

Nottingham North East Circuit Summer Study Series



**Go Deeper into God's word
through the remaining
Discipleship Pathways**

Introduction to this booklet

There is a quote, one that has appeared in many different forms and which has been attributed to many different saints, authors and theologians which suggests that, 'the scriptures are shallow enough for a child to come and drink from without fear of drowning and at the same time deep enough for theologians to swim in without ever reaching the bottom'.

I think there is a great deal of truth in that. Many of us know the stories from our bibles really well...on a surface level. Whether by choice or circumstance i.e. we have never really been given or taken up the opportunity, that is the level at which we are content to leave our understanding.

We are happy to drink from the waters of scripture but perhaps fearful of 'diving in' and searching out its hidden depths. The picture on the front of this booklet is of an iceberg, which as scientists will tell us only show a 1/9th of their true size above water.

Over the next few weeks, we are encouraging you, either on your own, through house groups or even during acts of worship, to explore the depths that scripture has to offer as we engage with the remaining six Discipleship Pathways i.e. **Learn, Pray, Worship, Care, Tell and Live**. To leave behind a superficial surface only exploration and go on a deep dive in search of sunken treasure that is there just waiting to be discovered.

The Circuit Staff Team

Week 1: Learn

Sunday 2nd June: Proverbs 1:1-7 Let the wise listen and add to their learning.

How do you learn best? Looking at the picture above, which one (or more than one) of these learning styles suits you best? We are all different and we all have preferred ways to learn, whether that is for professional reasons as part of our job / vocation or for pleasure...and it can be both at the same time.

So, what about learning about your faith...what style or approach do you find the most helpful? Hopefully all of you will say 'Using the circuit produced booklet!'

Perhaps one way in which you learn is from the tradition, heritage or denomination(s) within which you worship (remembering we have a couple of Local

Ecumenical Partnerships in our circuit). It might be through your own lived out experience of faith. It can even be through the application of reason, logic and scientific knowledge. Ultimately though perhaps how we all learn best about our faith is through the knowledge gained about God within scripture, revealed most clearly in and through Jesus and how that resulted in the formation of Christianity.



When this passage talks about the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”, it relates more to respect and reverence for God than actual fear in its modern definition. If we respect and revere someone, then hopefully we will take note of how he / she /

they (choose your own pronouns) behave, do and speak. And we do so because of the high position or esteem we hold that ‘person’ in. So, it should be with how we ‘fear’ God and in response we open ourselves to learn and gain wisdom from God. After all we would be foolish not to.

So, a question as you set out on this study...who do you have respect and reverence for and why?

Monday 3rd June: 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Learning from the word.

What can you do with a balloon?

Most, if not all, things that you can do with a balloon require something to be put inside it, and often the best thing to put inside a balloon is air. Unless we fill it, a balloon may be colourful and have potential - considering what it could be might bring a smile to our face or might spark our imagination - but it’s still limp and lifeless... Until we breathe into it, until we “inspire” it, it won’t reach its potential and won’t be brought to life.

Paul says Scripture (the books and traditions the people he was speaking to used to help them to live well) is “God-Breathed”. As such, I think that the Bible is a bit like a balloon.

Some people have thought that it means God wrote scripture, and that it was found as it is... That’d be like the balloon being pre-blown and pre-tied, that it was never any other way. Others think it means that it was written by humans, but that God told them what to write, that God breathed (spoke) the words, and they were written by man... That’d be like me breathing into a device that was then used to blow up a balloon.



But I think it might be something else... I think it might mean that God took something that is relatively normal, and then breathed into it to give it life - that the words were written by men, and it's only when God breathes into it that scripture reaches its full potential and comes to life.

We don't learn the words in scripture or just recite memory verses. Instead, we learn about the God who breathes into it and truly brings it to life. It is that breath-filled word that equips us.

NOTES:

Tuesday 4th June: Psalm 25 Learning from God

The 25th Psalm is a beautiful piece of writing. It speaks of trust and love, of learning and being taught, and being led on right paths.

The writer asks to be taught, to be led away from shame – he knows that when there's something to learn, there's only one way to turn, and that's towards God. Verse 4 says '*teach me your paths...*' because the writer knows that the way to learn the correct way of living is through God, it is through following those paths, because God will never lead anyone towards harm. God will only lead towards what's good.

We could think of God's covenant and decrees as being laws to make life difficult. Instead, God's covenant with us is a promise, and his decrees are necessary to help us live well with each other.



As a deacon I try to live by a Rule of Life, which all Methodist deacons commit to. I say try because I'm not very good at it, and also because it is considered guidance, rather than a law. It's not the same as the rules of the road, whereby you must never go over the speed limit, or through a red light. God's laws are only to protect us, to keep us from harm. As verse 8 tells us '*Therefore [God] instructs sinners in the way*'.

God isn't going to rule over us like a dictator, we all have free will and we can ignore God's teaching if we choose, but if we do that, we have to remember that God only wants to teach us the best way to live. God wants us to learn about life, to learn

about things that will make our life better, will make our lives full – will help us flourish.

Wednesday 5th June: Matthew 11:29-30 Learning from Jesus

²⁹ Take the yoke^[1] I give you. Put it on your shoulders and learn from me. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest. ³⁰ This yoke is easy to bear, and this burden is light.

Jesus offers an invitation to all; it is an invitation to a higher authority, because it is his own yoke that he offers and Jesus provides the rest.

The word “yoke” is the Greek word *zugos*, referring to a wooden yoke that linked two animals together, so they could pull cargo that would have been too much for one animal alone.



The scribes and the Pharisees were accused earlier in Matthew of being the ones who made the people carry ‘heavy burdens’ because of their legalistic demands. Although religion was meant to honour God, so much pressure was placed upon the Jews that it resulted in condemning them to hard labour.

Although the yoke was seen as oppressive, it was also used in a positive sense as service of God. The rest that Jesus is offering doesn’t mean a ‘get out clause’ from all the obligations because we can appreciate that he placed many demands upon his followers. Because of whom Jesus is, responding to those demands equates to *rest*, or maybe another way of describing this would be to say *relief*. Jesus doesn’t offer something that is impossible to achieve but inspires freedom.

As Jesus offers us his yoke, he is encouraging us to be in a relationship with him that is built upon both growth and learning. He doesn’t want to weigh people down and, as it is better to have a well-fitting yoke on a pair of oxen, Jesus’ yoke helps to foster devotedness as we grow together in faith.

Thursday 6th June: John 14:26 Learning from the Spirit

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” [NIV]

The concept of advocacy is often about something legal. It can speak of courtroom drama and intrigue... the counsel offering prompts, advice and reminders to keep the arguments of the case in question flowing and moving forward. However, I

wonder if that imagery might be extended a bit and move more into the realm of justice, and in particular, activism and protest.

In light of this, as we are talking about learning from the Spirit, we perhaps need to consider the role of the Holy Spirit in prompting us. I think that there is a dual aspect to it; First, that the Spirit prompts us, guides us, and leads us to act or speak or



stand with others - especially those whose voices are marginalised or simply not listened to.

Second, that God, by the Spirit, sets an example of how to act and enact justice and peace, essentially a holy life as depicted in scripture, and our responsibility is to live our life by that model.

If we are essentially set the ultimate example of how to be a people who 'advocate like the Advocate', then we too are to be a people who teach, and remind others of what we know God calls us to be and do. To love others, to follow in the way, to listen to the Spirit, and to be a reminder of the call to work for justice and peace in the world today.

Where and how might you do that in your life right now?

Friday 7th June: Philippians 4:9 Learning from leaders.

'Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me...'

At some point in our lives, we will all have had, or worked with, leaders. This may be our line manager at work, teachers, sports coaches, leaders at clubs or societies and of course our ministers and leadership teams within our churches.



