Lent Study

Lessons From the Life of the Early Church for 21st Century Christians

Daily readings and reflections during the season of Lent
Introduction

I am so glad that you have decided to use the Diocesan Lenten Study this year. I hope that you experience God’s richest blessing as you read the bible passage and consider the reflections.

This has been a major work of the Diocesan Ministry Council led by Bishop Sonia Roulston. Each reflection has been prepared by a member of the clergy or laity of the Diocese. You will detect some common themes but also pick up some individual differences. The prayer of each writer is that you may grow in your relationship with God each day.

Ideally, you should set aside the same time each day for your reflections. You should allocate about 30 minutes. Given the busyness of life for most people, you may end up doing your study at different times.

It is good to begin with prayer. Perhaps you could begin in silence or prayer:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The next step is to read the passage set for the day. You might read it quietly to yourself or aloud. You might read it from some different translations of the Bible such as the New Revised Standard Version or the New International Version.

Before you read the reflections, stop for a moment and notice how the passage sits with you. Have you noticed a particular word or phrase? Did a new idea grab your attention? Sit with your own insights for a few moments.

Now, read the reflection and consider the prayer points proposed by the writer. What has stood out for you?

When it is time to finish, spend a few moments in quiet prayer.

Know that across our Diocese people are joining in these reflections with you. May our careful attention to the scriptures and openness to God enable us to flourish by his grace.

With every blessing,

+Peter

Anglican Bishop of Newcastle
Week 1: Faithfulness to the Call of God

VALUE: Focussing Our Resolve
Day 1: Ash Wednesday
Exodus 20:1 – 17

Practices of Faith

When I embraced the Christian faith as an adult, I attended a church which used the Book of Common Prayer for the Communion service most Sundays. Part of the rhythm of that liturgy is for the Ten Commandments to be rehearsed every time with the people of God praying that their hearts will be inclined towards faithful obedience. The Ten Commandments were of such significance for Anglicans that they formed part of the decoration near the Communion Table in many church buildings.

Exodus sets out an amazing scene for the delivery of these words. Moses calls the people to preparation as he spends time with God on Mount Sinai. When it is time for the commandments to be delivered, as God speaks with Moses, there is thunder and lightning, trembling and thick smoke. This is a holy moment to be remembered. God gives to his people a way of life which covers their relationship with him and enables them to honour all humanity. These words form the basis of forming a good society.

The Ten Commandments are derived from 17 verses. Jewish and Christian scholars differ in the way they allocate the verses to arrive at the ten memorable sayings which should be grafted into our hearts and minds.

One way of looking at the Ten Commandments is to see them covering three themes – honouring God, honouring life, and honouring society.

Honouring God – We recognise our utter dependence on God and step back from any behaviour which denigrates the holiness and wonder of God. We will not seek to reduce God to created images and we will not dishonour God by the way we speak of him.

Honouring life – Every human being portrays an aspect or image of God. From our birth to our death we are part of God’s sacred canvas. In God we live and move and have our being. We honour life by taking rest with God, cherishing the ones with whom our lives are bound and refraining from disregarding the sanctity and significance of life.

Honouring society – Human communities rely on people acting towards one another with good will, in good faith and with good grace. The commandments are aimed at building society. They affirm our need to always deal with one another with honesty and integrity.

Jesus was very familiar with the teaching of law. He knew that it was founded on the work of being at one with God who created us. Yet, the first Christians experienced people who were caught up in legalism rather than embracing life-giving relationship with God.

Our first call as Christians is to express faith and trust in Jesus Christ. As his disciples we then choose how to live. Guided by the Holy Spirit we endeavour to walk in holiness. The Ten Commandments provide an enduring structure to faithfulness. When we review our lives against them at the beginning of Lent, we are often reminded of our mistakes and sin. We identify areas for penitence and amendment of life.

Points to Ponder
1. Today, read Exodus 20:1 – 17 or the Ten Commandments in the Communion service of one our Anglican Prayer Books. How might you choose to live your life differently?

Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent: create and make in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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The Right Reverend Dr Peter Stuart
Anglican Bishop of Newcastle
Day 2: Thursday 27$^\text{th}$ February

Acts 1:1 – 26

The Promise of the Holy Spirit, the Ascension of Jesus, Matthias Chosen

“In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did from the beginning...”


“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?”

Luke then tell us (verses 8-11) about Jesus’ ascension into heaven, following his 40 days of resurrection appearances. Here Jesus promises the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit, and charges them to be his witnesses, “to the ends of the earth.” Jesus then disappears from their disciples sight, while angels ask the disciples, “Why do you stand looking up to heaven?”

I remember once hearing of a Chapel to the Ascension in which there were a pair of feet placed in the ceiling. This represents, in its way, the sense of Jesus disappearing from sight. And yet there is something about it that seems incongruous. For here, as throughout his ministry, Jesus calls his disciples to be active in ministry – to do the things they see him doing. The angels’ words remind the stunned disciples – that there is work to be done and that they are to be about that work. That work includes gathering for the breaking of the bread and fellowship, care of the community, and prayer.

Of course, they are also to wait on God in this interim time, for as we know, for this group the gift of the Spirit was yet to come. Karl Barth calls this active waiting, “A significant pause, but not empty-handed waiting”. The disciples are called to wait, live, and act in hope.

The Call of Matthias

One of the first things the now 11 disciples did in these early days was to prayerfully call a disciple to replace Judas so that their number was restored to 12. We are reminded here that the call to discipleship extends to a new generation of disciples. We don’t hear of Matthias again, and yet his ministry clearly mattered enough to the early church for them to speak of him here. How many have served faithfully in their place, yet their names are remembered only in the place of their service and in heaven. We also know, however, that many more were soon called to serve for the sake of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Let us remember that we too are part of the following generations called not to stand staring up to heaven, but rather sent out in mission, joining the great band of apostles who have been called to share the Gospel in all the places in which they find themselves.

Points to Ponder

1. How might you be exercising your call to discipleship and mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in your context?
2. What is the balance for you between “looking up to heaven” and the activity of ministry?

Prayer

*God of majesty, you led the Messiah through suffering into risen life, and took him up into the glory of heaven: clothe us with the power promised from on high, and send us forth to the ends of the earth as heralds of repentance and witnesses of Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, who lives with you now and always in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.*

(C) APBA

Bishop Sonia Roulston
Assistant Bishop (Inland Episcopate)
Day 3: Friday 28th February
Acts 2:1 – 36

The Coming of the Holy Spirit and Peter’s Address

‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts
Through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us’ - Romans 5:5

I invite you to join me as I try to imagine myself present in the house as one of the companions, totally immersed in the mystery of what is happening. I am remembering that day just over a week ago when the risen Jesus had suddenly appeared in our midst and opened our minds to understand the scriptures (Luke 24:44-48). I remember him saying to us to stay in the city until he had fulfilled his Father’s promise to “clothe us with power from on high”.

What did he mean by this? .... We didn’t understand but at the same time our hearts were filled with inexplicable joy and our lips continually offered up praise to God for his mighty deeds. We did as he said – we came to this place to wait.

Suddenly I hear a deafening noise such as I’ve never heard before; it fills the house, and the Holy Spirit is pouring out upon us, filling us with such love and power. A great crowd gathers, drawn by what is happening and even though we are Galileans and they are from many different countries they hear us speaking about God’s deeds of power in their own language.

Like me, the crowd are amazed and perplexed and even more so when Peter – a rough Galilean fisherman, stands up and eloquently repeats the words of the prophet Joel (Acts 2:16-21) and the words of our ancestor David (Acts 2:25-28). Peter then reminds his listeners that David had spoken of the resurrection of the Messiah.

This passage concludes with the words in (Acts 2:36): “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified”.

