sharing your faith

Bishop Bill Ray
The Parable of the Sower Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!”

The Parable of the Sower Explained

18 “Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.[a] 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

1 Corinthians 3:1-8

1 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 4 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? 5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.
Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptised?” And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptised him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Sharing our Faith in Word and Deed

Introduction:

Before we start the studies, I invite you to reflect on how you came to faith and how you have grown in your faith over the years. What are some of the highlights? What have been some of the challenges? What has been some of the learnings?

We need to remember that there is no one way for people come to faith. There are many ways in which people come to faith. In fact there are as many ways as there are people. For some people they came to faith over a long period of time with various people providing valuable input and/or challenging them to explore the Christian faith. Some people grew up in a Christian home and were immersed in the faith from infancy. While some of these people have continued to grow up in the faith, others have rejected the faith after time. There are also those who come to faith quite suddenly. They may have been attending an outreach rally or they have been convicted when listening to a sermon. There are many other stimuli that bring people to faith, creation itself, a particular piece of music, or a book they have read or just by watching someone go faithfully about their daily life.

So I invite you to reflect on how you came to faith in Christ.

During a spiritual direction session some time ago, I recall the spiritual director enquiring of me how often I gave thanks to God for those who have assisted in bringing me to faith. The question challenged me because I could not honestly say I had given thanks! However, I have found it a blessing to give thanks to God for the many folk who have enabled me to be the disciple of Christ I am today.

If possible, before you come to the group studies, take the opportunity to share how you came to faith with someone in the faith community. Note each story may be different, each story is special as your faith journey is unique.

There are two aspects to faith sharing. The first is naming how you came to faith. The second is how we live out our faith in our daily life. People notice and people see how important our faith is to us. When Robin (my wife) and I left one of our parishes, my warden and his family gave us a polished fence post with the following quote on it from David Otis Fuller, “If you were arrested for being as Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”
So I invite you to reflect on how you live out your Christian faith in your daily life.

Recently, we have journeyed through Lent reflecting on our daily life in Christ. We are celebrating the resurrection of our Lord through the Easter season. It is a time of great joy. Does our faith radiate that joy, that excitement? In the Book of Revelation, chapter 2, verse 4 (see below) John is saying to the members of the Church at Ephesus, “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first”.

So I invite you to reflect on whether you still have that same love for Christ now as you did when you first came to own your faith in Jesus Christ or when you publicly stated your faith in Christ when you were confirmed?

As an aside, when a person is ordained priest, the Bishop says in the Exhortation, “I now exhort you, in the name of Christ, to take up your calling with joy and dedication. As the Lord’s messenger, proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ”. (page 793 APBA) (This is why clergy are always happy!!)

Over the past few decades there has been quite a deal of research by a number of people about how people have come to faith in Jesus Christ. For the purpose of this study series I focus briefly on John Westerhoff.

Westerhoff explores faith development using the model of the rings of a tree that measure the age of a tree. He currently has three rings in his understanding of faith development now but I prefer his earlier work where he had four rings. The rings represent the following:

The inside ring is experience stage, (for a child growing up in a Christian home they experience prayer, saying of grace before meals, experience the scriptures being read as well as participating in worship.)

The next ring is the affiliative stage, where people are affiliated into a faith community. In an ideal parish people of all ages, from the cradle to the grave are affiliated into the activities of the community of faith.

The searching phase is the third, where people across the ages question, search and seek answers to their questions. Then the person moves to the outer or fourth ring, the ring of owned faith.

Scripture Passages

To the Church in Ephesus Revelation 2:1-7

2:1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lamp stands. 2 “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’


25 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” 27 And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” 28 And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii[a] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' 36 Which of these, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” 37 He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch Acts 8:26-40
3. The basis of all ministry is baptism. How will you continue to live into your baptismal promises and how will you help people to live into their baptismal promises?

4. Sharing our faith is a life long responsibility? How are you preparing yourself so that you can share your faith through the years ahead?

5. What does this prayer say to you in your ministry?

   Call to discipleship (APBA p210/211)

   Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives:
give us discernment to hear your word
grace to relinquish our tasks,
and courage to follow empty-handed
wherever you may lead,
so that the voice of your gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth, Amen

Conclude with a time of prayer and the above prayer together.