We can watch political leaders, leaders of big organisations, even leaders of nations on our TV screens. Sad to say however, it is often the words and behaviour of poor leaders which make the headlines, rather than those who are

good leaders.

Reflecting on this problem, these are the things which sprang to mind.

- We need to carefully choose those leaders from whom we wish to learn.
- Sometimes learning from leaders is about not learning from them – if you see what I mean.
- We need to decide what we wish to learn – and try to find a trusted source.

- We need to be open – I learn more from my children now than they learn from me – the roles have been reversed.

In this passage to the Philippians Paul asks the listeners to put into practice anything which they have learned or received or heard from him. At first glance that may seem somewhat arrogant. However, we need to remember that everything Paul did and said was because of his relationship through the risen Jesus. In Jesus we have a leader who welcomed the unwelcome, loved the unloved, challenged injustice and led by example. **He** is the leader from whom to learn.

Before we get too complacent, though there is another side to this coin. Many of us will be in currently, or have been in, positions of leadership. What would we like people to learn from us? Is there anything we hope that people won't learn from us? Now there's food for thought!

Saturday 8th June: 1 Thessalonians 5:11 Learning from each other

In this verse, the apostle Paul urges believers with a simple yet profound directive: "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." This resonates deeply with the theme of learning from each other, emphasizing the mutual exchange of support, encouragement, and wisdom within a community.

At its core, this verse speaks to the fundamental human need for connection and the power of uplifting words and actions. In a world often marked by division and discord, the call to encourage one another serves as a timeless reminder of our shared journey towards spiritual and personal progress.



Learning from each other is not merely about acquiring knowledge or skills; it's about embracing the diversity of experiences and perspectives that others bring.

Just as iron sharpens iron, so too do individuals sharpen each other through meaningful interactions. When we open ourselves to learning from one another, we not only expand our understanding but also cultivate empathy and humility.

The act of encouragement takes centre stage here. It is a deliberate choice to uplift and inspire, recognizing the inherent value in every person. Whether through a kind word, a listening ear, or a helping hand, we have the capacity to make a positive

impact on those around us. In doing so, we create a ripple effect of positivity that extends far beyond ourselves.

In our modern world, where digital communication often replaces face-to-face interaction, the essence of this verse remains as relevant as ever. It challenges us to be intentional about our relationships, to be present for one another, and to actively seek opportunities to learn and grow together.

Week 2: Pray

Sunday 9th June: Luke 11:1 An introduction to the Lord's prayer: "Lord Teach us to Pray".

The Bible records the disciples asking Jesus to teach them about prayer in Luke 11, as here, and also in Matthew 6. In both, Jesus offers them what we now know as 'The Lord's Prayer'.

In Luke's account Jesus is already praying 'in a certain place', but we are not told what that place is. Matthew has Jesus giving some guidance on where to pray as well as what to pray. "Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." In both accounts prayer is seen as a *humble activity*.

Prayer is for the service of others. We are to be persistent in our praying. We are also to remember that God knows what we need before we ask, not a shopping list of requests. Neither do we need to go into great details in our prayers. God knows.



It seems to me that prayer is like a well-spring. Like this image of one of the springs that pour forth from the Malvern Hills, and many other places, day and night, every minute of every hour. We cannot imagine how much water has flowed from here. The water of prayer flows *from God 24/7*.

The gifts God gives in prayer are always there for us to receive. The water from this well is free, one of a number that people bring their water bottles, small and large, to take the water that quenches their thirst and brings life. It is the same with prayer.

All we need do is present ourselves humbly, consistently, and at the service of others, before God and God will pour out the blessings of prayer in and through our lives.

Monday 10th June: “Our Father in Heaven, hallowed by thy name” (Adoration)

In a prayer that could have begun “Our God”, “Our Lord” or “Our King”, instead we are to turn to our heavenly Father.

“Our” speaks of the corporate nature of this prayer, in the nurture of a community. And even when we pray this prayer alone, this address reminds us that we are members of the body of Christ.

And so, as we begin “Our Father”, we pray not on our own or for ourselves, but with and for others.



We are children of God, adopted into God’s family through Jesus Christ. It is both profoundly personal, whilst making clear our mutual accountability. And whilst Our Father is in heaven, he is ever present. Our Creator and Sustainer with whom we have a personal relationship.

And we pray that our Father’s name be hallowed. Some consider this a petition, or a request. Alternatively, this is an adoration that God should be magnified and glorified. The word hallowed means sanctify.

We are asking that God’s name be sanctified, made holy or treated as holy. We hallow the name of God when we believe and trust in Him, when we revere Him, obey Him and glorify Him. We want others to look to God as their Father.

Tuesday 11th June: “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done, on earth as in Heaven” (Invocation)

⁽ⁿ⁾
/,ɪnvəˈkeɪʃən/ - [ɪn·vo·ca·tion]

invocation

The act or form of calling for the assistance or presence of some superior being; earnest and solemn entreaty; esp., prayer offered to a divine being.

I wonder how many Christians live out their faith / beliefs here on earth simply to assure themselves of ‘a place’ in some other non earthly realm when they shuffle off this mortal coil. I wonder if that is the focus of their faith, a reserved place in heaven.

Or I wonder if you see the purpose of your faith, your witness, your service, your discipleship as being to help transform earth so that it bears some resemblance to

heaven. Where we go and what happens to us after death, well that will just be a bonus.

In its original context this part of what we call the Lord's Prayer, would have been about bringing into being God's kingdom instead of Rome's empire. It would have been about submitting to God's will, rather than Caesar's rule.

It would have been about embracing freedom rather than cowering due to force. For those first disciples it would have been all about being channels of God's peace, love, acceptance, and mercy. It would have been about going out and changing the world beginning in Jerusalem, through Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

So, having invoked God i.e. called on God to act, do we expect us to be passive spectators on this process? Do we expect God to simply do it for us? Or do we wish to be part of the process? Perhaps by being open to God working on us, being open to God working in us and most importantly being open to allowing God to work through us, we don't just invoke God to bring about this change, we become part of the change we wish to see in the world. Those first followers of Jesus did it... can we?

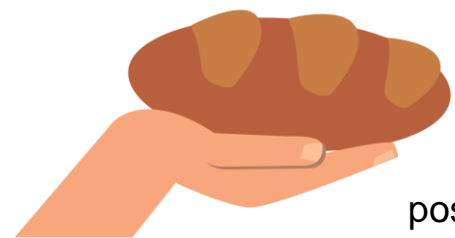
Wednesday 12th June: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Petition)

But if God knows what we need before we ask, why do we need to ask? Especially when it comes to the basics like bread, why should we have to come cap-in-hand and ask for it? Surely in the Kingdom of God none of us should have to ask for bread!?

I honestly believe all of those things: God does know what we need and God's Kingdom should mean we don't need to come cap-in-hand, especially not for the basics.

But I also believe that we are called to walk humbly with our God.

When we come humbly to ask, we return to a position of worship and recognition of the providing and sustaining nature of our Creator God. We are reminded of the generosity and bounty of the past and the promise and potential of the future.



I think that moment also allows us to open our eyes to see what we already have, and also to see the abundances that we might share with those around who are seeking their daily bread also.

I don't believe in the Old Testament God that would withhold blessings, but there is something to be said for the words we find in 1 Chronicles 7:14-15:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven... my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place.

As part of a process, we come humbly, asking to be fed (physically and spiritually).

We don't come with a shopping list, or seeking the extravagant, but claiming the promise that we will be heard by the one who provides.

May we ask for, recognise, receive and share our daily bread.

NOTES:

Thursday 13th June: "Forgive us our ... As we forgive those who ... against us" (Confession)

Every week in worship we say the Lord's Prayer, including this line– '*Forgive us our trespasses...*' When we say that, do we know what we're asking? We're asking God to forgive us for what we've done wrong. Actual God. Only God can forgive us completely – so when we ask it, we need to be sincere – it can't just be something that we say.