The early church certainly received a powerful kick start with the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit. In this passage we note that the early Christians were enabled with their lips and with their lives to seek and respond to God’s loving grace, to rejoice that God ministered to them through the Scriptures, and intentionally told and retold the Christian narrative to people of all ages from different backgrounds.

Points to Ponder

1. Obedience – are we prepared to ‘go where the Spirit leads’ and ‘wait for further instruction’?
2. Receptive – are we open to receive and keep receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit?
3. Relevance – are the words we utter sincere, understandable and relevant to our listeners?

Prayer

Gracious God, to fulfil our mission you gifted us with the blessings of your Spirit. Open our hearts that the power of your Spirit may flourish within us and your love pour forth into a troubled world. Amen.

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Denise Brown
St John’s, Raymond Terrace.
Diocesan Mothers’ Union President
Day 4: Saturday 29th February
Acts 2:43 – 47

The First Converts, Life Among the Believers

Luke in this passage describes the early days of the Christian community. Jesus had ascended into heaven, and, on the day of Pentecost Peter preached a stirring sermon which was received with warmth and enthusiasm. People were astounded by the signs and wonders that were being done through the power of the Holy Spirit. Community life was kicking off. There is a definite sense of excitement and eagerness. Patterns of being together were established: sharing resources, praying together daily, and, eating together, all with a disposition of joy and generous hearts.

These were the visible witnesses of Christ’s salvific action in the world. This was not just a ‘warm hearted social club’ that did nice things for people, this was a community committed to living the gospel. This was an inclusive community, striving to embody the kingdom for everyone! This was a community that had embraced their mission with all their being. People responded to this witness by wanting to be part of the community. The number increased.

Being in community - if only it was as simple as how it, at least, initially reads. It is so often tricky. Jean Vanier in his book Community and Growth, says that it is in community that you come to realise that you’re not quite as loving as you thought you were, that you come to know your limitations, weaknesses and darkness. Often being part of a community, is both joyful and a trial. Differing opinions and ways of being often pull people away from the core business of being the Church. Too often, the focus becomes on what we want, making sure that our own desires and ego is fulfilled rather than embodying the kingdom of God and reflecting the image of the Son.

What we can learn from the example of the early church community is that this group of people had a very clear understanding of who they were and what they were there for. The community existed for an aim outside of itself. The community existed to share the gospel and to embody the kingdom here on earth. To live into the promise of salvation in the here and now, in their context.

The early church was a passionate, dynamic, vibrant community that engendered a strong sense of belonging that embodied the kingdom of God. They maintained their focus: by remaining in fellowship with each other, even though I’m sure at times that was immensely challenging; by breaking bread together, being constantly reminded of the sacredness of life and the gift of salvation; and, by praying together, remembering that it is only in relying on the Holy Spirit that being a community that embodies the kingdom is made possible.

Points to Ponder

1. How do we manifest community in our context?
2. Are we a vibrant, passionate community that engenders a strong sense of belonging?
3. Do we make breaking bread and praying together a priority?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we walk the journey to the cross with you this Lent, may we be mindful of our own light and darkness. May we hear your call to be in community with each other. Help us to be tolerant and to accept others for who they are. May we see your face in all those we serve and be gracious in the giving of ourselves. Help us to be a passionate, dynamic, vibrant community that engenders a strong sense of belonging that embodies your kingdom. Amen.

Sarah Dulley
Ordination Candidate
Telarah Rutherford Parish
VALUE: Focussing our Resolve

PRAYER
Open with a brief prayer seeking God’s guidance as you reflect together.

SHARE
- Insights from your readings this week.
- Anything that arose for you from the ‘Points to Ponder’.

DISCUSS
1. In this week’s readings we have heard various instances of people seeking to respond to God’s call:
   a. from the people of the ancient Israel, called to be a holy people through obedience to God’s Law;
   b. through to the Early Church as they sought to be faithful disciples in this new time.

   Reflect together on your call as the people of God today, and on how we are responding to that call in our context.

2. The early church ... maintained their focus:
   a. by remaining in fellowship with each other, even though I’m sure at times that was immensely challenging;
   b. by breaking bread together, being constantly reminded of the sacredness of life and the gift of salvation; and,
   c. by praying together, remembering that it is only in relying on the Holy Spirit that being a community that embodies the kingdom is made possible” (Sarah Dulley).

   As you reflect on these words discuss what you think the implications might be for how we might “Focus our Resolve” locally.

3. What is the lesson from these readings of the Early Church (Acts 1 & 2) for you and your parish today?

CLOSE
With a time of prayer.
Week 2: Faithfulness in Adversity

VALUE: Committed to Healthy Ministry
Day 5: Sunday Lent 1
Matthew 4:1 – 11

‘We are what we eat’: Jesus Tempted in the Desert to Turn Stones into Bread

Deserts can be frightening places. In the 1990s, I used to make field trips into the Great Sandy Desert. There was always a chance of being lost as we travelled across sand dunes to remote communities. In fact, some of my colleagues did get lost, and needed rescuing. So, every time I managed to find my way back along dirt tracks to the dusty Tanami Highway after visiting a remote community, I felt an immense sense of relief.

Like desert creatures and plants, humans exist on the edge of life in the desert. Yet, this vulnerability is also its allure. Existing on the edge, in view of the very curve of the earth on the desert horizon, I could breathe deeply. The wide blue skies of the desert provide us with a big space to be.

Deserts were a “safe” place for Christians fleeing the persecutions in the fourth century. In their accounts, they would often begin with a request to an elder - not for some bread or a drink - but to “give them a word”. These desert men and women hungered for the Word of God. They appeared not to consider the Word to be a guide or set of moral principles; rather the Word was their nourishment. They consumed it, and in turn were consumed by it. They became what they ate.

The following story from one of the desert brothers seems to capture how the Word nourishes us, then consumes us, and transforms us: A monk had asked an elder for a word: how to go further beyond his diligent rule-following, fasting, and prayer. The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, his fingers becoming like ten lamps of fire. He said to the monk: “Why not be totally changed into fire?”

Lent is a process of stripping back to the essentials, somewhat like living vulnerably in the desert. Jesus told his desert tempter that we do not live on bread alone but “on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). Jesus, feeding off every word from the mouth of God, becomes the Word of God. The disciplines of prayer, fasting and alms giving are a means of drawing us into the desert and into a deeper reliance on the Word as our only real nourishment; so much so that the Word is able to nourish, consume and transform us into flames of love.

Points to Ponder

1. We are what we eat: Is the Word of God part of your daily intake of nourishment?
2. Can we fast from consuming the creatures of God this Lent thus contributing to the regeneration of God’s environment?

Prayer

Almighty God, whose Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are, yet did not sin: give us grace to direct our lives in obedience to your will, that, as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Bernard Goldman
All Saints Belmont
Day 6: Monday 2\textsuperscript{nd} March  
Acts 3:1 – 26

Peter Heals a Crippled Beggar, Peter Speaks in Solomon’s Portico

In around 35AD, people did not hold a lot of sympathy for others who found themselves in abject poverty, or who were disabled or sick. The thinking was that these people deserved their lot. They must have done something bad and God had cursed them for it. People like this disabled man and his family, were seen as unrighteous – sinners, not worthy to set foot in the temple. The ‘friends’ (possibly people who saw him as a money earner for them) brought him to the temple to beg – the only way he could survive.

In our modern society here in the Diocese of Newcastle, we don’t see professional beggars, but we may see people with problems like drug addiction and mental health problems. We may encounter people from different cultural backgrounds to us, people with different life views and the temptation can be to view people who are different to us as being worth less as human beings, not our equals and therefore not good enough to belong. Ignorance, fear and dis-trust of someone very different to us can make it easy for us to ‘de-humanise’ people and view them as the worshippers Jews may have viewed the crippled man.

The role of our Church today is to show Jesus’ love and acceptance of everyone – no matter who they are, and Peter and John understood this as they ministered in their community over 2000 years ago. They could have just kept walking like everyone else, but they chose to interact with this man and the outcome was healing of body mind and spirit.