Once people have owned their faith in Christ they will continue to search, they will want to continue to be affiliated (or another way of expressing this is to continue to be a part of life of the Parish and enjoy the fellowship of the community of faith) and be stimulated and challenged by their ongoing experiences within the community of faith.

A tree never loses its rings. To have an owned faith, the Christian will continue to search and seek affiliation and share experiences. (I think you can tell when a person is losing their faith when they cease questioning.)

Before we move onto the studies let us stop for a few minutes and consider the power of the following expressions:
“You can not share what you do not have”.
“It is important that we “walk the talk”.”
“Actions speak louder than words.”

Each of the studies is centred on a Biblical passage. We will be focussing on a various of aspects of each Biblical text. Please note, I am not providing a detailed exegesis. That has its place, but it is not the focus here.
Some Questions for Consideration:

1. How would you explain the devil to an inquirer?

2. Once again I ask you to consider, How well do you listen? What can you do to improve your listening? Share any insights you have gained over the past couple of weeks about the importance of listening in your ministry?

3. There are some people who think that in being a Christian, you will not have any hassles as you live life. We know that is not true, but what we do know is that God is with us in all situations. So how would you give an account of the Christian life and the cost of being a Christian to an enquirer?

4. Do you give thanks to God for the good harvests and for the blessings you receive?

5. What does this parable of the Sower and the Seed say to you in your ministry. Share your insights.

6. It has been said that much of our ministry is sowing seed of the Gospel. Do we see ourselves as sowers? Is that exciting? Explain.

7. How do we prepare the soil so that the seed of faith falls on the good soil?

Some points to reflect on as we conclude this study:

1. We share our faith by the way we live and by what we say. What will you be addressing as you seek to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others.

2. It has been my experience that often people who want to know about Christianity, can only give you three minutes. Work out what you will say in that time frame. (I have to be honest and say that I often rehearse this task.)
broadcast method. The sower wore an apron like garment with a pouch in the front with the seed. The sower placed his hand in the pouch and spread out the seed through the fingers. The seed fell on/in various types of soil and agrarian environments. Jesus named the situation or the reality of each environment the seed fell in. Each environment is instructive in our mission.

So the seed fell on/in:

- the path where the birds come and ate the seed . When this happens it is like those who hear the word of God but the evil one snatches the Word of God away from the person. (Matthew 13:4&19)
- the rocky ground where there was little soil. The seed sprouted but because there was not depth of soil it withers, it dies. Jesus said it is this like the person who receives the good news with joy but because there is no depth and cannot stand up to the pressures and persecution that can take place. (Matthew 13:5-6 & 20-21)
- the thorns choked the seed. Jesus says that these people are like the seed sown among the thorns, hear the Word of God, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the seed and it fails to yield. (Matthew 13:7 & 22)
- the good soil. Jesus says these people who hear the Word of God and bears fruit in their lives, some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold and some a hundredfold.

Sharing our faith is not always straightforward. Whatever, we do we must commend ourselves and people we are ministering with, to God in prayer. As mentioned earlier, it not our business; we are serving God. We are privileged to be part of our Lord’s ministry.

Paul puts it this way, (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 below) one plants another waters, but it God who give the growth. We are servants of the Lord. Paul also reminds us that some people are can only digest milk while others are able to take solid food. One approach does not nurture all. That us why we need to understand where people are at in their thinking and their journey of enquiry and consider soil where the faith is being sowed.

People will have different needs for support and nurture depending on the “soil”. It is important to use questions judiciously and make sure that all times we listen both to God and to those we with whom are ministering to in the Name of our Lord.


This is a well known parable. I have found that people who are not of the Christian faith can refer to this parable. We need to remember the context that led up to Jesus the telling this parable.


Often when we share our faith in response to an enquirer, it may appear that we are being “tested”. We need to be aware of this reality and not respond defensively.

Note how Jesus responds. There is a great lesson for us here. Jesus does not directly answer the question, instead he asks, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” Jesus is finding out what the lawyer knows, where he is coming from. We need to find out the thinking that is behind a person’s questioning, as they journey in faith.

Note, the lawyer answered with what we refer to as the two great commandments. In fact Jesus goes further and affirms the lawyer, he says, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

Please note that a correct answer given by a person, such as this lawyer, may not be fully understood by that person. We can answer from the head, but it also important that we can answer or respond from the heart. It has been said that the longest journey some people will make as a grown adult is thirty three centimetres - the distance from the head to the heart.

