by using a shamrock. St Patrick would apparently hold up a shamrock and ask the people "is it one leaf or three?" "It is one leaf" they would reply, and Patrick would proclaim "And so it is with God"!

We may not find this the most helpful explanation of the Trinity; it's not actually much different to saying that God is like a hat with three corners, or a triangle with three sides. St Patrick was aiming to communicate the three-in-one nature of God, and of course every analogy breaks

down at some point! You may have heard a range of explanations of what the Trinity is like. St Augustine, a very influential theologian of the 4-5th century, likened the Trinity to the memory, intellect and will of a person – they are three distinct features, but of one person.



A popular image today, is that of water, ice and steam – they are all H²O, but in different forms, one essence, but three distinct forms. The theologian Jeremy Begbie suggests a musical analogy. He believes that it is easier to understand the Trinity if we think about three notes of a chord. They occupy the same 'space' and make up one chord, but at the same time, they are three distinct notes.

⇔ What do you think of these explanations / illustrations? Which do you find most helpful and why?

As we have said, none of these analogies or picture of the Trinity will be entirely successful. We cannot adequately capture a complete explanation of the triune God, but they can give us glimpses of what God is like, or form the beginnings of understanding what it might mean.

⇔ Can you think of any other ways you have heard the Trinity described?

The doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the Bible. That is to say, it is not presented as a clear statement that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three natures in one person. The actual word 'Trinity' doesn't appear in Scripture. It is clear however, that God is revealed in different ways. Consider this account of Jesus being baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Mark 1:9-11

In this account, Jesus the Son heard the voice of God the Father, and the Holy Spirit appears as a dove. This might be one of the few times in Scripture when God is presented as Father, Son and Spirit.

⇔ **Do you think it matters that the doctrine of the Trinity is not spelt out in the Bible?**

⇔ **Can you think of any other ways in which God is shown as Father, Son and Spirit?**

Christians believe that the understanding of God as Trinity was one of the things Jesus revealed about what God is truly like. It is through Jesus that we also know God is love, God cares for us and constantly invites us to have a relationship with Him.

No other religions talk about God as being triune. In the early days of Christianity, this sometimes led to the accusation that Christians were polytheists – that they believed in three gods. This was particularly difficult for Jews who had a very clear belief in one God.

“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4)

This verse is a proclamation of the Jewish faith and is called the Shema. Jews are required to say it every morning and every evening. It was very important to the people of Israel to assert their belief in one God, as many of the other religious systems in ancient Israel believed in lots of gods. Rather than believing in many god’s the Israelites believed in one all-powerful God who had chosen them to be God’s people. The first Christians were mostly Jews, and it remained important to them to assert that the God who is Father, Son and Spirit, is one God.

⇔ **Why do you think that belief in the triune God is an important part of the Christian faith?**

The doctrine of the Trinity is very hard to explain or describe, it takes us outside the kind of categories of things we are used to talking about. The Christian tradition has struggled with how best to communicate belief in the triune God for centuries. Even though it is difficult, it is important to try. By struggling with ideas and concepts about God and exploring how they fit with our own experience of what God is like, we come to know more and more about God, and this can lead us into a deeper relationship with Him.

The Relational God

The Trinitarian God is relational; God is three persons in communion. That doesn't mean that they are separable, that one of the persons can opt out of the Trinity! It does mean that God, the perfect being is a fellowship. This is important for several reasons. When we think about God as being perfect, it is not a singular being who manifests perfection, but the triune God.

In the seventh century, a theologian called John of Damascus used the word *perichoresis* to talk about the relationship between the persons of God. The word means movement, connection at every point, interrelatedness. Some have interpreted it to mean "the divine dance". Although this isn't technically the meaning of the word, it is a great image of the dynamic nature of the fellowship of God.

⇔ **What difference might it make to us, our churches and our society, if we modelled the relationship of the Triune God?**

It is an important part of Christian life to realise that we cannot be Christians alone. We can only be Christians with other Christians, and with God. As well as the important model the Triune God gives us for the sort of sharing we should practice with one another, it is also part of the call to follow Christ that we are invited into the life of the Godhead, to be part of the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Recap on ... The Triune God:

- ★ The Trinity is a doctrine unique to Christianity and holds that God is one in three, and three in one.
- ★ God reveals Godself as Father, Son and Spirit in the Bible, but the doctrine of the Trinity is not spelt out in the Scriptures.
- ★ The triune God is relational, and we are invited to model and be part of the communal life.