Faith must be witnessed to be understood. The bible tells us that the man who had been crippled went walking and leaping and praising God – he had been completely transformed, much to the amazement of all who witnessed this.

We, who have experienced God’s redeeming love for us through Christ, have the opportunity every day to bear witness to this love with everyone we encounter – particularly those who suffer ostracization in all aspects of their life. As Christ’s witnesses we must break through the human-made boundaries that are the unspoken laws of what it is to be a valued member of the community and value all people the way God does as precious, priceless and unique.

We are the body of Christ. It is through Christ’s body that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Points to Ponder

1. How have you taken on stereotypes of people or perceived others as less worthy or less human than yourself?
2. What might you do to see the value of all people and to learn from them?

Prayer

\textit{Loving God, you sent Jesus to suffer and die for the sins of the whole world. Your love knows no boundary and all people are precious in your sight. May your kingdom come, where there is no distinction between rich and poor, black and white, ritually clean and unclean. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.}

Mary Horn  
Gresford Paterson Parish
Day 7: Tuesday 3rd March
Acts 4:1 – 22

Peter and John Before the Council

Those first disciples of Jesus were extraordinarily enthusiastic about their new faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Their preaching attracted crowds of eager listeners, but their enthusiasm offended and embarrassed Jewish officialdom, so they arrested the two leaders, Peter and John. Jesus had told his followers that they would experience this sort of opposition but often it is quite a shock when what is warned about actually happens.

Being hauled before the High Court did not seem to daunt Peter and John nor shake their faith in any way. As they answered the charges brought against them, they remained courteous but stood their ground, certain that what they believed and proclaimed about Jesus was absolutely true. The officials noted that the disciples were just ordinary men, ordinary people like you and me. They just proclaimed and taught what they themselves had seen and heard. Not opinions or theories but good eyewitness testimony. That, after all, is the best we can offer our friends and neighbours, what we ourselves know and experience of the grace and mercy of God in our own lives.

We live in a country where we enjoy freedom of speech and belief, but many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world do not enjoy that freedom. They live in the same fear of reprisal as those early believers faced.

The shape and colour of the opposition we face may be different, often it is just plain indifference, but how we respond to it is just as important. Like Peter and John, we too have the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage us. Let us make sure we value and use that gift.

Points to Ponder

1. We do not know for how long we may have the freedom to worship and share our faith with others. Are you using your freedom of speech well and wisely?
2. Will you pray for faithful Christians in those parts of the world who do not have the freedom to worship as we do and for those who live in fear because of their faith in Christ?

Prayer

_Loving God we thank you for the faithfulness of those early disciples. Help us to be as faithful and wise as they were in sharing the good news of the Gospel with our friends and neighbours. Please sustain and protect those who do not have the same freedom to worship as we do. May we use that freedom well and wisely._

_Amen._

Gaye Mercier
Holy Family, Wyoming
Day 8: Wednesday 4th March
Acts 4:23 – 5:11

Believers Pray for Boldness and Share Possessions, Ananias and Sapphira

Peter and John return to the burgeoning church-community after their release. The community is driven to prayer. This worship and petitioning shows them coming to terms with the significance of Jesus’s incarnation and now with the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit among them. God is at work, subverting structures and the ‘normal’ ways of doing things. The new kingdom has been inaugurated. God answers their prayers, for they are indeed filled with the Spirit. While God heals and provides signs and wonders, the miracle of the disciples is their boldness in speaking the Word.

The correlation of hearing and speaking the Word of God is in ethical action, and this the second part of today’s narrative. The believers are ‘of one heart and soul’ which drives them to social action. A community where no one is needy is a subversive community. Imagine a society that had drawn lines between Jew and Gentile, slave and owner, male and female, now drawn together by the Spirit to be the new church-community. Boundaries are removed, labels no longer required, bodily needs are met. This radical Christianity, defined by love in action, was tearing down boundaries and building a new society. Boldness to preach is matched by social action. Truly, actions can speak louder than words.

The Spirit is at work challenging our assumptions about economic and social structures. The example of Ananias and Sapphira challenges our worship of money and possessions. It questions the idol that we can make of the married couple over the community. As a couple, Ananias and Sapphira attempt to ‘deceive the Spirit’, reminding us of Adam and Eve. Luke might also be thinking of another story, that of Achen in Joshua 7, who stole from Israel and was stoned to death. In God’s new kingdom, no such violence is permitted. The taking of the breath of life is the prerogative of the giver of life, the Holy Spirit. Violence has no place in the new church-community.

Points to Ponder

This passage asks us to seek empowerment to speak the Word boldly and demands that we meet the needs of the most vulnerable. God wants us to partner with the Holy Spirit in subverting the usual ways of doing things, by breaking down boundaries and creating loving church-communities that reject violence.

1. What might that mean for you today?
2. Are there secret ways we attempt to deceive the Holy Spirit in any of these areas?

Prayer

O Lord, who for our sake fasted forty days and forty nights: give us grace to use such abstinence, that, our flesh being subdued by the spirit, we may ever obey your godly will in righteousness and true holiness; to your honour and glory, who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen. 

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Dr Di Rayson
Wingham Parish
Day 9: Thursday 5th March
Acts 5:12 – 42

The Apostles Heal Many... and Are Persecuted


Have you noticed how in Acts every time the early church enjoyed a time of growth or blessing, this was immediately followed by something negative, something to pull them down? Here again we read of the growth of the church and then very quickly the apostles are arrested and brought before the courts in an attempt to silence their witness. ‘We must obey God rather than human authority’ (verse 29), was their bold defence!

When the angel opens the door of their prison and leads them out, he sends them back to the temple courts, with instructions to ‘tell the people all about this life’ (my emphasis). In other words, what the new life in Jesus is all about.

Gamaliel’s advice to the Sanhedrin in verses 38-39 is instructive: ‘Leave these men alone!... For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men.’ If it is God’s church, it will be unstoppable!

Application

The Church’s reputation has been severely damaged in recent years. The way to rebuild is to proclaim and live out the Good News. The Holy Spirit will do the rest!

In telling people ‘all about this life’ we are invited to proclaim the full gospel, and not just the bits that we think people will like to hear.

Points to Ponder

1. Perhaps your church has suffered ‘reputational damage’ in your community. Are you, as a church community, sharing and living the Good News as you rebuild or are you relying on other ways of rebuilding your church?
2. Does opposition (or the fear of opposition) hold you or your church back from being Christ’s ambassadors? What would it mean for your church to ‘tell people all about this life’?

Pray

Jesus, Lord of the Church, give us courage to face fear and opposition with the grace that comes from knowing whose we are and whom we serve. In your mercy forgive our failures and our compromises. Help us to trust your Good News to change and heal lives, even as you have changed and healed ours. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Dr Steve Sylvester
Bulahdelah/Tea Gardens Parish
Day 10: Friday 6th March
Acts 6:1 – 7

Seven Chosen to Serve


In this passage we read of a complaint made by the Hellenists against the Hebrews. The Hellenists were Christians, born Jewish, but with a Greek background whereas the Hebrews were Christians born into Jewish cultural backgrounds. The Hellenists felt discriminated against in that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of rations.

In response, the Apostles called a meeting of the whole community of disciples and asked for seven men to be elected from the Hellenists to oversee food distribution. The men were to be of good reputation, filled with the Spirit and wisdom to carry out this duty.

The seven men were presented to the Apostles and, after prayer, the Apostles commissioned them by the laying on of hands. The seven have been regarded as the first deacons, the clerical order which in the early Church was entrusted with the care of the poor and sick. The laying on of hands conferred on the seven the authority of the Apostles, and the Hellenists were recorded as preachers and missionaries. Two of the chosen, Stephen and Philip, are said to have played an active role and Stephen, according to Acts, was the first Christian martyr. After the commissioning of the chosen seven the Apostles were able to devote themselves to prayer and spreading the message of the Christian church.