Also the lawyer, while answering questions correctly still had another question, “And who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29b). Jesus answers this question by telling this well known parable rather than with a direct answer. He allows the lawyer to come to his own conclusion. A the end of the parable, Jesus asked: “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?” The lawyer answered: “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus said to the lawyer: “You go, and do likewise.” Jesus worked though the issues with the lawyer. So in sharing our faith we need to find out where the enquirer is coming from, what is prompting the question and assist them to arrive at their own conclusions. We also need to remind ourselves constantly that we are ministering in the name of our Lord. It is the Lord’s work of which we privileged to be part. In doing so, it is important that we ourselves are supported. One of the aspects of the Cursillo weekend that really struck me was that when a person was giving a talk there were people praying...
Study Four: The Parable of the Sower Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23

We started this series with a Parable and we will conclude with a parable, this time the Parable of the Sower and the Seed and the Jesus’ explanation of the parable. (See Matthew 13:1-9 & Matthew 13:18-23) In Study Two I touched on the importance and place of questions when sharing our faith. Before we answer a question we have to listen so that we answer the question that is being asked. So when sharing our faith, listening is vital.

It is interesting that the first and last word of the parable is “Listen. Listening is different from hearing. We hear noises all around us all the time. At the moment as I write, I am hearing the rain fall on the roof. I am aware of this sound, but I continue on with my task. Listening is different. Listening requires being intentional and making sure we hear what a person is saying or asking. A part listening is also noticing the non verbals such as the way a person uses their hand gestures (I am aware some people speak with their hands!), their eye movement, and their body language Listening can be hard work as it requires concentration.

I wear hearing aids. They greatly improve my hearing, but at times I still struggle and it is very important I watch a person’s lips and their eye movement. Also I have learnt if I am unsure about what I have heard, I need to check it out. It is not helpful for a person to think you have heard them when you have not quite heard them as this miscommunication can led to confusion, uncertainly and sadly at times, tension.

Just because a person has heard does not mean that they will respond instantly or positively or that they have fully comprehended what was said. When we share our faith it is important to realise that there will not always be a 100% harvest. The parable concludes with “some hundredfold, some sixty and some thirty”. I have to confess that I am bit of a perfectionist. Secretly, I would love it to be “a hundredfold” every time. Yes, I acknowledge that “sixtyfold”, if compared with an exam result is a pass and “thirtyfold” is still a result. Growing up on a farm I recall at time when we had a crop that was not good enough to harvest. I cannot recall the comment I made but I still remember my father saying something like, in the Bible “thirtyfold” is a result. Just as we give thanks to God for the “hundredfold” it is important to also give thanks to God for the sixty and “thirtyfold”.

This parable provides us with many insights as we seek to share our faith both in word and deed. The method of sowing the seed was the

for the speaker. I am a great believer in asking people to pray for me at certain times in my ministry. I acknowledge that it is not always possible because things happen spontaneously, but the power of prayer upholds and sustains us.

In the telling of the parable, Jesus challenged the lawyer. We hear that the man fell among robbers and clearly was injured. Regardless, the priest and levite walked by on the other side. You would have thought they would have helped a fellow citizen, but no, they walked by on the other side. Then a Samaritan, a person that was not respected by the Jews came and attended to the person and their injuries. He provided extra care for the injured person by taking him to the inn, paying for his stay and offering to pay more if needed. It is fair to say that the lawyer would not have regarded the Samaritan as a person to whom he should offer help or show compassion. The Samaritan certainly loved his neighbour and in his actions showed compassion. This meant going outside his “comfort zone”. Often in sharing our faith we too have to go out of our “comfort zone”, but we must never forget that Jesus with always with us. (Matthew 28:20)

Some Questions for Consideration:

1. We hear the two great commandments regularly in our worship, but are we living into the two great commandments? Are we “walking the talk” in this regard?

2. Not everyone with whom we share the faith is like us. We can find ourselves outside our “comfort zone”. This present us with challenges. What are some of the biases you have to address in seeking to share the Gospel/the Christian faith with others?