Follow up reading ...

- Stephen R. Holmes *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (2011) Authentic Media (an overview of different accounts of the Trinity in Christian History)
- Paul M. Collins *The Trinity: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2008) T & T Clark
- Robin Parry *Worshipping Trinity* (2011) Wipf and Stock
- T.V. Philip *The Holy Trinity (John :11-18)* <http://www.religion-online.org/article/the-holy-trinity-john-3-11-18/>
- Barbara Brown Zikmund *Trinity and Women's Experience from the Christian Century*, found at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/trinity-and-womens-experience/>

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 & 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:

You are the creator of the sun and stars, the earth and all that is on it. You hold each one of us in your care, and weave your presence into our lives. As we watch this film, and reflect on this story, help us to see more of your presence; to understand more of the ways in which you are at work in the world, and to celebrate the people who are so gifted at telling their story. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Jesus Camp (2006) Directors: Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady

Jesus Camp is a documentary about a youth leader in North Dakota and some of the children who attend her events and summer camp. It uses footage from a range of events as well as interviews with the youth leader, Becky Fischer. It explores issues of the relationship between Christianity and America, particularly American politics; the political education of children and the way in which faith is passed on. It raises some interesting questions about the line between forming children in the faith and manipulation, and about the boundaries and purposes of pastoral care.

Themes: The church, mission, ideas about God, creation and evolution, politics and religion

The Mission (1986) Director: Roland Joffé

This film is set in eighteenth century South America, and tells the tale of a Jesuit missionary. The film explores what it means to take the Gospel to a group of people and what ecclesiastical and political responsibilities and choices it brings with it. The themes of power and imperialism, sacrifice and redemption are important in this film. Notice the different responses the characters make to their situation and the different understandings of God, Good News and their Christian commitment that this reflects. The film is beautifully shot and won an Oscar for the cinematography and awards for the soundtrack.

Themes: mission, the church, repentance, forgiveness, authority

The Scarlet Letter (1995) Director: Roland Joffé

Based on the book by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* tells the story of a Hester Prynne, an English woman living in a puritan community in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. Whilst waiting for her husband to join her, she establishes a community which includes various outsiders and difficult people. She also forms a close friendship with the priest. When she hears that her husband has died, she starts a relationship with the priest and has a child. The community treat her harshly and humiliate her. The film follows the consequences of her choices, and the prioritising of legalism over compassion.

Themes: Christian community, forgiveness, legalism, adultery

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

Made in God's Image

Aims of the session:

- ❖ To reflect on the way in which humans are made in God's image
- ❖ To consider what difference it makes to reflect the image of the triune God
- ❖ To explore Christian understandings of the human person

Opening Prayer

God, you have made us in your own image. You have valued us and blessed us, and invited us to know you. We have not always let your image shine from us and we pray that as we come to know more of you, others will see your image reflected in all that we do, all that we say, and all that we are. In Jesus name we ask it. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Summer 5

People often ask whether their dog, or another much loved pet will be in heaven. The New Testament tells us that all of creation will be brought to perfection by God, and this includes animals and all of nature. So in the next life, it will not just be humans, but a perfect version of the world we now know. However, the Bible also tells us, that human beings have been given a special place in the order of creation.

↔ What do you think the difference is between humans and animals?

There is something important about being a person, and the role given to human beings is different than any other species. In the very first chapter of the Bible, in the book Genesis, we read:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

The book, Genesis, is the first book of both the Christian bible and Hebrew Scripture. It is not, however, the oldest book. Genesis is almost like a scrapbook in which someone has collected and written down stories which had been told by word of mouth for generations, or an anthology of all the ancient stories of Israel's distant history, woven together to make a single book. The tell-tale evidence for this can be seen (for example) in that there are two versions of some stories, for example there are two creation stories in Genesis. This happens so often that scholars generally agree that Genesis, and many other Old Testament books, were formed from materials coming from many different periods and settings. There was no author in the way we think of it today; instead there was a compiler who gathered together and combined material from different sources.

In the past, people understood this to mean that they should subdue and conquer the earth. However, these days, we tend to think more in terms of 'stewardship' – the responsibility we have to care for the earth and all of the creatures on it. It is clear that this responsibility is given to humans, as part of their distinctive place in creation; no other animals are also given responsibility to care for one another.