This passage in Acts describes how many followers of Christianity were given a chance to serve and we can see the start of the threefold servant ministries of bishops, priests and deacons.

As we reflect upon this passage from the perspective of our comprehensive Anglicanism, we can see in the early development of the Church a considerable degree of flexibility – the Hellenists were commissioned to specific roles and the Apostles carried on their role of spreading the Gospel. There existed a commonality in heritage of the roles together with diversity of application. There are many tasks we can be called upon to fulfil in God’s name and as Anglicans we are bound together by mutual loyalty in order to deliver the message of Christianity to our community and throughout the world.

Points to Ponder

1. Do you open yourself to hear God’s request of you to serve Him?
2. How can you serve Him in your daily living?
3. What can you do to equip yourself to serve him?

Prayer

Dear Lord, we ask that you bestow upon us the opportunities to serve you;
Please give us the awareness of these opportunities.
Guide us to be worthy instruments for you in whatever level of ministry you call us to.
May we continue to equip ourselves to be worthy of your call. Amen.

Lyn Wickham
Cardiff Parish
Day 11: Saturday 7th March
Acts 6:8 – 8:3

The Arrest, Trial and Stoning of Stephen, Saul Persecutes the Church

Here is a contrast between those who want to preserve the status quo and those who change with the times; afraid of change or embracing change; a contrast between those who want to control and those who want to share godly love.

As Stephen read the Hebrew Scriptures, he saw godly people through the ages migrating from place to place with guidance of the Holy Spirit but at times straying or meeting opposition. The Jews themselves had rejected Moses and abused the Temple.

The Temple in Jerusalem had become a power base in contrast to a moveable dwelling and meeting place as the earlier Tabernacle had been. God was not contained in a single place but was with the people wherever they were, whether in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Jerusalem or elsewhere.

Stephen did not reject the Temple as such but the abuse of the Temple. His view aligned with that of Jesus, who stressed its true purpose of being a 'house of prayer' (Luke 19:46). The particular abuse that Stephen addressed was the use of the Temple to restrict and exclude people, and ultimately to try to confine and manipulate God. ‘This house, this way—here and nowhere else’.

Application

Wisdom is not so much what you know, but how you live. It is the ability to respond correctly to the circumstances of life. Stephen shows us a life of a wise person, helping others in practical ways, able and unafraid to defend his faith and forgiving even at the end.

Evangelism is a matter of character and content. It is not just what you say, it is what you are. What you are makes a platform for what you say. How we live affects the world in which we live. The Scriptures can be used with wisdom and grace or misused to confine and control.

Points to ponder

1. Do I live to preserve the status quo or change to status quo?
2. Does my behaviour day by day reflect the grace and power of God?

Prayer

We give thanks for men and women of wisdom and grace bringing help and healing where there is poverty or sickness of any kind, and opening hearts and minds to the reality of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

We remember Jesus and Stephen who yearned to set people free from religious words and images that caused fear and took away freedom.

May God-in-us find generous and courageous expression in our words and actions as we work to make the reign of God evident in our world. Amen.

The Reverend Robyn Fry
The Church of the Transfiguration, Windale
STUDY GUIDE
Week 2: Faithfulness in Adversity

VALUE: Committed to Healthy Ministry

PRAYER
Open with a brief prayer seeking God’s guidance as you reflect together.

SHARE
- Insights from your readings this week.
- Anything that arose for you from the ‘Points to Ponder’.

DISCUSS
1. Throughout the readings this week, from Jesus’ wilderness temptations to various incidents on the life of the Early Church, a common theme is faithfulness in adversity. Jesus stayed faithful, though he was tempted in the wilderness. We also saw the Early Church struggle both with persecution from outside as well as internal contention (Ananias and Sapphira).
   “Have you noticed how in Acts the Early Church enjoyed a time of growth, this was immediately followed by something .. to tear them down” (Steve Sylvester).

   What is your experience of maintaining faithfulness in times of trial, contention or adversity? How do you recognise God’s presence and call at these times the time … and how do you recognise this in hindsight?

2. “Evangelism is a matter of character and content. It’s not just what you say, it’s what you are” (The Rev’d Robyn Fry).

   How do you care for yourself and others as you engage in mission and ministry?

3. What is the lesson from these readings of the Early Church (Acts 3.1 to 8.3) for you and your parish today?

CLOSE
With a time of prayer.
Week 3: Conversion – Lives Changed

VALUE: Called to be a Safe Church
Day 12: Sunday Lent 2
John 3:1 – 17

Nicodemus and Jesus, The Nicodemus Principle

When I studied evangelism our lecturer had a list of catch phrases, one being, ‘The Nicodemus Principle’. Now the principle is that becoming a disciple of Jesus involves a process that occurs over time. We see this with Nicodemus.

In John 3 we first meet Nicodemus, but clearly Nicodemus had already had indirect contact with Jesus (verse 2), and he was clearly impressed!

But he was also confused, for clearly God was with Jesus – but then, why did his mates hate Jesus so much?

In the end Nicodemus decided to pay Jesus a visit, but he was afraid of what his mates might think, so he went to Jesus at night (verse 2).

But Jesus simply added to his confusion. For, to become His disciple, Nicodemus would have to give up everything. For Jesus said, ‘No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’.

Now this came as a bit of a shock to Nicodemus, because he had been taught that a person would be saved if they were good and obeyed God’s laws. And anyway, it was ridiculous to think that his mother could give birth to him - again.

But Jesus continued, ‘No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit’. Now these words point to our baptism – which symbolises, as we read in Romans 6, that we have been united with Christ in His death, but also in His RESURRECTION (Romans 6:14-15), into the new life that is governed by the Spirit.

Now it may surprise you to learn that Jesus did not convert Nicodemus that night. But God continued to work in his life. For, in John 7, Nicodemus defended Jesus before his mates. Then, in chapter 19, Nicodemus helped to bury the body of Jesus – an act which would have incurred the wrath of his mates and prevented him from partaking in the Passover.

But it didn’t matter! For Nicodemus had discovered the true meaning of the Passover and the God who ‘loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him will have ETERNAL life’.

Points to Ponder

1. Consider how you might help those in your life, whom God is drawing to Himself, to discover the truth about Jesus.
2. Spend time praying for them and praying for yourself – that you may have an opportunity to explain to them how THEY can be born again.

Prayer

God of mercy, you are full of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in mercy, and always ready to forgive: grant us grace to renounce all evil and to cling to Christ, that in every way we may prove to be your loving children; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Reverend Canon Allan Bate
Parish of Kincumber
Canon for Evangelism and Evangelical Ministries
Day 13: Monday 9th March
Acts 8:4 – 25

Philip Preaches in Samaria

Philip was ministering in communities other than his hometown, spreading the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. While in Samaria, he performed signs and miracles, and baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Many people came to believe, including Simon who had for a long time amazed the people with his magic. But the signs that Philip performed were not tricks or demonstrations of power like Simon’s magic. Philip cleansed the demon possessed and healed the sick.

Hearing of the conversion of the people of Samaria, the apostles sent Peter and John to pray for the new believers and lay their hands upon them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit. Simon falsely believed that the authority vested in Peter and John could be bought and in doing so, demonstrated the true intent of his heart. He saw an opportunity to amaze people again. Peter confronted him and called him out as his heart was not right with God. But Peter also offered Simon a way back through repentance and God’s forgiveness.

Sometimes, our intentions are very good, and we believe whole heartedly, but we see through Simon’s experience, how easy it can be to revert to our old ways. Faith, belief and conversion are not only one-time life changing events, they are lifetime events that draw us ever closer to the heart of God, sometimes despite ourselves.