3. In the lawyer’s reply to Jesus about who was his neighbour he said, “The one who showed him mercy”. Many people who enquire about the Christian faith today often refer to local as well as global issues. At the local level, how can we show mercy in Lismore? How can we help those who are suffering because of global issues such as poverty, corruption, lack of clean water and sanitation etc? [A web address that may help https://www.un.org/mellenniumgoals]
4. It has been said that sometimes the hardest place to share our faith is in the home or within the family, because our loved ones know us so well. We can be challenged by such comments as, “You call yourself a Christian.” Has this been your experience? What insights have you gained? What aspects of your faith would you be prepared to share with others?

5. In the parable it states that the Samaritan had compassion. Hugh Mackay in his latest book, “Australia Reimagined - Towards a more compassionate, less anxious society” encourages Australians to be more compassionate. How can we be more compassionate in living out our faith among our neighbours, those at work and/or those in the community?

6. When we know that we will be sharing our faith with particular people, are we prepared to ask other people to pray for us? Please remember we can not address every matter a person raises, but people will respond to our concern for them.

Some points to reflect on as you conclude this study:

1. Remember your school days. Often we can recall teachers we related to but, we cannot or may not recall what they taught us. What we remember their concern for us. The same is true in sharing our faith. People may recall what we did for them, or how we were there for them, rather than what we said.

2. We need to build up a relationship and answer the questions they are asking and not answer the questions we think they should be asking. (See the next Study)

Conclude with a time of prayer and the following prayer:

Eternal God,
you have taught us through Christ that love is the fulfilment of the law:
help us to love you with all our heart, with all our soul,
with all our mind, and with all our strength, and our neighbour as ourself;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(APBA p562)

5. Do we as a faith community have great expectations of God? Share your thoughts.

6. Every parish thinks they are very welcoming. How welcoming would you say we are on a scale of one to ten, one being the lowest and ten the highest. Share the factors that helped you make that assessment.

7. Share the parts of the Acts of the Apostles which are important for your faith journey.

Some points to reflect on as you conclude this study:

1. As a Church, do we need to have more action than talk?

2. Is it possible to use the nine points as an audit tool both for the parish and for yourself as a Christian?

3. What changes would you like to see in the community of faith over the next twelvemonths and the next three years.

4. Is my heart glad and generous? Is there anything I would change to make me more glad and generous?

5. When sharing my faith, do I have a balance between word and deed?

Conclude with a time of prayer and the following prayer:

O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth and sent your Son to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near: grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; pour out your Spirit upon your church that it may be a place of welcome and nurture, lively exploration of faith and a place growing in commitment to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

(adapted from APBA p214)
Eighth, the early Church was a happy Church, picking up on the previous point of glad and generous hearts. There is a real sense if you are glad and generous, you are happy. A sad Christian is a contradiction! Yes in our daily Christian walk there may be times when we are sad, but we are glad in that we do not walk alone, Christ is with us.

Ninth, the early Church was an attractive Church and we are told that the Lord added their number (v.47). It is important that our Churches are attractive and inviting. Having retired recently, then travelling and settling into a new place, it has been interesting to experience different ways in which we have been welcomed. We have been greeted with a smile and a welcome. At other times it has been very mechanical - handing you literature. More than welcoming it is important that we pray others will be added to our number. A few years back I invited the parishioners of North Queensland to pray for one person, for one year, that they may come to know Christ and live the Christian faith. Over the years I never cease to be amazed at how God uses these contacts. Yes there have been times when nothing appeared to have happened at the time, but what I have learnt that nothing is wasted in God’s economy and in God’s timing, which is not always my timing!

While the Acts reading it is short passage, each of the nine aspects of the early or primitive Church and seven verses are power packed and provide much from which we can learn. So let us share the Good News Jesus Christ, making sure we walk the talk and that our actions are an active form of communication.

Some Questions for Consideration:

1. What insights into your ministry have you gained from briefly exploring the the nine ministry aspects of Acts 2:42-47?

2. In our parish do we need to be more intentional in regard to the teaching of the Christian faith?

3. Has it been your experience, the more you know, the more you realise you need to know and so you need to keep learning? Share you thoughts and insights in regards to this statement and how more learning can be achieved.

Study Two: The Ethiopian Eunuch Acts 8:26-40

This is a fascinating passage of Scripture and raises the matter of how we ask questions and how we answer questions. The matter of questions is important as we seek to share our faith in Christ.