Think about the implications of asking God to forgive us. God says we're forgiven and so we are, wiped clean.

Then we say the next line '*...as we forgive those who trespass against us.*'

And my question is this – do we forgive others? I mean properly. Or, do we hang on to the hurt and dredge it back up again later? When God forgives us, we are forgiven. The sin isn't in a notebook to be brought back up at a later date. It won't be thrown back in our faces if we do the same thing again.

And so, we are to give others the same courtesy that God gives to us. But that's difficult, because we don't forgive and forget. We're not God, and we're not perfect, so all we can do is try.



Is confession too easy - is it too easy to simply do something we know is wrong, and then go to God and confess it, knowing we're forgiven? Can we just ignore God when we're doing something we know we shouldn't – maybe gossiping or being negative – because we know we can seek forgiveness later and be given it?

God will always forgive us, Christ going to the cross ensured that for us, but that doesn't mean we should take it for granted. It was no easy thing that Christ did, so when we confess – we need to mean it.

Friday 14th June: “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil”.

When we submit to this section of the Lord's Prayer we are asking for help in times of temptation, offering all aspects of our future into the hands of God.

We often don't like the idea that we might be tempted; we can see it as a weakness, or a lack of control. In its New Testament usage, the word tempt is often translated into test, so if we think about it like this then to tempt someone is not so much to lead them into sin, but to test their strength and loyalty.

If we follow this thinking through, then I would like to suggest that one of the truths about temptation is that it isn't designed to make us fall but to make us stronger. If metal is to be used in a building project it is tested far beyond its capabilities and God tests us too, sometimes far beyond our own abilities.

Moving on to the end of the section, 'but deliver us from evil', there is no doubt that there is evil in the world, evil which is in opposition to the power of God. We all have a weak spot, something we are tempted to do (whether we would describe it as evil is another matter).

We are flawed people, and what might be pleasure to one person could be a menace to us. These are the things that we need to be open to and on the lookout for.



History is full of stories of castles that have been captured because the castle felt that it was so strong the defenders thought that they were beyond capture.

That moment of over confidence can make all the difference to temptation. Whether at our weakest or strongest point, we need to be on the watch. Our strong defence against temptation is the continual presence of Jesus.

Saturday 15th June: “For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, now and forever, amen”.

Finishing Up

“*We think alike, we act alike, we finish each other’s sandwiches*” was said on the animated sitcom The Simpsons. I think that there is something about this humorous sentiment which leans toward us ending and completing things in good order but doing so in harmony as a family and as communities.



The institution of the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11) doesn’t actually include these ending words. They are words that the church has added down the years, though it is generally now a form of words that Protestant churches use.

There is something about endings and rounding off, something that speaks of closure, and of properly concluding things.

But I wonder if it is also about remembering that, alongside the prayers that are offered in the Lord’s Prayer, there is a need for the church to return to praise and adoration in its conversation with God.

I think that this demonstrates that it is seen to be crucial. I suspect that it is something that we could all do with doing more - returning to praise and thanksgiving in every aspect of our lives.

The question is this; when you have spent time in prayer, when you have been out shopping, when you have been sitting at home, or even in church(!), do you regularly remember, and intentionally practice giving God praise and thanksgiving?

Let’s try to finish well in all we are and in all we do.

Week 3: Worship

Sunday 16th June: Hebrews 13:15 Worship Continually

‘... let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise...’

Worship to show reverence adoration for a deity to feel great admiration or devotion for ...

Many of us will spend around an hour or two each Sunday fulfilling that first definition as we meet together, sing, pray, listen to the Bible, listen to a message or sermon and receive a blessing. But for the other six days of the week our worship may be more like the second definition. What are we devoted to or show admiration

for? A sport, a celebrity, our phones, a TV series, our work, our homes etc. Does our reverence and worship for God feature after 12 noon on a Sunday?

This verse from Hebrews tells us that we should continually offer to God a 'sacrifice of praise.' **Continually**, not just for an hour on a Sunday morning or evening, but continually, every day, in everything we do.

Many of us will already worship God each day as we go about our daily lives, in what we do or say. But as we think about worship this week, perhaps we could each be a little bit more intentional.



- Take time to sit and use the reflections for this week, which give us an opportunity to learn more about worship, why and how we should worship, and different sorts of worship.
- Find time in your day to be thankful for three things, say them aloud or write them down somewhere.
- Notice God's creation and praise him.
- Look for where God is at work in the world or your neighbourhood and pray for those situations.
- Worship by doing something, worship in action.

After all, Jesus' worship wasn't confined to the temple on the Sabbath, and John Wesley often worshipped in the open air. Let's make our worship continuous wherever we are!

Monday 17th June: Exodus 20:1-17 Worship as commandment.



Exodus 20:1-7 presents the Ten Commandments, and within this passage, the theme of "worship as commandment" is particularly emphasized in the first two commandments. These commandments lay the foundation for the Israelites' relationship with God, setting the tone for their worship practices and attitudes.

The first commandment places an unambiguous emphasis on monotheism and exclusive

devotion to the one true God. It is a commandment that calls for the Israelites, and by extension all believers, to recognize God's supreme authority and to centre their worship solely on God. In a world of many distractions and temptations, this commandment serves as a reminder to prioritize God above all else in our lives.

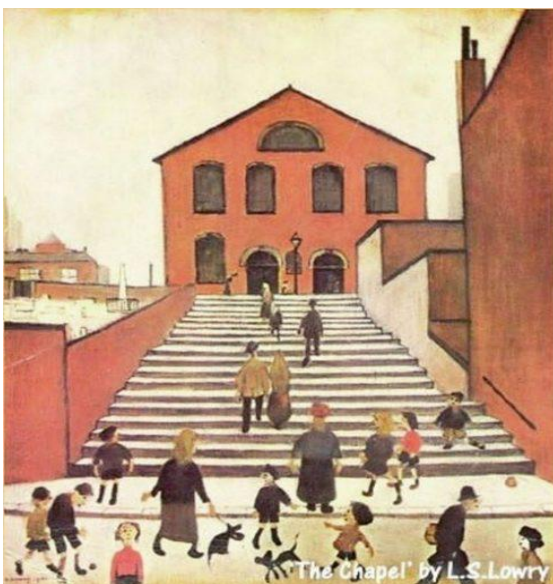
The second commandment, closely linked to the first, directly addresses the physical representation of worship. It warns against creating images or objects to serve as substitutes for God, highlighting the danger of reducing the divine to something tangible and finite. Worship, according to this commandment, is not about constructing idols of our own making but about engaging in a spiritual relationship with the unseen Creator.

Together, these commandments on worship establish a framework for the Israelites' reverence towards God. They underscore the importance of sincere, heartfelt worship that acknowledges God's uniqueness and avoids any form of idolatry. This theme resonates beyond the ancient Israelites, speaking to believers of all generations about the essence of true worship.

In a world where worship can become distorted by materialism or self-gratification, these commandments serve as a compass. They guide us towards a worship that is pure, centred on God alone, and free from distractions that might lead us astray.

To worship as commanded is to honour the sacred relationship between humanity and the divine, embracing humility, reverence, and faithfulness.

Tuesday 18th June: Isaiah 29:13 “Rules” of worship



I am keen on the paintings of L S Lowry. I like them because they depict the ordinary. The places and people are recognisable because they are like us.

This painting called ‘The Chapel’ shows folk engaged in the stuff of life. Adults walking dogs, children playing, people going somewhere and about to leave the canvas on their journey. Others are climbing the steps up to the chapel. Presumably to attend worship.

Try and imagine what the people are thinking, or where they are going, and why. Imagining this is easier than we might think, if we think of the stuff of our own lives.