True discipleship means becoming more like Jesus; learning, growing, repenting, asking for forgiveness, always coming back to answer the call of the One who loves us into being, calls us and claims us as His own. It is not only a part of us that must turn to Christ, but our whole selves ... our head, our heart, our life. We must be willing to give God the glory, not seeking glory for ourselves because it is in Jesus that we find our true identity and it is through Jesus that we encounter God. As we teach and model the life of the faithful, we do so by all that we do, say and believe. Each one of us is called to be disciples and to share the Christian story.

Actions usually speak much louder than words. May our true hearts be known by both our actions and our words. May all that we do and say bring God’s word to others and glory to His name.

Points to Ponder

1. What is it like to follow where God calls me?
2. How is it different when that call is to unfamiliar places?
3. What resources / experiences help me to tell the Christian story?

Prayer

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.

The Reverend Nicole Baldwin
Parish of Branxton-Greta-Lochinvar
Day 14: Tuesday 10\textsuperscript{th} March

Acts 8:26 – 40

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

In this passage about a life liberated when encountering Holy Scripture, the church is given a lesson in both how to read the scriptures and grow the church. It begins with an apostle being sent out by an angel of the Lord into a wilderness place and ends with a newly baptised disciple rejoicing and taking the Gospel into Africa.

This is no ordinary conversion story. The eunuch is three-times an outsider. Firstly, he is Ethiopian, which to the Jewish Philip means an alien, a foreigner. Secondly, he was a eunuch - a castrated male who did not meet the sex/gender norms of the community. And finally, he was a slave - and despite being a high ranking official in the service of a foreign Queen, he was still a male slave to a female queen in a misogynistic world.

From the eunuch we learn about humility in approaching the scriptures. He acknowledges he doesn’t know the meaning of the passage from Isaiah, and asks “How can I understand unless someone guides me?”

Philip might be seen as a bridge builder between the Hebrew and Hellenistic worlds. In John’s Gospel, the Greeks go to Philip and ask to meet Jesus. And in this passage, Philip goes outside of the city, into the danger of the wilderness road. To take the gospel to a genuine outsider, to learn about Jesus, the outsider who became both sacrificial victim and Saviour to all, including people like the eunuch.

Perhaps the key to this story of liberation is that the eunuch was reading a passage about a figure in Isaiah 53:7-8 who is denied justice in his humiliation. The ambiguity of the figure means it is possible for the eunuch to identify with him, and for Philip to read the passage Christologically and identify the figure with Jesus. For the eunuch then, this Jesus whom Philip attests is the crucified and risen Lord, is like him. An outsider, scorned, never fully welcomed into society. And yet, the same Jesus is God, who invites the eunuch to participate in the divine life. By being baptised into Jesus’ death and resurrection, those who society deems other, by virtue of race, gender, class, or any other social construct, have access to God. They, like the eunuch, can go into the world liberated and rejoicing.

Application

There is a great hunger for the truth in a post-truth world. Like the eunuch, many are searching for God and how God speaks into their lives. Many are searching for liberation. Can we as the church learn the lessons of Philip and the early church? Are we prepared to leave the safety of the temple and journey into the wilderness places of our city and country? Are you willing to walk alongside the outsider and the outcast, to listen to their story, understand their pain, and explore the scriptures from the perspective of the other, rather than our own? Are we ready to do some genuine rejoicing as we take on God’s Mission, baptising new believers whoever and wherever they may be?

Points to Ponder

1. We come to scripture with presuppositions, agendas, and prejudices. Are we willing to explore scripture with the church and learn as energetically as we are willing to share it with others?
2. How can I be a bridge builder between the secular world and the church?
3. Can I be an insider in the church with an outsider’s perspective?

Prayer

\textit{God of our liberation, we thank you that your Holy Spirit prompts others to walk alongside us as we search for you in Holy Scripture and in the wilderness places; give to us the fearlessness to go where your spirit may send us, the humility to ask for guidance when seeking your truth, and the grace to understand you anew from the perspective of others, so that the church may be a place of safety for those on the margins, and a place of rejoicing for those who find new life in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.}

The Reverend Canon Andrew Eaton
St Luke’s Wallsend
Day 15: Wednesday 11th March
Acts 9:1 – 31

Conversion of Saul, Saul Preaches in Damascus, Escapes, Preaches in Jerusalem

I’ll be honest. I’m more of an Emmaus Road than a Damascus Road sort of person. The slow burn of the hearts being nurtured and taught along the way reflects my faith story more than a dramatic, converting moment such as Saul’s. Yet, Luke records both stories for us, because both are about changed lives, in which discipling and nurturing are central. Our encounter with Christ is as individual as we are: what happens next makes the difference.

Whilst our focus is centred on Saul’s dramatic experience, the involvement of others is key. Understandably reticent yet faithful Ananias; Barnabas, living up to his name as an encourager; Straight Street Judas, who cares for Saul at his most vulnerable; and unnamed companions, on the road, in Damascus, and those who brought Saul down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus. What is important about all these people is that they take Saul’s experience seriously; they care for him; and they support him in ways that are right for that time and place. Some come with the wisdom of being more mature believers. Others come with practical help and guidance. Importantly all recognise through prayer, through testimony, through personal experience, that God is at work in and through Saul, and they do their part to enable and support God’s mission.

How do we nurture and support new believers? Like Ananias, we might feel that we’re taking an enormous risk: “Lord, I’ve heard much about this person”. And what we’ve heard may challenge us because their experience, their expression, their understanding, isn’t like ours. Still, this passage is filled with people who are willing to take that risk, because they see the big picture, God’s picture. They say it takes a village to raise a child: how are our faith villages safe places to raise and nurture new children of God?

Points to ponder

1. Invite someone to share their faith story with you. Reflect on what is like your experience and what is different. Give thanks for the ways in which God calls and uses us differently.
2. Who nurtured or nurtures you? How might you ‘pay it forward’?

Prayer

*God of all faithfulness, send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with understanding, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

(adapted Prayer of the day, Fourth Sunday of Easter Year A, A Prayer Book for Australia, p. 510)

The Very Reverend Katherine Bowyer
Dean of Newcastle
Christ Church Cathedral
Day 16: Thursday 12th March
Acts 9:32 – 43

The Healing of Aeneas, Peter in Lydda and Joppa

In today’s text we find St Peter going “here and there among all the believers” (verse 32), in the quickly growing church in the areas of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Peter visits the saints in the town of Lydda, halfway between Jerusalem and Joppa on the coast and it is here that he ‘finds’ a man by the name of Aeneas.

Aeneas was a believer who had been paralysed for 8 years. How he came to be a paralytic or how long he had been a believer, we are left without any way of knowing. Upon seeing Aeneas’ condition Peter says to him “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed”. Peter’s prayer was not a request that Jesus might heal Aeneas. No, Peter is boldly pronouncing a statement of fact – Peter knew precisely what Jesus would do right then and there for Aeneas.

Aeneas responds to Peter’s pronouncement with faith and immediately stands up which caused quite a stir in the little town of Lydda. In fact, Aeneas’ healing caused all the residents of Lydda and nearby Sharon, to turn to the Lord (verse 35).

Each one of us has a testimony of Jesus’ healing in our lives – a healing or change brought about in our lives explainable only as the action of God. It is our testimony of healing and wholeness that others need to hear about, to see, and by which they may turn to the Lord themselves for their own healing.

Points to Ponder

1. What ministry opportunities might you ‘find’ if you took up a habit of going “here and there among the believers” in your community?
2. Peter wrote in his first letter, encouraging people just like you and me, to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have…”? (1 Peter 3:15). What is the answer you could give to someone wondering about the hope you have?
3. Can you point to a time in your life when either physically, emotionally, or in some other way you were not experiencing the peace of God? Can you share with others how it was by turning to Christ that you were able to experience peace and wholeness in your life?