Right at the start, the Lord took the initiative instructing Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (Acts 8:26). Philip did that, obeying the voice of the Spirit and found the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah. (Acts 8:29)

Philip asked the eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30). The eunuch’s reply was, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). The eunuch invited Philip to sit and explain the text to him and answer the eunuch’s question about to whom Isaiah is speaking. (Acts 8:34)

Then we read that the eunuch asked Philip what prevented him from being baptised. (Acts 8:37). Philip baptised the eunuch. However, before the eunuch was baptised, Philip shared the Good News. (When I arrive in heaven I am going to ask Luke a few questions and one is why he did not include the conversation between Philip and the eunuch explaining the Good News in the text!)

We note in Acts 8:39, the eunuch went on his way rejoicing. It is important in the Church that we rejoice and celebrate. We can be too staid! However, in the next verse we are told that Philip found himself in Azotus! The way this passage ends, there is no opportunity for Philip to provide ongoing pastoral support for the eunuch. In our day and age it is important we offer ongoing support. It is important that we, or someone else in the community of faith continues to journey with people who have or are exploring the faith or those who have committed themselves to following the way of Jesus Christ.

It has been my experience that many people seek assistance in understanding the Scriptures. Some want to know where they should you start reading the Scriptures . Some suggest Genesis while others advise Mark’s Gospel. Additionally, people who are coming to faith may want to know the relevance of the Old Testament. These examples highlight the importance of understanding where people are coming from in their enquiry.

In sharing our faith, questions are very important; how we ask them, how we answer them and how we encourage people to ask further questions. Also we must remember that some people find it very difficult
to frame questions because they are not confident or sure of the vocabulary. We need to give people space and time to ask.

There is a hierarchy of questions:

- **recall** - start here - what did you hear or see that encourages you to explore further?
- **comprehension** - what does that mean for you?
- **application** - explore how they can apply certain aspects of the faith to their life.
- **analysis** - in exploring this topic, ask what are some of the other areas they would like to address to fully appreciate the journey they are making
- **synthesis** - how does this relate to your life? **evaluation** - so in your opinion you should now .......

The questions move from the familiar such as what people have experienced to the more complex questions that require much more thought to answer such as the how and the why questions. It is very easy to start with the why, which requires analysis and synthesis and this can leave people overwhelmed, confused or maybe even frustrated.

As mentioned in Study One, make sure you answer the question the person is asking, not the question you think they should be asking.

During the 1990s the Church employed the Catechumenal process to assist adults to come to or renew their faith. While it is not used much today the process is still very valid. It is a four stage process:

**Enquiry** - people seek answers to their questions in regard to what is required for living the Christian life.

**Formation** - building on the questions asked, we seek to help the enquirer to explore the place of the Bible, the centrality of worship and prayer as well as introducing the notion that we all have a ministry. So discerning God’s will for their lives commences in this stage.

A period of **Intense preparation** - this is traditionally what we now know as the season of Lent with its focus on the Gospel readings for Year A.

**Reflection** on the experience of having been baptised or confirmed or being received into the Anglican Church or reaffirming your baptismal promises with a deliberate intent to amend your life. The focus here is to reflect on the experience of having made the promises, having had the water poured over you, being aware that family and strangers were there

Third, the early Church was a praying Church (v.42). The members of the early Church knew that they could not meet the demands of ministry and life in their own strength. It is with God that they could go out into the world, able to address the matters that were before them. The same is true for us, we need to be in tune with God. The Girls’ Friendly Society (GFS) use to say this little mantra using the letters of the word JOY - Jesus first, Others next and Yourself last. All three foci are important, but we must not forget the order as we are to go into the world, a world that is not always open or sympathetic to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so it important that we go in the strength of Christ.

Fourth, the early Church was a reverent Church (43). They were awestruck, wonderstruck and amazed. We like them, must have that sense of mystery, of the power of our Lord that can overwhelm us.

Fifth, things happened in the early Church and we are called to be a part of a Church where things happen in the Name of our Lord. It was a great English Baptist Missionary minister William Carey (1761 -1836) who said, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God”. As Christians, as a Church we must not be timid, but bold attempting great things for our God.

Sixth, the early Church was a sharing Church, (v 44-45) where they shared their goods with those in need. This was a radical move. The modern Church has sought to implement this aspect of the life of the early Church in a number of ways such as through weekly food baskets that are brought forward at the offertory, assisting at soup kitchens, being involved in with breakfast clubs as well providing blankets and like for those who are sleeping rough. The reality is, as mentioned in our first study, in loving God we love our neighbour and our neighbour is anyone we come in contact with as we live our life. On other words we are to “walk the talk”.