There has been a huge amount of discussion over the centuries about what it means to be made in the image of God.

⇔ **What do you think it means to be made in the image of God?**

One of the ways in which Christians have understood this, is the belief that all human life is equally precious, regardless of who a person is. This is sometime called the sanctity of life – each life is sacred, valued by God. This belief has had a huge influence on Christian thinking and is of course the route of the pro-life position of the Roman Catholic Church. It is also part of the reason that Christians believe they have a duty to help other people even strangers.

A lot of the advances in education and healthcare provision across the world, have been because Christians have wanted to help out their neighbours, and have wanted to follow the example of Jesus who changed the situation of people he met and had a particular concern for the poor and marginalised. Throughout the Scriptures, God's concern for those who are poor or oppressed is clear. It is embedded in the laws of Judaism, and in the actions of Jesus and the early church.

Human societies throughout history have valued some members of society more than others. At times in history we have seen this taken to extremes. Think for example of Germany in the 1920s and 30s. Jews were not just valued less than Aryans but were regarded as being less than human and a blight on society. Shocking though that period of history is, it is not unique. There are lots

of instances in our past, and in our present, where a particular group of people have been regarded as of less value because of their race or religion, gender, sexuality, class or whatever else.

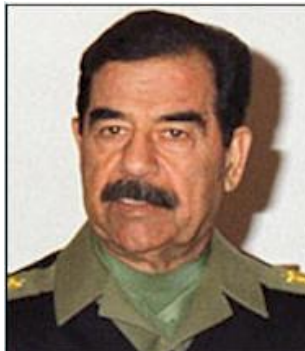
⇔ **Who do you think the persecuted groups are today? What justifications are given for their persecution or exclusion?**

Christians have not been exempt from this, far from it. But we are called to a higher standard where every person is valued simply because they exist – regardless of who they are. It might be easy for us to agree that every life is precious, when we are talking about babies, or children, or people who have done a lot of good in the world; but it is more difficult when we think about people who have promoted hate and brought about destruction and violence. People whose lifestyles we do not approve of, or who are very different to us.

⇔ **How do you feel about the sanctity of life when you look at these people?**



Adolf Hitler



Sadam Hussein



Osama Bin Laden

⇔ **Do you believe that despite the awful things they have done, God loves them?**

If we take seriously the teaching on sanctity of life, we have to say that each of their lives is as valuable and precious as that of Mother Theresa, for example. In other words, sanctity of life teaches that we are important not because of what we do, or because of who we are. Our worth comes from the fact that we exist, we are human beings made in the image of God.

This does not mean that Christians find everything acceptable. Christian teaching is very clear that we are capable of doing great wrongs, of sinning against God. This is sometimes described as 'fallenness'. This comes from the account of the 'fall' of Adam and Eve in Genesis. We know that humans can do great wrong, but we also know what the perfect human being is like. In the risen Jesus we learn what perfected, eschatological (ultimate) humanity is. This is humanity which is not fallen or sinful but that which has been reconstituted or recreated in Christ.

Perfection and Sanctification

The only truly perfect person is Jesus Christ, but this does not mean that we might as well give up hope of ever becoming fully human. Jesus shows us what our humanity will be like when God has perfected us. Those who are canonised (made saints) by the Roman Catholic Church or who are revered as exemplars of the faith may be closer to the perfected person than most of us are.

↔ What are the main difficulties in trying to become like Christ?

The Christian belief is that we cannot through our own sheer effort or hard work achieve this state, but rather it comes as a gift from God. However, we do expect that those who are committed Christians will gradually become more and more Christ-like.

This is sometimes called sanctification. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism caused controversy as he believed in Christian perfection, in other words that people could, in this life become fully sanctified and free from sin. To sanctify means to make holy, and this is generally believed to be a process which most Christians will only complete in the end times.

The journey towards becoming a perfect human being, begins with becoming more and more like Christ. This is the aim of Christian living.

What would it mean for you to become more like Christ? What things would you do more, and what things would you do less? What values would you change? How might you treat people differently?

During the week, as you go about your usual activities, think about what you might do to become more like Christ.