Prayer

*Jesus I am in awe at your healing power and I open myself to experiencing anew or perhaps for the first time, the joy of being made whole by your Holy Spirit. Open my eyes to see the healing and wholeness you have brought to my life already and for which I can give testimony to others. May my healing also turn others to you Jesus. Amen.*

The Reverend Greg Colby
Parish of Belmont North Redhead
Day 17: Friday 13th March
Acts 10:1 – 48

Peter and Cornelius, Gentiles Hear the Good News and Receive the Holy Spirit

This story is about two men who in prayerfulness, openness and faithfulness allow for the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The two men were Peter the Apostle, a Jewish Christian living in Joppa, and Cornelius a Roman Centurion professing the Jewish faith, living in Caesarea, I CE.

The initial momentum of this story comes from definitive interventions of God, who delivers separate visions to Peter and Cornelius. Obedient to God’s call, the two come together and meet. Their mutual yet initially not fully understood destiny in Caesarea is the offering of Baptism by Peter to Cornelius and reception of Baptism by Cornelius.

The momentum picks up with the travelling of Cornelius representatives to Joppa and then Peter from Joppa (Jewish enclave) to Caesarea (Roman enclave). The Apostle Peter and his six men break the boundaries of their geographic and cultural safety and travel to meet Cornelius, a strong Roman Centurion, a Gentile professing faith in the Jewish God. While God calls the shots through the visions, it is the two men who decide separately to meet through the prevailing custom of Hospitality, to stay and eat and listen to one another.

Both men lead faithful lives of prayer to the one God Yahweh. However, both men on account of their cultural upbringings, one Jewish and the other Hellenistic/Roman were more or less attached to customs that might stop their ability to cross the threshold of acceptance to the other and share in the liberation of the Gospel of Christ, as a church.

It seems that Peter’s realisation of what his vision means, is only just in time for the meeting of Cornelius’ desire to transition into full relational communion of faith with the triune God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to receive forgiveness for his sins through Jesus Christ and begin a new path in life.

It would have been easy for Peter to have held back from fully blessing Cornelius. Coming from a Jewish tradition, he may well have decided to debate the matter further. However, Peter embraces the presence and action of the Holy Spirit at the moment and takes the step in faith, to ensure that first Cornelius and second the Church can move forward.

Points to Ponder

1. Key considerations for the Christian church and Christian life are the necessity for a prayerful life and a willingness to meet others, where they are, in a spirit of mutuality and hospitality.
2. Take a moment to reflect on the ways you are implementing these in your life.

Prayer

*Gracious God, we ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to move us and shape us afresh so we may take new steps forward for our lives and the life of the church. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.*

Josephine Snowdon
Chaplain to the Samaritans Foundation
Day 18: Saturday 14th March
Acts 11:1 – 18

Peter’s Report to the Church at Jerusalem

While Peter has been in Caesarea, people have given their lives to Jesus. On his return, the other apostles and believers alike criticised Peter for not following the Law in regard to eating with and fellowshipping with the Gentiles. Through the new covenant of grace that was ushered in through the life and passion of Jesus, we find a freedom in ministry and mission that encourages us to engage with people wherever they may be.

This freedom is depicted in Peter’s vision of a large sheet being let down from the sky with all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds on it, and with a voice from heaven telling him to kill and eat. Recalling Jewish Law, Peter refuses, with the voice from heaven telling him not to call something uncleanness that God has made clean.

Trusting the Holy Spirit, and with a new-found liberation, Peter goes to Caesarea with the three Gentile men, where he meets and eats with people in their homes. Peter also watches as people become full members of the rapidly developing Jesus-family through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Had Peter held fast to the Law and not the New Covenant of grace (unmerited favour) Jesus had ushered in, many people in Caesarea would not have come to know Jesus as their Saviour and the early church would not have grown in faith, vibrancy and momentum.

Application

We too have freedom through Jesus to go and meet people where they are at, to get outside of the temple and to tell people about the Living God who sent Jesus, to get them and bring them back to Him. We are called to reach out to those often rejected by society, the marginalised, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, addicts and people with mental health illnesses. As carriers of God’s new covenant of grace and as Living Gospels, we can touch and add value to people’s lives as we reach out and shine the light of Christ into the lives of others.

Points to Ponder

1. We would grow in our faith and be a vibrant church that adds value to people’s lives.
2. We would find the freedom to get outside of our buildings and meet people where they are at in life
3. We would, empowered by the Holy Spirit, go out of our way to find opportunities to tell people about Jesus and help them come into his Kingdom.

Prayer

Remember, O Lord, what you have wrought in us and not what we deserve, and, as you have called us to your service, makes us worthy of our calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(© APBA)

The Reverend Colin Walters
Cameron Park
STUDY GUIDE
Week 3: Conversion – Lives Changed

VALUE: Called to be a Safe Church

PRAYER
Open with a brief prayer seeking God’s guidance as you reflect together.

SHARE

• Insights from your readings this week.
• Anything that arose for you from the ‘Points to Ponder’.

DISCUSS

1. What an interesting series of readings! Each day this week we read of lives changed by the Good News of the Gospel. The converts range from the Pharisee Nicodemus, to Gentile Cornelius and an Ethiopian eunuch. We even read of a whole village being converted, and of Peter teaching the other Early Church members of this new thing God was doing. We read of instant conversions and gradual conversions. In all of these people shared the Good News with others.

   Have you shared your faith with another person, or invited to come to church with you (or perhaps to Alpha or similar)? Share this experience with other group members.

   Reflect together on what the Good News you have to share is.

2. In the story of Simon Magus (Monday) we heard of someone who sought to attention to himself through trickery and deceit. We read:

   “Peter confronted him and called him out as his heart was not right with God. But Peter also offered Simon a way back through repentance and God’s forgiveness. ... Faith, belief and conversion are not only one-time life changing events, they are lifetime events that draw us ever closer to the heart of God” (The Rev’d Nicole Baldwin).

   How you might these words speak to our value, “Called to be a Safe Church”?

3. What is the lesson from these readings of the Early Church (Acts 8.4 to 11.18) for you and your parish today?

CLOSE
With a time of prayer.
Week 4: Sharing the Good News

VALUE: Encouraging Inclusion
Day 19: Sunday Lent 3
John 4:5 – 42

The Woman at the Well

So Jesus came to a place that belonged to the People of the Land. It had been given to them by their ancestors. Jesus was tired and was sitting by the waterhole. An indigenous woman came to get water in her Coolamon (water carrier). She asked Him “How come you’re asking me, an outcast, to get you water? Don’t you know what will happen to you if you hang around us?”

Jesus listened; He listened to her.

The woman of the land says that, “our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but the Jews say we have to worship at Jerusalem.” Jesus answers her with “the time is coming when you will worship in Spirit and in Truth”. Truth. Here in this land, the people of the land are asking that Truth be told.

Jesus’ followers saw Him talking to the indigenous woman and said to Him “have you eaten? You must be Nurrigah (someone to be pitied) talking to that woman!” The followers of the Way did not understand.

The woman went back to her people of the land and told them all that He had said. Many of them followed Jesus because Jesus was truly their Elder and Brother, in that He listened.

Reflection

I have always seen the Anglican Church coming to this land in a pot plant. The pot plant was placed on the land. The pot needs to be broken and the roots of the church grow and mingle in this land. God did not arrive here on the front of Captain Cook’s boat, He was already here.

In this valley we have caves that have had continuous occupation and teaching for over 3000 years. They teach of a God who has arms that stretch out over the whole valley, embracing us and caring for us. In our language He is Byamee. He has eyes that see, to show us that He is watching over this land. He has a kangaroo tail that tells us He is infinite. Always was and always will be. Like the woman in this story who had a mountain that was holy, we too have mountains that are sacred. Mount Yengo is where God stepped down on this land. It is time to listen to the Truth and hear the Spirit of this land.