Seventh, the early Church was a worshipping Church (v. 46). They spent much time in the temple and broke bread together in the home. It is important that we gather to praise and worship our Lord. It is also important that we are strengthened by the sacrament of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is also known as the Eucharist, which means to give thanks. It is important that we give thanks to God for all the blessings we receive but also give thanks for blessings we receive from other people. Following on from the previous point of the nine aspects, the members of the early Church had “glad and generous hearts”.
Study Three: The Early Church Example Acts 2:42-47

When I was a student at Duke Divinity School in the United States, I had a Biblical Studies lecturer who often said the fifth book of the New Testament is a continuation of the Gospel of Luke and is titled “The Acts of the Apostles” and not “The Talk of the Apostles”. The first time I heard him make this comment, it struck me how much talk there is in the Church. I thought about all those meetings I had been a part of, which in many cases had not produced a great deal of action. The comment changed my thinking and as a result when I chair meetings I often ask, “What is the action the follows on from our discussion or debate?”

Christianity is about action, about living out our faith in Jesus Christ both as individual disciples and as a members of the Body of Christ, the Church. From time to time this same lecturer would say that the Acts of the Apostles could have been called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit”. Yes, the Holy Spirit is key to living our of our faith both in word and action.

This week’s short, concise passage has been referred to as summary of characteristics of life in the primitive Church. These seven verses highlight nine aspects of living out our faith in Christ as a Church and as members of the Church.

First, the early church was a teaching church (v. 42) We are told that the people devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. Many authors have made the comment that if people are learning they are growing in their faith. I also hold the view that if children do not see their parents learning about the faith they will not see this learning as important. In the early Church they looked forward, not back. They were active not static. It has been said, “The more you know, the more you realise that you should or can know”. Disciples of Jesus are people who realised that the riches of Christ are inexhaustible. The great Scottish scholar, William Barclays said, “A wasted day is when you learn nothing!” Every day, God has so much to teach us. Are we ready learners?

Second, the early Church enjoyed a “togetherness” in fellowship (v. 42). They were living into the words of Psalm 133:1, “Behold how good and how lovely it is: when families live together in unity”. In building up our fellowship, we must understand that we will be counter culture. Life today is so individualistic, each person for themselves and their own opinion and their own way. This is not the message of Luke or life of the early Church.

with you and promised to support you so that your life and faith is enriched. (In the past we often stopped at the baptism or confirmation itself with no further exploration in terms of how it relates to our faith or what the experience was like for you.) The process of discerning God’s will for us continues throughout our lives.

In days past people were often baptised without preparation. Note the eunuch received a grounding that lead him to ask for baptism.

Bringing people to faith in Christ is not the end of the faith journey, it is the start, a springboard to continue the journey of faith. Sadly this view that is it the graduation or end has been the case over the years. However, with the Catechumemnal process, people are invited to share what the experience of being baptised or confirmed meant to them, such as “How did feel when you make the promises?” “What was it like to be baptised or have the bishop’s hands laid on you when you were confirmed for received into the Anglican Church or when you re-affirmed your baptism vows after an amendment of life” (See pages 91 to 94 APBA)

Some Questions for Consideration:

1. Philip responded to the Lord. How open are we to respond to the Lord? Do we give the Lord sufficient time to speak to us? How well do we listen to God?

2. If you were asked in a couple of sentences to describe the Bible, what would you say?

3. If you were asked to explain why the Church baptises people, how would you respond?

4. If you asked: “Why should I pray?” You would reply saying ..........

5. When you answer a question, does your answer lead the way to another question being asked?

6. When helping people grow in their faith how comfortable are you with starting with people’s questions rather than having a curriculum?
Some points to reflect on as you conclude this study:

1. The place of prayer and the scriptures in your life.
2. How well do we follow up on people who have come to faith?
3. How can we advance and enhance ministry when society is so mobile?
4. Years ago the Church used printed curriculum resources. Today is a digital age. What is required to make a relevant transition?

Conclude with a time of prayer and the following prayer:

Saving God, who called your Church to witness that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself: help us so to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may be reconciled to you; through him who died for us and rose again and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(APBA p512)