In Isaiah 29 the people seem unable to comprehend God’s strange plan. In the early part of the chapter God seems to both attack and defend Jerusalem. Is this Isaiah offering the people an oracle of judgement, or salvation? Or both? Often, we cannot

understand what God is doing in the world. In our lives. God's ways are incomprehensible to human beings.

Isaiah points to the people's deafness and blindness. The hardening of their willingness to see and hear what is obvious around them. Into this mix Isaiah tells them that their worship is superficial. They are only going through the motions. Can we imagine the people in the painting bringing the stuff of life before God in worship. They, and we, face the perennial challenge of connecting worship to life.

Despite their lack of vision, God promises to perform further miracles. The Hebrew word for 'amazing, wonderful, marvellous' is repeated over and over. The message seems to be that God has done great things in the past and will do so again. Such wonders will demonstrate real wisdom; they may also provide the cure for empty worship.

Wednesday 19th June: Psalm 95:1-7a Praise



Psalms allow an outpouring of our emotion, are a vehicle for our hearts, they speak to the realities of human experience fostering a deeper connection with God, self, others, and our world.

There are psalms of lament and complaint, of thanksgiving and praise, royal psalms and psalms of wisdom and psalms that speak of our confidence and trust in God.

This psalm begins with an invitation and then an exhortation to worship. An invocation to praise God, not as individuals but as a community. We are called to sing for joy, shout joyfully, and to draw near. And we get a real sense of jubilation, a mix of human voice and musical instrument, an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation.

And then we're given the reason to inspire such praise. For God is Creator of all, from the depths of the earth to the peaks of the mountains. All is within His reach; His sovereignty knows no limits.

We are invited again to worship God; the Hebrew word for worship meaning to bow down. For this time, we are invited to show our humility and submission, by kneeling and bowing down in the presence of God. We are called to show reverence, not in voice or music but by our body language and actions.

And again, a reason why, because God is our Maker and he cares, and guides and protects us as a shepherd does their flock.

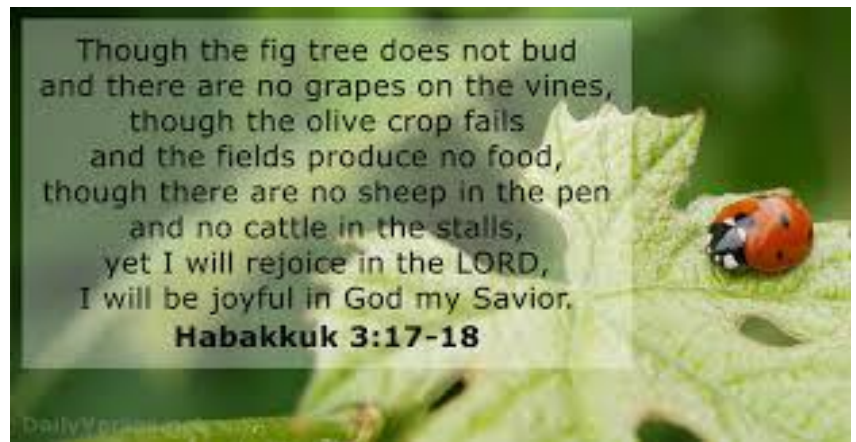
Here is an invitation to refocus on what is important in our lives. It's too easy to lose sight of all that God has provided us with. Let us kneel before God. Allowing the distractions in our lives to fade away. For it is there we will be transformed. And from there we are better equipped to cope with all that life may bring.

Thursday 20th June: Habakkuk 3:17-18 Even in disappointment/Lament

Sometimes the Old Testament prophets can come across as a bit intimidating, seeming like spiritual superheroes as they speak Gods truth into all sorts of difficult and dangerous situations.

Habakkuk is having a hard time, he is wondering where God is in all of this, all he can see is moral decay all around him.

God responds by telling Habakkuk He is keeping an account of the wickedness that is going on and will be sending the Babylonians to conquer the nation of Israel, not what Habakkuk was expecting at all!



Habakkuk is really confused; how can God punish evil with more evil? Doesn't that go against His very nature? However, despite all the evil around them God has instructed the people as to how He wants them to live – "The righteous will live by faith".

God's people must accept His methods and His timing even when we don't understand. Habakkuk needed to understand that even the despised nation of Babylon had a purpose in God's plan (weather they knew it or not!)

Living by faith means that even if every shred of evidence points in the opposite direction, God is in the right and His word is reliable.

There may be times when we are disappointed or doubt God's purpose in the difficulties we face, most probably because we cannot see our situation from God's perspective. But keep on keeping on, because as we get to know Him better, even when the going gets tough, we too can declare with the prophet "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

Reflection - Finish the following sentence in a way that is meaningful to you in terms of your Christian walk

“Even though..... yet I will

”

Friday 21st June: John 4:21-24 True worshippers in Spirit and Truth

These verses are of course found within the context of the encounter at Jacob’s Well, between Jesus and that other ‘Good Samaritan’ the women at the well. Why good I hear you ask? Well, remember that she is one of the very first evangelists, going as she does to bring others to Jesus.

For both Jews and Samaritans, the location for offering worship to God was important. For the Jews it was within the temple in Jerusalem and according to the Samaritan women, her ancestors worshipped on ‘this mountain’ (Mount Gerezim).

But Jesus’ reply seems to indicate it is not ‘where’ we worship God that is crucial but ‘how’ we worship God.



Although salvation will come from the Jews and will be through the most faithful of the Jews (Jesus), it will not solely be for them. The time is coming when to coin a popular daytime TV show, ‘Location, Location, Location’ will not be important because

SPIRIT & TRUTH access to God and God’s kingdom will not be restricted to animal sacrifices in the temple / mountainside but through a different type of sacrifice made on a cross. One made for all.

Perhaps loving God in Spirit echoes what Jesus declared to be the greatest commandment...And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ (Mark 12: 30) which is itself an expansion of what both Jews and Samaritans would have understood from Moses speaking in Deuteronomy 6:4.

And of course, as for ‘the truth’ well Jesus himself declared that he was not just the way and the life but also ‘the truth’. For Samaritans, Jews and Gentiles, true worship of God will not be geographically or ethnically restricted, but will be open to everyone, everywhere.

Saturday 22nd June: 1 Corinthians 10:23-33 ALL things to bring Glory to God

Pulling verses and passages out of context to shoehorn into a booklet like this and to apportion themes isn’t always helpful... But that’s what I’ve done here, and part of me is regretting it now that I’m writing this reflection!

In principle “All things (can? should?) bring glory to God”, and I wholeheartedly endorse the exhortation to “do everything for the glory of God.” But this passage isn’t just about that.

This passage is about how we make choices and how those choices aren’t always black and white. It’s about how in the light of the freedoms offered to the people of God by the understanding of life offered through Jesus there are even more shades of grey that people won’t agree with. It’s about being sensible and sensitive in the choices we make and what dictates those choices.



The bottom line is that with the choices we make in all things (even beyond the contexts surrounding this passage) we are to use worship as the discerning factor, heart and guide. Where there will be others who will disagree with our choices based on tradition, religion, culture or preference, we are called to be directed by a heart of worship. Where there is a human tendency within each of us to work for our own gain, the cry of this passage is to be guided by worship towards the service of others.

The complexity of that is that our worship has to involve striving for unity, not doing things that would distract others from being able to worship and experience life in all its fullness, whilst also pursuing integrity and holiness.

May we be people who are led by a desire to worship in all the words and actions that result from the choices we make, to the glory of God.

NOTES:

Week 4: Care

Sunday 23rd June: An Introduction: Genesis 1:26/Psalm 8:4 Made in the image of God.

Why do we help others, why do we pray for other people who live on the other side of the world, who we’ll never see? Why do we donate to those countries affected by natural disaster or war, to food banks, to charities? Because we care.

And why do we care? Because God has made us in God's own image. And God cares. We – you and I – are made in the image of God. We say that, but do we really take it in? Psalm 8 verse 4 says '*what are human beings [...] mortals that you care for them?*' And that's an excellent question.