Recap on ... Made in God's Image:

- ★ The Christian tradition teaches that all people are made in the image of God, and that humans have a special place in creation.
- ★ The teaching of the sanctity of life means that all people are valued, regardless of what they do or how they behave.
- ★ Jesus is the perfect human being and Christian living is about becoming more and more like Christ.

Follow up reading ...

- Dallas Willard How to be a Disciple accessed at: <http://www.religion-online.org/article/how-to-be-a-disciple/>
- Stephen Cherry The Barefoot Disciple (2010) Continuum
- Dallas Willard and Randy Frazee Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ (2005) NavPress

Session Seven

The Parable of the Sower

Aims for this session:

- To think about the way in which Jesus taught His followers
- To reflect on the themes of the parable
- To understand where the passage fits in Mark's Gospel
- To reflect on what this parable means for us

Opening Prayer

Lord you have given so much to each one of us. Today we thank you for all the people we enjoy having in our lives, all of the things which bring us joy, and for this opportunity to reflect on the story of the sower. Help us to understand a bit more about your kingdom through this time together. Amen.

>> Watch the video clip Summer 6

The Gospels include some of the teachings of Jesus. They tell of some of the stories he told, conversations he had, and explanations he gave. They do not claim to report everything Jesus ever did but include enough for us to understand what Jesus was like. Each of the Gospel writers told their story because they wanted other people to hear what they knew about Jesus, and even more they wanted people to respond to it. The Gospel writers thought it mattered, and they want to pass the opportunity to be part of the Jesus-movement on to other people.

The passage that we are going to look at this week is from Mark's Gospel, it is also found in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 13. Each of the Gospels tell the Good News of Jesus, but they all go about it in a slightly different way. There are certain things that we might know about Mark's Gospel, that are distinctive to that book.

↔ What do you know about Mark's Gospel?

You may have said things like:

- It is the shortest Gospel
- It is thought to have been the first Gospel to be written (perhaps around 65 AD)
- Some people think that Mark got his information directly from Peter the disciple.
- It has a rather urgent style of writing, lots of sections begin with phrases like 'and then', 'and immediately', 'and he began to teach'
- There is a strange theme of secrecy in the Gospel. Several times Jesus tells people not to tell anyone who he is. This is sometimes referred to as the 'messianic secret' – he wanted it to be a secret that he was the Messiah until the people could understand what that would mean.

⇔ **Which of these pieces of information help with your understanding of the Gospel?**

The opening sentence of Mark's Gospel is:

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Typically of Mark, this is straight to the point. The first words tell us who and what the story is about, and why we should care! This is a clue to understanding the rest of the Gospel, when we hear what Jesus has done, we already know, it is because he is the Son of God.

Mark's Gospel can be roughly broken up into four sections:

1.1 – 1.13	Introduction
1.14 – 8.30	Who is Jesus?
8:31 – 15.47	The cross
16:1-8	Epilogue

These sections are not of equal size, but they are useful in giving us an idea of what Mark focuses on. The two main sections concentrate on the question of who Jesus is, and then the importance of his death. One of the things that is often noted about Mark is that he spends a lot of time on the passion of Christ.

The parable of the sower comes at the beginning of chapter 4, in the section 'Who is Jesus?'. It is the beginning of a section devoted to the teaching of Jesus, having introduced Jesus in chapters 1 - 3, Mark is now introducing the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims.

'Passion' means the suffering of Jesus. It comes from a Greek word paschō, which means to suffer. You may have heard of Passion Plays. These were very popular in Christian countries in medieval times and were plays in which the story of Jesus was told, and they were often put on every year.

There are a series of parables that use images of growth. These may reflect on the failure of people to understand who Jesus is and what he is telling them, but the kingdom will ultimately be triumphant anyway. Each parable demands of its hearer, that they respond to the situation which has been created by the coming of Jesus. These are not just stories for entertainment; they are a challenge to do something!

The parables are intended to prompt the brain into action, and the heart into response!

⇔ **Read the first section of the parable out loud.**

'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

Mark 4:3-9

⇔ **Share any words or phrases or images, that particularly strike you.**

The first word of the parable is translated "Listen!" but it means a bit more than that, 'listen to me and understand!' 'Hear and inwardly digest!' It is a commanding and authoritative start to the parable, which again gives us a clue that what Jesus is about to say has real significance for those who hear it.