Points to Ponder

1. Over the years Christian Churches have tried to treat Jesus as though he were a precious pot plant and tried to keep Jesus’ root bound. In what ways do we try to keep Jesus to ourselves?
2. How are we allowing Jesus and the Gospel message to break free of social and historical constraints?
3. In what ways does Jesus’ teaching reflect Aboriginal spirituality?
4. Who are the marginalised in our society?
5. How do we listen to them?

Prayer

God of Holy Dreaming, enliven in us the gift of listening. Jesus our elder, taught us to listen to an indigenous woman, marginalised by a society; a society that believed they had the Truth. Open our eyes and our ears to those who are marginalised, so that we can see and embrace God in all that surrounds us. We ask this through Jesus our brother and elder. Amen.

The Reverend Di Langham
Chaplain, Cessnock Correctional Centre
Day 20: Monday 16th March
Acts 11:19 – 30

The Church in Antioch

Something happens in life which causes us to make a dramatic turn. It might be for any reason and may not seem significant to others, but it has a power to move us in a particular and unexpected direction. Such was the case for those who were persecuted and ended up in Antioch. Fear, danger and the unknown were present to these people who only spoke to the Jews. Thankfully they were not alone and some courageous people took the opportunity to speak about the Lord to the Hellenists.

We see a pattern in this early story of the Church about how easy it is to relate to people like ourselves, who we hope will find what we have to offer acceptable. We may feel unsure about going outside our circle of friends and acquaintances. How will we be received? I am surprised at the willingness of people to greet me despite the bad press over the last decade. Some days I do have to make more of an effort to be present and welcoming of the other person. These are unexpected moments of grace, such as Barnabas witnessed when he came to Antioch. Our reaction to these moments is parallel to Barnabas as he both rejoiced and “exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (verse 23). Often our work is that of Barnabas, to encourage others to be steadfast. This is nearly impossible if we are not also a person who is open to the Holy Spirit. Barnabas was a person who knew that he needed help, so we hear of him going to Tarsus to find Saul (verse 25).

This passage of scripture reminds us of the importance of trusting God no matter how we feel. It tells us that we should expect to be surprised as God increases the church members. It reminds us of the importance of seeking the Holy Spirit in any ministry and of the need to work in a collaborative manner with others. Finally, it speaks to us of the need to go beyond our circle and respond to others in need as the disciples did “to the believers living in Judea” (verse 29).

Points to Ponder

1. How might I pray when feeling fear and facing an uncertain future?
2. Reflect on those unexpected moments of grace and those who are a Barnabas to us. What opportunities do I have to encourage others in the church and my circle of influence?
3. Where might I find wisdom and holy guidance as I seek to serve God?

Prayer

Lord God, our Redeemer, who heard the cry of your people and sent your servant Moses to lead them out of slavery: free us from the tyranny of sin and death and, by the leading of your Spirit, bring us to our promised land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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The Reverend Canon Roger Zohrab
Chaplain, John Hunter Hospital
Day 21: Tuesday 17th March
Acts 12:1 – 24

James Killed, Peter Imprisoned and Delivered from Prison, Death of Herod

‘A drama in three acts.’

I’ve been a reader of stories since being bedridden with asthma during childhood. I’ve been a Christian reader probably since Confirmation Class in Sunday School, then my decision to follow Christ at a Billy Graham Sydney Crusade, and by following the SU Daily Bible readings given to me at high school ISCF.

This chapter of the Acts of the Apostles satisfies not only my appreciation of storytelling, but also confirms my belief in my Lord-and-Master’s presence with me through all the stuff of life.

In Act One today, the horror of the vicious Herod Agrippa arranging for the murders of the apostles, James Boanerges and Peter, is very scary. But, chained there in his cell, guarded on each side, and knowing his fellow apostle has already been killed, does Peter worry? No! His trust and knowledge of Jesus gives him the power to ‘keep calm and carry on’. And besides, he knows that his church is praying strenuously for him.

Act Two, the body of the drama in Peter’s miraculous escape, is breathtaking. We smile at the beautifully balanced and exact details of the amazed disbelief of his church-folk. They hear he’s out of prison and knock, knock, knocking at the door, and their prayers have been answered!

Act Three of today’s story satisfies our deep belief that the villain gets his ‘just deserts’. Just as God promises throughout the Bible, through His grace in placing all our burden of sin on His Son, the victory is God’s and ours in the final battle.

Application

To take this bit of drama into our selves gives us reason never to be astonished at God’s plan and purpose for our lives. In the face of danger, disability, diversity and devastation we reminded not to be anxious for anything, but to be peaceful, keep calm and carry on. The purpose in being members of the church, the body of Christ, is to experience the security of knowing that for all our diversity we are people of prayer, and that our strenuous prayers are listened to and acted upon by our Father God.

Points to Ponder

1. The remembrance of our salvation gives rise to thanks for the past and trust for the future in God.
2. God’s power is made concrete in our unifying in prayer.
3. We are a new creation for changing God’s world into believers.

Prayer

Father, when we look back on the work and worry of our lives, and our daily worship of You, we say, “We should have trusted You! We should keep on trusting You”. Thank You for being our faithful, true and loving Saviour. Amen.

Helen Fraser
Parish of Kincumber
Barnabas and Saul in Ministry

While the gospel was penetrating hearts and minds in Judea and Samaria (Acts 1:1-12), it is now about to break into new ground.

1. **SAUL AND BARNABAS COMMISSIONED.** Flourishing in their multiculturalism, the Jewish-Gentile Church was expanding (11:20). The deepening of their gospel identity became the focus: Barnabas and Saul were brought to shepherd them (11:22, 25-26). After God provided more prophetic teachers, Paul and Barnabas were convicted by the Spirit and set apart to pioneer new missions (13:1-2). Expressing their support, the Church affirmed the Lord’s call through the laying on of hands (13:3). They were then sent to Cyprus (13:4).

2. **GOSPEL MISSION IN CYPRUS.** Arriving at the east coast of Cypris, the gospel was announced in the Jewish synagogues (13:5). Paul’s pioneering posture was likely marked by humility (13:9). He was no longer primarily using his Jewish name, Saul, which represented the attractive king of Israel (1 Sam. 9:2); He used his Roman name, Paul, which meant smallness. Now entering Paphos, Paul and Barnabas meet Bar-Jesus. Bar-Jesus was a false teacher who was deceiving the people with dark magic and false prophecy (13:6). With fervent resistance, he tactfully opposed the gospel (13:8). Exposing the deception, Bar-Jesus was then blinded (13:11). No Saul-like confession of humility was recorded (9:3-19). But unlike Bar-Jesus, the heart of the witnessing magistrate was pierced with the ‘teaching of the Lord’ (13:12). Paul and Barnabas then ventured to Pisidian Antioch (13:13).

3. **GOSPEL MISSION IN PISIDIAN ANTIOCH.** Using the same pioneering strategy, Paul and Barnabas entered the synagogue. Invited to preach, Paul accepted the invitation (13:15). Summarising the unfolding drama of Scripture, Christ Jesus was magnified with precision. Paul showed how all the Scriptures pointed to Jesus (John 5:39). While the rulers failed to recognise this truth by condemning him on the cross, God physically raised Jesus from the dead to confirm his work of forgiveness (13:38). It no wonder Paul proclaimed, “everyone who believes is set free” (13:39). Refreshed by the gospel, the people then yearned for the overflowing wells of God’s grace (13:42): “The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord” (13:44). Through this Spirit-filled preaching, in the context of Jewish oppression, a gospel movement penetrated the ancient world (13:45-48).

Application

Throughout this mission narrative, we see Paul take the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” As he wielded ‘the word of God,’ the powers of the age were stripped of their authority. As he faithfully and humbly expounded the Scriptures, the light of the gospel broke into the hearts of those who were yearning for the food of heaven (Matt. 4:4). May we learn from their humble reliance on the gospel.

Points to Ponder

1. What does it look like to have a faithful and bold reliance on the gospel?
2. How could you encourage the work of missions in your local church?