Why does God even care about us tiny insignificant things crawling around down here on earth?



God cares because he loves us. God is love, and that's all he can do. He can't do other than love us. And because we are made in God's image, we are designed to care too. How often have we seen news items of something tragic, and we've felt pity, sympathy, compassion?

We hear a food bank needs donations, so we buy some extra tins. A natural disaster or a war breaks out somewhere and there are appeals on TV and we donate. We volunteer at charities and donate items we don't use anymore so that others can be helped. We care because it is within us, we are made like that, because we are made in God's image.

In this week's reflections we'll be thinking about care, about what it means to us, and what it means to other people. How we care for others, and how we respond when others care for us. And how we respond to understanding that we care because we are made in the image of God.

Monday 24th June: John 13:35 By this shall people know...

Before he went on a journey that nobody could walk with him, Jesus gave the disciples the commandment that they must love one another as he had loved them.

What does this mean for us and our relationship with others and how did Jesus love his disciples?



Jesus loved his disciples selflessly even in the midst of the noblest of love there is still an element of self, when we think of what we might get out of it. But Jesus never thought of himself, his desire was to give all he had for those he loved.

Jesus loved his disciples sacrificially there was no limit to what his love would give or where it would go, there was no demand that was too much. If love meant a journey to the cross Jesus was prepared to go there. The reality is that life may also bring pain and demand a cross.

Jesus loved his disciples and knew them through and through they say that you never really know someone until you have lived with them. When we meet someone occasionally, we are seeing them at their best. Jesus had lived with his disciples and knew everything about them but still loved them. The heart of Jesus is big enough to love us as we are.

Jesus loved his disciples forgivingly the disciples never really understood him, but Jesus didn't hold it against them. There was no failure that he wouldn't forgive. We love Peter because he is like the rest of us, he messed up and yet Jesus showed him forgiveness.

When love overflows it is all about the other person, this is the badge that the Christian community wears before the watching world.

Tuesday 25th June: Mark 12:31 Love Yourself

“The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. There is no commandment greater than these.” [NIV]

I think that the tenet that Mark records Jesus as having said here is the simplest and the most challenging of all. It is about how we see the world, because it is rooted in how we see ourselves in the world, and then how we see others around us.

It is about looking at everything with eyes of love.

What does that look like for you?

What do you say to yourself when you look in the mirror?

What do you think about yourself when you make a mistake/have success?

How often do you speak words of encouragement and praise?



The reality proposed in Jesus' words is that if we aren't able to be kind to ourselves, speaking gently about ourselves, describing ourselves with grace, owning the goodness within us, then we are hardly likely to be authentically and fully loving of our neighbours... and 'who is my neighbour?' The whole of humanity is my neighbour. The whole of humanity is to be loved, as we are.

How then do you love the human family?

It's 'simple' - and here is the big challenge; Put on eyes of love today - view yourself as the precious and wonderfully created child of God you are - and love the people around you, every person of the world with those same eyes.

Wednesday 26th June: Mark 12:31 Love your neighbour.

'... Love your neighbour as yourself...'



I wasn't sure how to react on being given this reflection. A familiar verse, a commandment, the essence of our faith. I have heard many sermons based on this verse and often we are reminded that our neighbours aren't just the people living in the accommodation on either side of us.

In today's world of technology, the whole world is brought into our homes. However, the thing which sprang to mind for me was the picture of the neighbours on our street.

Growing up we knew the people living two doors below, three doors above, the couple whose garden ran alongside of ours and the family whose garden backed on to ours. Whether they appreciated it in the summer with noise and balls heading over the fence I am not so sure.

Early on in lockdown, one lady on our street decided to set up a WhatsApp group, a way of communicating, sharing and caring. Sad to say I still can't put all the right names into all the right houses, but nevertheless the group still exists and through it we exchange news, ask for help or recommendations for trades people.

But do I think about my local neighbours as much as say some of the celebrities who make it into the news. So the challenge for me from this passage is to think of how I can show God's love to those people who live on my street.

It needn't be anything grand, maybe saying hello to the neighbour who is in the garden as I pull up on the drive rather than hurrying inside. Perhaps finally getting round to asking the couple next door to join us for coffee to welcome them to our street. They have lived here over 5 years!!! What sort of a neighbour does that make me?

Thursday 27th June: Philippians 2:1-4 Loving in the church family.

The apostle Paul urges believers to embody humility, unity, and selflessness within their community. This passage serves as a poignant reminder of the qualities that should characterize relationships among members of the church family. Paul emphasises the encouragement and comfort that come from belonging to Christ. He calls for unity of mind, love, and spirit, highlighting the connection believers share through faith.

This unity is not a superficial agreement of ideas, but a deep, heartfelt bond rooted in Christ's love.

The passage then pivots to humility, urging believers to emulate Christ's example. Paul points to Christ's self-emptying love, where the Son of God humbled Himself to the point of death on the cross. This sacrificial love becomes the model for how members of the church family should relate to one another. It is a call to set aside selfish ambition and self-importance, instead valuing and appreciating others.



Further, Paul encourages a spirit of selflessness and concern for others' interests. He challenges believers to not only look to their own needs but also to the needs of those around them. This selfless love within the church family creates a nurturing environment

where each member feels valued and cared for.

In essence, this passage calls the church family to a higher standard of love. It invites believers to cultivate relationships marked by humility, unity, and genuine care for one another's well-being. Loving in the church family means bearing one another's burdens, rejoicing in each other's successes, and walking together in Christ's footsteps of sacrificial love.

As we reflect on this passage, we are reminded that the church is not just a collection of individuals, but a family knit together by the love of Christ. When we love in this way, we reflect God's love to the world.

Friday 28th June: Matthew 25:35-36 Loving those in need.

One of the more recent sayings I hear is that someone is "living their best life". Often found on a photo of someone on social media alongside the caption "Living my best life!" The photos are usually of someone travelling, or enjoying themselves at an event, or even simply drinking a cup of coffee.

This phrase is commonly used to describe someone who is living in a way that aligns with their personal values, goals, and desires. It implies that the person is making choices and taking actions that bring them joy, satisfaction, and a sense of purpose.



To my mind 'living my best life' is ultimately a selfish way of living. For it focuses on 'me' and not on 'you' or, better still, 'us'. Jesus asks us the question; can we live our 'best lives' in helping others and in doing so maybe even help ourselves? In Matthew 25 Jesus seems to be making how to live faithfully very straightforward. If we want to 'live our best lives', and have a place in the heavenly realm, to be among the sheep not the goats, then we are to love those in need.

The image above comes from a Bread Church we began in Stafford back in 2012. We simply opened the doors, and kitchen, of one of the churches and invited folk to come, learn to make bread together and share a simple meal of soup and bread together. We heard the stories of the Bible, shared what we thought they meant for our lives today, and we prayed together. Many who attended every week were lost, lonely, rootless, homeless. We helped each other along the way, and in doing so we found that we could help each other 'live our best lives'.

Saturday 29th June: Hebrews 10:24 Encouraging each other to care.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds".

Christianity is not a faith which God intended to be lived out alone. Both encouraging others and being encouraged by others are central to our lives as believers.



The book of Hebrews is intended to encourage Christians not to give up on their faith. When believers are persecuted, fearful, and under pressure here we are encouraged to "hold fast" to the truth. This verse is part of a passage about being

called to persevere in our faith.

If we read around this verse, we read "let us" three times. Let us draw near with a true heart and faithful assurance, let us hold fast the profession of our hope, and let us consider one another so we can provoke each other to love and good works. Here we have faith, hope and love, reminding us of 1 Corinthians 13.

We need to take our own personal faith seriously but at the same time it is through the influence of others that we can mature and grow.

In those difficult times look to others for encouragement and seek to do the same. Not just encouraging others to stay firm in their faith but also to act in love and in good deeds.