⇔ **Some translations of the Bible give this parable the heading 'The Four Grounds' why do you think that might be?**

The sower is not actually central to the story, once the seed is scattered, the sower has no further role. It is the seed itself, the type of ground and the harvest that are the key aspects of this passage. One of the obvious questions that poses for the hearers is "what type of ground are we?"

⇔ **Do you think we are always one type of ground, or do we change between the different types?**

Sometimes this parable is used to divide people up into different types of ground, those who are in the Church are the good soil, those who used to be in the church are the rocky ground etc. But there is nothing to suggest this is fixed, it may be more likely that sometimes we have ears to hear and we are the good soil, and sometimes we don't and we are the rocky ground or the thorny ground. There is something important about the kingdom of God breaking into the world like seed that is sown on the ground. Seed is promising, it has potential, but until something has happened to it, it is pretty much unremarkable.

⇔ **Read the second section of the parable out loud.**

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."' '

Mark 4:10 - 12

⇔ **What do you think Jesus means by this explanation?**

This section seems quite strange! Jesus seems to imply that the parables are deliberately cryptic so that people do not understand them. It is possible that this section develops the theme of secrecy which we have already mentioned; until people have made some move towards the kingdom, they cannot really understand Jesus' own teaching. It does not mean that those outside cannot be instructed in the ways of the kingdom, it means they cannot be instructed whilst unbelief continues. The initial phase of the kingdom is dependent on faith that it has come.

The quote is from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, chapter 6 starting from verse 9. It is common for the Gospel writers to include references to the Old Testament, to show how Jesus had come to fulfil all of the old prophecies.

⇔ **Read the third section of the parable out loud.**

And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.'

Mark 4:13-20

This section is very unusual – Jesus does not normally explain the meaning of the parables. In fact, that is part of the point of teaching in that way; it requires people to work at understanding what Jesus means and respond to it. With this explanation, the parable of the sower is set apart as having special significance; understanding this is also key to understanding any other parable.

The explanation is quite realistic, and again this is typical of Mark's Gospel. He is clear that people struggle and fail no matter how hard they try. He is also clear that there is nothing which can compare to being a part of the kingdom of God. It is only following Christ that will bring unimaginable yields, and so no matter how difficult it is it is worth trying to become the good soil!

Images of abundance

The parable of the sower tells us something about what God is like, the nature of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims, and invites us to make a response to it. Although there are undoubtedly some hard edges to the parable – the birds which gobble up the seed, and the thorns which choke the other plants – there are also distinct images of generosity and extravagance.

We might ask, why does the sower not just plant the seed into the rich ground? In Israel, as Jesus' hearers would have known, there is a sort of weedy grass that covers much of the ground, and it is too much work to discover whether it hides good soil, or rocks. Therefore it was the habit to throw out seed and hope for the best! There is no suggestion in the parable that this is a reckless use of seed; there is no suggestion that the grounds in which the seed will not flourish should be avoided altogether. Seed is deliberately sown on all kinds of ground, which is

ploughed after sowing. The emphasis is not on waste, but on the enormity of the harvest – the Kingdom will be glorious.

This may be an image of God's word which is graciously and generously given to all, regardless of what sort of ground they are, and which is in no danger of running out.

The second image of abundance is that the grain will bear fruit "thirty, sixty and a hundredfold". This would not just be a good harvest, it is possible that five-fold would have been a good year! This is a ludicrous amount – a ridiculous number which would suggest a greater harvest, more abundance than they had ever experienced, or even dreamed of. And of course, the harvest is more remarkable given the adversity described.

Recap on ... The parable of the Sower:

- ★ The parable is not just a story, but an invitation to us to make a response to Jesus.
- ★ The parable tells us a lot about what God is like, not least the generosity of God.
- ★ Every Gospel is different, and they shape the stories they are telling to reveal something about the kingdom.

Follow-up reading...

There are lots of books on Mark's Gospel which discuss it a variety of levels.