For reflection:

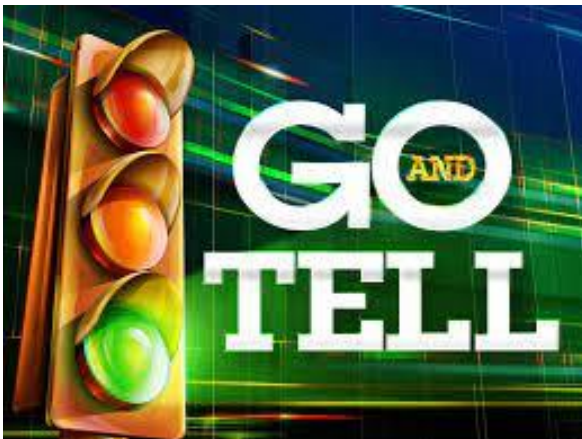
- How often do you meet with others, in worship, fellowship, small groups?
- How could you encourage someone and what encourages you?

Week 5: Tell

Sunday 30th June: An Introduction: Matthew 28:19-20 Go and Tell.

It seems that three word slogans are all the rage these days. 'Get Brexit Done', 'Hands, Face, Space', 'Stop the Boats', and of course the biggest lie the world has ever told DFS' infamous 'Sale Ending Tomorrow'.

They might seem new, but they have been around forever. Jesus himself was fond of a good three word slogan; 'Love One Another' 'All Are Welcome'. 'Seek, Serve, Save' and not forgetting today's three word example... 'Go and Tell'. And as some of the last words Jesus says to his disciples you would think we might remember it.



- Go and tell what...all about Jesus.
- Go and tell who...everyone we meet.
- Go and tell why...it's good news!
- Go and tell where...everywhere we go.

Because we don't keep 'good news' to ourselves do we? Wouldn't you want to tell everyone about the birth of your first grandchild, a promotion at work, a fabulous holiday or a life changing encounter?

So, what are you waiting for? If it's good news that we think we have to share then why hesitate, why worry, why be anxious? What is it that keeps us from going and telling?

Do we lack the words? Do we not have the confidence? Do we not think we will do it right? Do we not think we are qualified' enough? Do we not think it's our job?

The theme of the recently concluded District synod was all about making disciples. Making them NOW. And as disciples that is our role, to go and tell and to help make other disciples. Because if we don't, and let's be honest here given our current

demographic, in 10 years' time out of the 15 churches we currently have in the circuit, I think only 4 will still be open.

Monday 1st July: Ephesians 4:11 A job for just some?



“Telling” is about more than evangelism. In this verse Paul does state that there is a spiritual gift of evangelism - of sharing or preaching the good news - and that seems to give some of us a partial excuse to be hesitant in claiming this pathway as a part of our discipleship journey... But I don't think it's as simple as that.

“Telling” isn't just about talking about the Kingdom of God from a starting point of the Bible or standing on a street corner shouting about Jesus.

Instead, I think it is about claiming the spiritual gifts that we have identified in ourselves (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-10,28; Ephesians 4:11) and sharing where our hope and power comes from to be who we are. I think it is about recognising the fruit of the spirit in our lives (Galatians 5:22-23) and helping others to see where that has come from and how it has impacted our lives.

Telling Jesus' story and preaching the Good News might be a job just for some, but telling others our own story and celebrating where Jesus has shaped that is a responsibility and privilege for all of us.

I wonder what it looks like for us to re-familiarise ourselves with our stories and to share them with our friends and with others?

But more than that, what does it look like for us to tell our shared story? Our faith is about more than just our personal journey and personal faith. Christianity is built around the premise of a collective faith, a shared journey and responsibility for one another and the world around us. Where has our journey together been shaped by God's faithfulness toward us?

What does it look like for us to tell our stories individually and together?

NOTES:

Tuesday 2nd July: Romans 1:16 Not ashamed

Ozzie, looking mischievous: 'Why do you go to church anyway?'

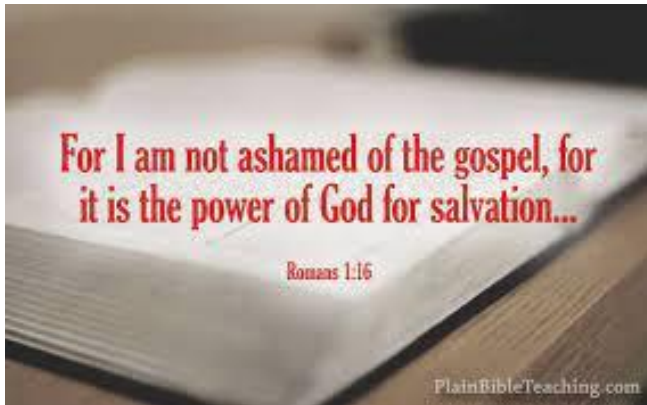
Luna squirming a little bit: 'Well, it's 'cos I meet lots of other people, and we enjoy being together.'

Ozzie: 'But you could just go to the gym or a café...'

Luna, embarrassed at being questioned: 'Yeah, but church is good.'

Ozzie: 'Why? What makes it good?'

Luna: 'Well... it's interesting... and we say prayers and things...'



Ozzie laughs: 'Ha-ha, you're one of those God botherers!! Ha ha ha!'

Luna: 'No I'm not... My parents made me go...'

Ozzie: 'God botherer! Ha ha ha, do you confess your sins and sing holy songs? Are you allowed to swear?'

Luna: 'I'm not a God botherer..'

Ollie snores gently in the corner.

Luna is quiet for a moment, then says – 'Actually, Ozzie, I'm not going to make excuses or be ashamed. I do go to church, and I love it. I'm not ashamed of my faith. I meet with fellow Christians, and we share in food together and worship God. We sing together and pray together, and we learn from one another, we care about the community, each other and about justice for all.

We believe in equality, diversity and we're inclusive and all are welcome. But, more important than all of that – I am a Christian and I go to church because Jesus died for me! Jesus died so that I would be saved for eternal life. I have strength and confidence through Jesus Christ, and I know that I am loved and valued. So there.'

Ozzie, pausing for a moment. 'Oh right, well why didn't you just say that then? When do you go? Where do you go? What time does it start...?'

Ollie, waking up from his snooze – 'Did someone say something about food???''

Wednesday 3rd July: 1 Peter 3:15 Prepared to explain your hope.

¹⁵ Honour Christ and let him be the Lord of your life. Always be ready to give an answer when someone asks you about your hope.

If you are asked to provide a defence, or give an answer, this carries the idea of a lawyer defending a case in court. When Peter talks about always being ready with an answer, he isn't saying that this is the job of the 'professional Christian' but for everyone.

I love this verse. It reminds me that we all, without exception, should be ready to speak to others about our faith. And that doesn't mean going out on the streets and shouting about it, it's just about being able to talk to the person next to you about why you have hope in Jesus.

And we all have a story to tell. I often find that people don't believe that their story matters and I like to encourage them to see that, in just a few minutes, they can share how they've come to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Whether that narrative has a clear point at which someone comes to faith or it was a gradual process, every story matters without exception.



Even if someone was first taken to church by their parents, they can still share their story about the changes that have taken place over the years because of their faith.

What will encourage people of no faith or who are open to learning more is when they see that Jesus is real in someone's life who they respect and that they tell their story in a way that they can relate to and make sense of.

After all, if we don't tell others about Jesus, who will?

Thursday 4th July: Matthew 10:7 As you go...

"As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'." [NIV]

What a massive privilege it is to be the ones tasked with this - to proclaim the Good News that God is present in our midst. What a blessing to share the message that is given to the people of God in every time and every place.

However, I suspect that it is not simply about finding the nearest megaphone and climbing onto the roof of the nearest church/public building (that's likely trespass!) to shout about it. Rather, I propose that, as the verse states, it is a conversation "as [we] go..."