Accessible books:

- Paula Gooder, Mark Pryce and James Woodward *Journeying with Mark* (2011) SPCK
- Tom Wright *Mark for Everyone* (2001) SPCK

More thorough commentaries on Mark:

- Morna Hooker *The Gospel According to Mark* (2001) Continuum
- William Lane *The Gospel of Mark* (1995) Eerdmans

Session Eight

Spreading the Word

Aims for this session:

- **To think about the mission of the Church**
- **To reflect on Jesus' instructions to share the 'Word'**
- **To consider what the tasks of mission might be in Britain today**

Opening Prayer

Lord, you sent your Son Jesus so that we might know of your love for us. Help us to believe that you love and accept us and have a purpose for each one of us. Help us to share your love with others, so that more and more people will know that they are precious to you and come to know life in your kingdom. In Jesus name we ask this. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Summer 7**

'Mission' is a buzz word in the Church today, and can mean different things to different people. Sometimes people are a bit anxious about the idea of mission as they think it might involve knocking on doors or standing on street corners telling people about the Jesus. Mission might involve this, but it is a much wider activity.

St Francis of Assisi famously said **"Preach the Gospel at all times. If you must, use words"**

↔ **What do you think St Francis meant?**

Christianity often seems to be focussed on words. Of course, this is partly because St John's gospel talks about Jesus as the Word of God. We may think that mission, preaching, sharing the Good News of Jesus is all about using words. But it isn't.

St Francis was born at the end of the 12th century in Italy. He was famous for his commitment to a life of poverty and his care for animals. He wrote a very well-known prayer, which was (controversially) used by Margaret Thatcher when she was elected Prime Minister in 1979.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not
so much seek to be consoled as to
console;

to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned
and it is in dying that we are born to
eternal life. Amen

Words are very powerful and can have a great impact on ourselves and others. But Christianity is about being a person who knows God, who tries to follow Jesus and live according to the values of his kingdom. As St Francis implied, this might involve speaking, but it is so much more about what we do, and how we are than just what we say.

One of the important things about mission, is that we don't have a mission, God does, and God invites us to join in with it. We do not set the agenda for it, but try and respond to the words of Jesus:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18 –20

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 from which they have broken away.

⇒ **What challenge is laid down here? In what ways do you think the Church is responding to that challenge?**

If we look back at the history of Christianity, we can see that 'mission' has changed the world in all sorts of ways. This is not just a matter of more people, from more varied parts of the earth becoming followers of Christ; the impact of mission can also be seen in terms of the provision of education and healthcare; in the way in which certain 'Christian' values are still influential in shaping laws and rights; and in the origins of many charities and organisations that work for the common good.

For many developing countries, it was Christian missionaries working amongst them who made health care and education widely available. For many countries in Africa and South America, it was Christian missionaries who first established schools and hospitals in certain areas. Even in Ireland, it was the introduction of Church schools which meant the majority of children were able to go to school. This sort of social mission was an important aspect of the work of the Church. Clearly, a lot of good came out of this, but there were problems as well. Missionary

activity was often part of a bigger programme of 'taking over' countries, and some of the agendas of the 18th and 19th century missionaries seem to have been more political and social than religious. However, it remains true that Christianity has been spread by the missionary zeal of men and women over the centuries who have risked everything to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

⇔ **Are you aware of any health or education projects which have been set up as a result of Christian mission? What UK based charities can you think of that have a Christian foundation?**

What we might now refer to as 'social justice' is, and always has been a central part of Christian mission. This focus on working for and alongside the poor, prisoners, the disadvantaged, is clear in the words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. This passage, in which Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61, is almost like a manifesto from Jesus, where he sets out what his ministry is going to be about.

"He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:16-21

The Gospel According to Luke is the only gospel to be written by a Gentile (non-Jew). Luke contains many parables and stories that don't appear in the other Gospels (e.g. the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the account of the walk to Emmaus). A major feature of Luke is Jesus' concern for the disadvantaged, such as women, the poor and other social outcasts. His gospel contains a great deal of teaching on money.

Luke's Old Testament references are more subtly woven into his plot than those in Mark and Matthew – nevertheless, he is keen to stress the continuities of the old and new covenants, proclaiming Jesus as 'Son of David' (1:32–33; 1:69; 2:11), whose arrival would fulfil God's promise to Abraham (1:72–75). Luke sees a continuity between three ages: the age of preparation (the Old Testament), the age of salvation (the time of Jesus) and the age of fulfilment (the era of the early Church). Every great event in Luke's gospel is prefaced by prayer and emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit.

⇔ **What sort of challenge is being presented here? To what extent do you see the Church responding to it?**

Christians have a long tradition of being involved not just in healthcare and education, but also in other types of care for the poor and work with prisoners.

⇔ **How are Christian mission and social justice connected?**

Those who have been involved in this type of social justice because of their Christian beliefs, would probably say that this work matters, because it is a practical way of caring for people as God cares for them. It is an opportunity to show them that they are loved and valued by God. People involved in these types of mission may want to make it clear to people that the reason they are doing it is because they want to share the love of God. In this case, social action goes hand in hand with speaking to people about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Mission means the Church living faithfully as Church

Mission is not something tagged on to the Church as an extra committee or activity, it is part of the core understanding of what it is to be Church. The Church of England report *The Mission-Shaped Church* has been very influential in the last few years in encouraging Churches to think about how they are missionary and what it means to be a missionary Church. As we move further into the twenty-first century, we face new and increasing challenges if we want the Church to function as it did 30, 50 or 100 years ago. Society has changed so much, that the Church no longer has the same role, support or finances. However, the changes in society also mean that we have new opportunities for mission and new ways of showing the love of God to the world.

What particular mission might you be called to? What are the priorities for mission in your parish? Is there an opportunity to share God's love with the people in your community which is not currently being acted on?

⇔ **Can you think of any examples of new ways of being Church?**

You may have mentioned things like Café Church, Messy Church, Godly Play, for example. What these have in common is that they are trying to create opportunities to tell people the Good News of Jesus, and invite them to follow Him, without assuming that they will come to Church on Sunday mornings. This is part of a big cultural change in Britain, which is likely to increase.

⇔ **Do you think people can be part of the Church without coming to worship on a Sunday?**

⇔ **What are the challenges and possibilities with those new forms of Church?**

Recap on ... Spreading the Word:

- ★ Mission is about both speaking the Good News to people, and acting for social justice, to change things for the better and to show the love of God.
- ★ We do not have a mission, God does, and God invites us to be involved in it.
- ★ Every person is called to mission, to share the love of God, in their workplace, communities, homes, etc

Follow up reading ...

- Mission-shaped Church (2004) Church House Publishing. Also available online at: <https://www.chpublishing.co.uk/books/9780715143179/mission-shaped-church>
- Richard Bauckham The Bible and Mission –Christian Witness in a Postmodern World (2003) Paternoster Press
- Stuart Murray Post Christendom – Church and Mission in a Strange New World (2011) Authentic Media
- Stephen Spencer SCM Study Guide to Christian Mission (2007) SCM
- Tim Sudworth, Graham Cray and Chris Russell Mission Shaped Youth (2007) Church House publishing

Session Nine

“We believe in the Church”

Aims for this session

- **To try and understand what the Church is and why it matters to be a part of it**
- **To think about the role of the Church in the life of our country**
- **To reflect on the difference between the Institution of the Church, and the body of Christ.**

Opening Prayer

God you have called us to follow you, and to share the journey with one another. Help us to encourage and strengthen all of those who are part of your Church, and to reach out to all who do not feel part of your body. We pray for all who are leaders in the Church, that with them, we may show your love in every community in this country. Amen.

>> **Watch the video clip Summer 8**

A priest tells the story of a couple who came to visit him to ask if they could be married in his Church. “Do you ever come to Church?” he asked them. “Oh no” they said, “we believe you can worship God in the park”. “Well then” he said, “why don’t you get married in the park?”

In Britain, we generally accept that the Church is part of the life of our country. There are certain times in our own lives and in the life of our nation when we expect it to be an important part of what is going on. These might be weddings, funerals and other significant milestones in life. When Prince William and Kate got married in 2011, most people accepted that the Church should be involved in that, they didn’t call for them to be married in a Registry Office, or indeed the park!

Believing in the Church is about more than just believing, or agreeing, that it should have a role at important occasions. It is not about saying that you can only worship God at Church. Of course, you can worship God in the park, and often places of outstanding natural beauty help us to worship God. But going to Church is about more than weddings and funerals and is even more than having a place to worship God.

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of how the church came into being. In response to the ‘Jesus event’ people formed communities where they prayed and ate together. But those early church communities were much more than that.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Acts 4:32 – 37

The first Christian communities shared all that they had: their faith, food, their possessions, their time, the Good News about Jesus Christ. They shared this within the community, and also with others who were outside of the church, so that they may know that there was a different way to live. This initial response to the Jesus event, tells us a lot about what the Church is, and why we believe in it.