'As we go' begins to include more than events and occasions, it begins to point to a very ordinary and regular pattern of describing how God's kingdom is nearby in our actions and activity, our love and solidarity, our prayers and peacefulness, essentially in all we express and enact in our day to day life.

For the message of the kingdom of God is one which proclaims, not simply by words, all the central and particular emphases of our faith... lives that follow the teachings of Jesus, that respond to the word of God, that echo the working of the Holy Spirit, that recognise and celebrate the presence of the creator of all in the mundane and the extraordinary events and experiences of our existence. 'As we go' may we express the privilege and keep as a priority the task we have before us.

This is the Good News - God is with us, Jesus is for us, the Spirit is in us, and not only is eternity assured but it begins here and now.

Friday 5th July: Romans 10:17 Growing Faith

'Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.'

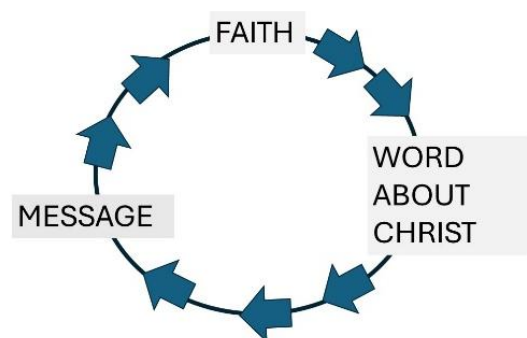
In recent years I have tried my hand at growing vegetables, not always very well it has to be said!! Each plant begins with a single seed, planted and nurtured until I can harvest, sometimes many months later.

One of my more successful crops has been chillies. I have raised plants which have given much fruit so that I have had chillies in the freezer all year round.

I have also been able to save seeds and plant them the following year and so the cycle continues.

I have been able to give away plants, sharing the fruits of my labours.

As I read this verse, I thought that growing our faith has similarities with the cycle of growing my chillies.



- The message is heard through the word about Christ.
- We hear the message, and our faith grows.
- We share the word about Christ and the message is heard.

It's a circle and it doesn't really matter where you enter the circle. At different times in our life, we will be at different points in the circle. Sometimes hearing the message, sometimes growing our own faith or the faith of others, sometimes sharing our faith, like I am able to grow and share my chillies and chilli plants.

The verse says that the message is heard through **the word** about Christ, a bit like my one seed for one plant. If you had one word, one seed to tell people about Christ I just wonder what it might be?

Love?

Teacher?

Friend?

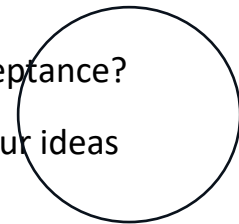
Acceptance?

Good news?

Justice?

Forgiveness?

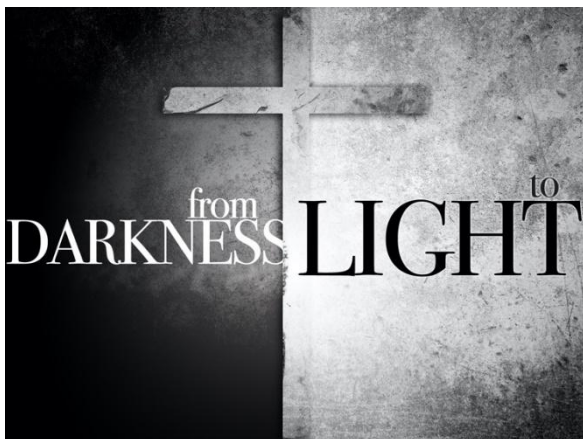
Your ideas



And if people were to look at **you**, what would be the one word, the one seed which would tell them about Christ?

Saturday 6th July: 1 Peter 2:9 Declaring praises of the Journey (Dark to light)

In 1 Peter 2:9, believers are called a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession."



The passage speaks to the identity of believers, emphasizing their closeness' and royal priesthood. It reminds us that through Christ, we have been called out of darkness into His marvellous light. This journey from darkness to light is not merely a physical or metaphorical shift; it is a profound spiritual transformation that shapes our identity and purpose.

As we reflect on this theme, we are invited to declare praises for the journey God has led us on. It is a journey marked by the mercy and grace of God, where we have been rescued from the shadows of sin and brought into the radiant light of Their love. This transition is not always easy; it often involves struggles, challenges, and moments of doubt. Yet, through it all, God's hand guides us, leading us closer to Them.

The imagery of moving from darkness to light is a powerful metaphor for the Christian life. It represents the process of spiritual awakening, growth, and renewal. In the darkness of our failures and shortcomings, we find ourselves lost and broken.

But through Christ, we are given hope and direction. We are called to shine His light in the world, to declare His praises not only through our words but also through our transformed lives.

This verse encourages us to reflect on the incredible journey we are on as followers of Christ. It is a journey of redemption, restoration, and purpose. As we declare praises for this journey, we acknowledge God's faithfulness in leading us from darkness to light, and we embrace our identity as Their chosen people, called to be a light to the world.

Week 6: Live

Sunday 7th July: An Introduction: Matthew 5:14-16 Light attracts and brings glory to God.

"I see dead people in my knees!" I found myself enjoying some TV recently. I was watching a series with Alan Carr & Amanda Holden doing up an old house in Italy.

The key was that the derelict house was in a town increasingly desperate to attract new people to the shrinking community. In one scene they are seen walking to Cinque Terre (see picture) a colourful set of five villages built into the cliffs along the coast.



As they walk, they are prompted by the sight of a crematorium, literally clinging high up on the cliff, into a conversation about ageing. The knees comment reflects one of the effects on the skin of the ageing process. The villages are old. Their founding goes back to 11th Century.

Originally, the fisherman and their families painted their houses using vivid colours so that they could identify them when out at sea. So that they could more easily find their way home. Finding our home in God, and others finding their way home too, is the purpose of this narrative from Jesus in Matthew 5.

Light is one of the constant themes through the Bible. The Old Testament speaks of Jerusalem as a light for the whole world. Glory would shine out to beckon the nations and they would come in peace to worship the God of Israel. Jesus echoes this hope when he spoke of 'a city built on a hill'. Jerusalem sits on a high ridge. The Jews 'went up' to it year by year on pilgrimage.

The lives of those who follow Jesus are meant to be a visual aid for the world, to gather people together to worship and glorify God. Jesus puts this

responsibility to his followers. He wants them to be radiant with God's goodness.

Monday 8th July: Luke 9:1-6 When people aren't attracted.

Here is a familiar story of Jesus sending out his 12 apostles. These apostles were ordinary people. But they have spent time with Jesus, listening to his teachings, witnessing his miracles, and with Jesus' power and authority they were transformed to go out in his strength, for his purpose. And they were told to take nothing for the journey, for now they would have to rely on his providence, as he inspired others to show them generosity.

We, as disciples, are called to go out into our communities and proclaim the same good news. We are sent with the same power and authority. Jesus empowers those he calls before he sends them out. Our mission is to make disciples. And we try to connect and engage with people, to meet them where they are, to show God's love and care.

And in this Bible story, Jesus advised the disciples on what to do if they were not welcomed.

We are called to proclaim the good news of the kingdom.



- Yet we fear being ignored, mocked, ridiculed or rejected.
- We worry that our mission may be ineffective.
- We might think it's someone else's responsibility.
- We'll probably think someone else could do the task better.

Maybe this is a reminder that we can't impose God on other people, rather we are called to invite. And then to entrust it with God. Knowing we can only do this in His strength, not our own.

Yet just like the dust clung to the feet of those apostles, so can the hurt that can be caused by being rejected. Just as the apostles were instructed to shake off that dust, maybe we need to learn to let go of those feelings, by praying, by encouraging one another and in the hope and promise of our risen Lord.