⇔ **What do you think characterises the church today? How do people think of it?**

One of the answers we are often given, if we try and find out what people think of the church is '**boring**'. Many people regard church as completely irrelevant to their lives. There may be a lot of reasons for this, and at least some of them are the fault of the church! We have often been so busy looking inward, that we have become disconnected from what is going on in the rest of the world.

C. S. Lewis famously said "**Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.**" Lewis is right. If the Good News of Christ is real, then it really, really matters. If it isn't, it doesn't matter at all. But it is not boring, and is only irrelevant if it is not true. Yet we live in a country where lots of people think it is vaguely or broadly true, and yet also think it doesn't really matter to them. The church has failed to show them, that Christianity really does matter.

⇔ **Do you think the church still matters? Why?**

This is one of the biggest challenges the Church now faces. How do we change people's view of the church, so that they can see that Christianity is "of infinite importance"? The people who observed the communities of church described in Acts 4 reacted to what they saw - it had an impact on them, and they realised that there was something significant about the choices that group of people had made.

The Nicene Creed was first written in 325 AD and was an attempt by some of the key Christians at the time to offer a succinct outline of what Christians believe. It is still used today in all of the mainstream churches as a statement of the faith we hold in common with Christians around the world, and Christians who have gone before us.

Confessing belief in the Church

In the Nicene Creed, we state: "I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church". Saying that we believe in the Church, does not just imply that we think it exists, but that we believe that Jesus has called us to join with a body of people who tried to follow him. Those people make up the church. Some of them we know because they go to our local church, but the church is made up of far more people than this. It includes people from all over the world, and from all different periods of history, those who now make up the company of heaven. Sometimes this is called the 'Church universal' and refers to the fact that there is one church which has members who are alive today, as well as members who have already taken their place in heaven.

As well as stating that we believe in the Church, we specifically say in the Creed that it is "one holy catholic and apostolic". That it is one, is obvious if we think through the implications of the Church universal. Regardless of what particular denomination we belong to, or how we understand Scripture or tradition, we all belong to the one Church. We might question whether the Church is holy. We sometimes hear of rather unholy behaviour coming from the church, and yet it is called to be holy, we try to be holy – to be set apart for God.

Catholic here doesn't mean the Roman Catholic church, in fact it has nothing to do with that use of the word. It means the actual definition of the word catholic – all-embracing, inclusive. For example, if you like a lot of different types of music, you could be described as having 'catholic tastes in music'.

Apostolic means following the teaching of the apostles. There is a continuity between the Church today, and the one established by Jesus' first followers. Some of these aspects of the Church we can see are true (or not!) and some we are required to believe in. When we confess that we believe in "one holy catholic and apostolic church" we are not necessarily saying that the church is like that in all places and at all times, rather we are saying that we can see that Jesus wants the Church to be like that and we will try and respond accordingly!

⇔ **How does this fit with your understanding of the Church? How much difference is there between what the church is, in your experience, and what you think Jesus might have intended it to be?**

A French Roman Catholic Priest called Alfred Loisy, famously said in 1902 "Jesus came preaching the kingdom, and what arrived was the church!" His observation was probably to do with the way in which the church was involved with the government, and perhaps that it was no longer free to be the Church.

⇔ **What can we do about the difference between the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and the Church as it is today?**

The Church in every age has been a place of division, conflict and exploitation, as well as a place of great faith, charity, love and hope. It is nothing new for us to see in-fighting and battles over truth. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit holds the church in being, keeps it in existence. It is God's church and not ours. Although the conflicts and arguments are damaging, we trust in God, and not in the church itself, to keep in existence the body of Christ, the people of God.

What sort of place would you really like your local church to be? What small steps might you take towards making this happen, or towards showing other people all of the ways in which it shares Gods love for the world?

Recap on ... The Church:

- ★ The Church is what has become of the 'Jesus movement'. It is the response of those who want to follow Christ.
- ★ 'The Church' refers to all of those who are members of the Church, on earth and in heaven
- ★ The Church and the Kingdom are not exactly the same, but they must overlap!

Follow up reading ...

- Frank Burch Brown A Matter of Taste? <http://www.religion-online.org/article/a-matter-of-taste/>
- Jonathan Gledhill Leading a Local Church in the Age of the Spirit (2003) SPCK
- Gerard Kelly Church Actually- God's Brilliant Idea (2012) Monarch Books
- Timothy Radcliffe Why Go to Church? (2008) Continuum

Session Ten

Meal & 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.