Tuesday 9th July: Galatians 5:22-23 Fruit of the Spirit

I remember my first Alpha Course and coming across the fruits of the Spirit for the first time, after some teaching on the Holy Spirit I was asked "do you notice any of these things in you?"

There was a tick box panel in the Alpha booklet and I think I ticked them all, yes, I was noticing these things developing in me, these fruits growing in me, I was beginning to understand that Jesus is the vine I'm attached to.



Of course, as a very young Christian the kind Alpha Course leader explained to me that when we become Christians God's Holy Spirit comes to live in us and we start to change, He transforms us from within. He changes our character so that we will find a new love for God, a desire to read the Bible and a sense of forgiveness. We begin to develop a new concern for others, enjoyment of worshipping God and a desire to meet with other Christians.

He explained to me that fruits of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23 are evidence in our lives of the family likeness, God family, and we should look for this evidence in ourselves and in others.

Over the years this has been a passage that I have come back to again and again as a challenge to me, I am a work in progress, as are we all. So, I ask myself again today how am I displaying the family likeness, and do I see the family likeness in you? If I am falling short, I always ask God for more love in my heart as this is the starting point for all the fruits of the Spirit to begin growing in us.

Wednesday 10th July: Ephesians 5:1-2 Imitators of God

Think of the best imitators / impressionists you know, perhaps Mike Yarwood, John Culshaw or Alistair McGowan. These are people who can get a voice just right with all its nuances and inflections, people who get all the mannerisms off to a tea, people who just seem to 'become' the person they are imitating. But they can only do so by knowing the person they are imitating intimately.

Writing to the fledgling church in Ephesus, Paul seems to set the bar incredibly high when he exhorts people to be imitators of God. But before the panic sets in Paul is asking that such an imitation takes place within and as a result of our relationship with God; as dearly loved children we are invited to imitate our heavenly Father.



For many children, imitating their parents is a natural part of growing up. They will imitate the things they do, the things they say, the way they behave, even how they dress.

By asking us to be imitators of God I think Paul is asking us to imitate God's character and if we believe God character to be love, then we are being asked to live out a life of love. A love which to quote Paul's own exposition on the subject is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, does not dishonour others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil, rejoices with the truth, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, and never fails.

If we can imitate just some of those qualities in our lives, then whilst we might not be the 'Spitting Image' of God, we will hopefully leave a 'good impression' on the world.

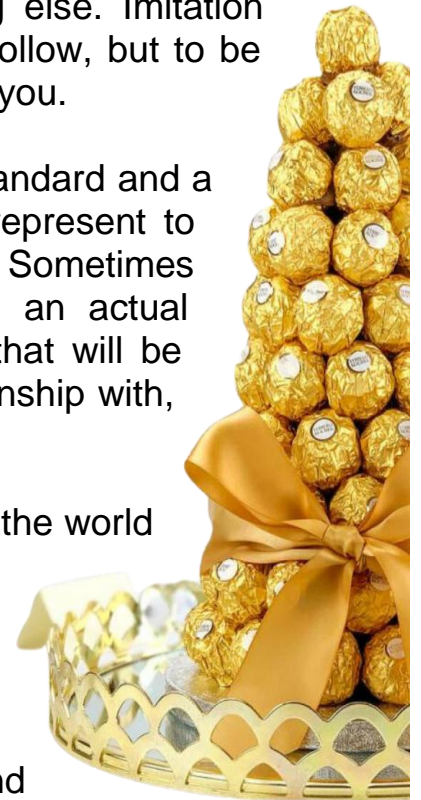
Thursday 11th July: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 Ambassadors of God

If "imitation" is copying, "ambassadorship" is something else. Imitation depends upon having a model to copy and example to follow, but to be an ambassador is to act on behalf of someone who trusts you.

To be an ambassador means that you know there is a standard and a reputation, but that you are entrusted by the one you represent to stand in their stead and make decisions on their behalf. Sometimes that might mean pushing the party line and following an actual example that has been lived out before, but at others that will be about making an informed decision based on your relationship with, and knowledge of, the one you represent.

As ambassadors of Christ, we are to be ones who look at the world around us and speak into it on his behalf. Our lives are to be examples that don't just copy the actions of Jesus, but apply the heart, spirit and discernment that was behind everything he did to living life in the here and now. We often face a different world and different challenges to those Jesus faced, but when we apply our knowledge and relationship with God through Jesus, we will find ourselves able to discern the right ways to live.

By living as ambassadors of God, entrusted to live in accordance with God's heart based on our understanding and circumstance, we will find that those we meet will be drawn to being part of the Kingdom we represent. As ambassadors we will, like the ambassador in the classic advert, be responsible for "spoiling" the world (in a good way!) with lavish blessings on behalf of the one we represent, reflecting any glory back to God.



May we discern God's heart well as we seek to bring God's blessings in our world today.

NOTES:

Friday 12th July: 1 Corinthians 11:1 Replicating the Apostles

Replicating the apostles – living how they lived – how hard can it be? I mean it should be easier to live like Peter and Paul right – because they had to spread the word about Jesus - but now we have computers, social media and 24 hour news.

Don't we just need a modern YouTube influencer to tell everyone that Jesus is great and all will be well – why has no one thought of that before?



Hmmmm. It might be a bit trickier than that. I'd guess lots of people know you come to church, and you have faith in Christ. But do they know because you tell them, or because they see something in you?

Paul wandered all over the place telling everyone he was a follower of Christ, and that they should be too. He was opinionated and didn't hesitate to tell people when they were wrong, but he undertook to live as Jesus would have, he had no money so he worked as a tent maker. He did have some women who supported him, but he lived well within his means, he prayed and worshipped and talked of God.

Peter and the other disciples lived during a time when being a Christian could have cost them their lives, and yet they were so strong in their faith. They followed Jesus and continued to promote his teachings, and because of their actions, we know, 2000 years later, what it was like for them.

How do we replicate that then? How do we live as Christ wants us to? Paul calls himself an 'imitator of Christ' and I suppose that's how we do it too – we try our best to follow the teachings of Jesus.

Saturday 13th July: Romans 12:1-2 Live fully

Earlier in Romans, Paul was conscious of tensions between the Romans and Jews as he described the unfolding historical plan of God. Now all believers are one in the family of God. This means that they all have the same vocation to be holy, committed, humble, loving and conscientious people of God.

You may know the story of Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan Friar who gave his life for another in Auschwitz.

Ten prisoners had escaped, and the Nazi guards ordered ten prisoners to be starved to death to deter future outbreaks. One of those men cried out that he had a wife and children, so the priest offered to take his place. He was thrown into the bunker where he starved.

Maximilian Kolbe sacrificed his life for someone else but what does it mean for us to be living sacrifices for God? This calling isn't an easy one. It should mean that we offer every aspect of our day totally to the service of God.

This goes against our culture of self-first and others second. It means saying to God 'do what you will with me.'



We have a choice to make, we can be swept along by the constant changes today, or we can attempt to stand firm on the Word of God. This is not easy, and we may differ in what we consider to be biblical priorities. We may also struggle to speak our minds because we're worried about other people's responses. But the results of doing this should be life enriching not the opposite.

If we believe in being a living sacrifice and standing out from the crowd the one thing we can know is that we're never alone – God has already done the work for us when He defeated death and rose from the grave.

In reflection...

So, you've reached the end of our journey together, our exploration of what it might mean to go deeper into scripture...and still get nowhere near reaching the bottom of its depths.

And as you have done so we hope as a circuit team that it has also enabled you as individuals, house groups and churches to explore these six discipleship pathways and how they might act as ways for you to live your faith and discipleship.

So what have you learned from this study?

Which of the reflections made you reflect the most?

What conversations did they generate?

And what comes next? Well, I guess that is down to you. What are your dreams and visions? How can the circuit help to assist and resource you? What would you like to see us do next?

Because...