Prayer

*Heavenly Father, thank you for commissioning Paul and Barnabas to pioneer the gospel outside of Samaria and Judea. As we seek to make the riches of your grace known, may your Spirit give us a humble reliance on the gospel. Amen.*

The Reverend Jesse Baker
Parish of Scone
Day 23: Thursday 19th March
Acts 14:1 – 28

Paul and Barnabas in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, Antioch

Paul and Barnabas have continued their journey further into the Asia Minor region or what we would understand today as Eastern Turkey. Along this path they have been greeted with great success with many communities both Jew and Gentile, even so like us still today some people meet them with hostility to the good news that they bring. Even to the point of tracking them down. We read back in Acts 8 of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem, forcing people out into the countryside of Judea and Samaria. The same pressure is now on Paul, and Barnabas from these communities to move Christian missionary work out into new cities and regions. Paul finds himself now in a position where his role has flipped, not so long ago he was the persecutor of Christians, now he with Barnabas are the persecuted.

The development in this journey is that of their encounter with the audience at Lystra, a community that is like many other Gentile communities are worshipping pagan false gods. After witnessing a miracle of God through the hands of Paul, they believe that Paul and Barnabas are human forms of these false gods. Even after Paul’s, and Barnabas’ strong resistance to their projected assumptions about who they are, the people of Lystra keep trying to worship them.

It was only after the Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and won over the crowds that they turned on Paul and Barnabas. After they had stoned Paul and left him thinking he was dead, were the two missionaries able to move on. In Derby, many people listed to the good news and became disciples, then they all returned to Lystra, moving on afterwards to Iconium and Antioch. This time when returning, they strengthened the people and encouraged them to continue in the faith.

After all this, Paul and Barnabas reported back to the Church at Antioch. They called the people of God together to tell them of all the great things God had done with them. Speaking about how through God, the door of faith had opened to the Gentiles.

Telling the good news of Jesus can be for many a difficult task, and it appears that is also true for Paul, and Barnabas. The radical message of transformation does not always gel well with people, because it requires us to accept or reject, and in that response of acceptance, it requires a change of life. Just as Saul became Paul, from persecutor to persecuted, Christ invites us all to that same transformation of life. There will be times where we understand it wrong, just like the people of Lystra, and we can even be lead off course! However, the good news of Christ never changes. The message of Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow; that’s why it is, so life-changing. Drawing all people into the very depths of God himself, building up the body of Christ.

Prayer

1. What are the times you have had objections to telling people about the good news?
2. Have there been moments that you have felt encouraged by sharing the good news with the people you have met?

Prayer

Lord of Life, you invite us into a deeper relationship with you. Encourage us in our baptismal calling to make disciples of every nation. Empower us by your Spirit to be people who spread your good news — sharing it to all people, at all times, and in all places. Amen.

Father Zebulan McKrell
Church of the Good Shepherd, Kotara
Day 24: Friday 20th March
Acts 15:1 – 35

The Council at Jerusalem, The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers

How many Christians have had their enthusiasm smothered by the internal wrangling and bickering of the church? Or, how have decisions been affected in church meetings by personal prejudices or agendas, rather than the Word of God? Acts 15:1-35 is concerned primarily with conflict resolution between two different faith communities. This was a particularly difficult dispute to negotiate, for it involved the bringing together of both Jew and Gentile. Two groups of Christians who shared little in common, not history, tradition, customs or practices.

The main theological question up for urgent debate at the Jerusalem Council, was, how does a Gentile belong to the developing Judaeo-Christian community? The real difficulty was whether the Gentile believers had to adhere to the laws of Moses and other traditions, like circumcision. The Jewish Christians insisted that the Gentiles should follow the law and submit to the rite of circumcision. However, Paul and Barnabas, and other church leaders believed that the Old Testament law was very important but was not a prerequisite to salvation.

This controversy had intensified largely due to the success of the new Gentile churches. The conservatives in the Jerusalem church were led by converted pharisees (verse 15) who preferred a legalistic religion to one based on faith alone. This passage is an example of a useful method of debate, or how the church ought to argue and actively listen (verses 7-21). This deliberation not only acknowledges that the church leaders are bureaucratic functionaries; but that the leaders should be bold visionaries, who need to take into consideration all the arguments.

A notable lesson from this passage is, do not let disagreements divide you from other believers. Rather, seeking assistance and further information is a sound method for resolving problems and preserving unity in the Christian Communion.

Points to Ponder

1. Describe a time when you felt excluded.
2. Read Galatians 5:1-6. What is the danger of adding additional requirements (like circumcision) to the gospel?
3. Note the way in which the apostles and elders at the council conducted their discussion. Both Peter and James, prominent leaders at the church in Jerusalem, were careful to use wisdom and reasoning that was based on Scripture. How might this be applied to church decision-making today? What about your own decision making?

Prayer

There is something of the pharisee in all of us. Let us pray that when we mistakenly uphold tradition, structure and legal requirements in our practice of obeying God, that we might heed the lessons of scripture and not arrogantly dispose of another’s point of view.

Alexandra Banks
Parish of Woy Woy
Day 25: Saturday 21st March
Acts 15:36 – 16:10

Paul & Barnabas Separate, Timothy Joins Paul & Silas

How one short verse in Acts sets up our reading today.

“Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem” (Acts 13:13).

Mark had accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey as a sort of general helper. For some unexplained reason he leaves them part way through, and it is because of this Paul refuses to take him this second time. This causes a rift between Paul and Barnabas so they go their separate ways. Paul takes Silas on his second missionary journey leaving Barnabas and Mark to set out on their own.

Mark is young and inexperienced. I wonder if Paul hadn’t taken that into account and that giving him a second chance with some more focused mentoring might have been all that was needed. Barnabas, being Mark’s cousin, might have seen the potential in Mark that Paul missed.

It is easy to write someone off who hasn’t lived up to our expectations because of something we perceive as a weakness of character. This is especially true if we were relying on them, it makes their actions more personal. I often think in times like these we can be more forgiving of ourselves than we are for others.

So, Paul and Barnabas part ways. Rather than this being disastrous it leads to greater things. Paul and Silas go on for a successful second missionary journey and meet up with Timothy who becomes a great help to Paul. Barnabas and Mark also go on a successful missionary journey, which gives Mark the confidence he needs and later becomes one who is with Paul in prison in Rome.

“Aristarchus my fellow-prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him” (Colossians 4:10).

I wonder if Barnabas’ name has something to do with Mark’s transformation. Barnabas means Son of Encouragement. Maybe having a mentor that understands a second chance with encouragement can bring out a person’s true potential is what Mark needed. If we find ourselves in positions of leadership this could be an important lesson when dealing with someone who has let us down. If we have failed at a task and feel broken, maybe we could look for a Barnabas to help build us up again.

Points to Ponder

1. What do you think it was like for Paul to refuse taking Mark with him?
2. What do you think it was like for Barnabas to side with Mark?
3. How do you think Mark was feeling about all this?
4. Have there been times in your church community where this scenario has played out?
5. Through the lens of this story could you help the three parties to find some resolution?
6. Who is the person out of these three that needs the most care?

Prayer

Lord God, our Redeemer, who heard the cry of your people and sent your servant Moses to lead them out of slavery: free us from the tyranny of sin and death and, by the leading of your Spirit, bring us to our promised land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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The Reverend Mark Cooper
MICA Parish
STUDY GUIDE
Week 4: Sharing the Good News

VALUE: Encouraging Inclusion

PRAYER
Open with a brief prayer seeking God’s guidance as you reflect together.

SHARE
- Insights from your readings this week.
- Anything that arose for you from the ‘Points to Ponder’.

DISCUSS
1. This week begins with the account of Jesus sharing the Good News with the Woman at the Well, and in Acts moves to the apostles in Mission, focussed largely on the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. The themes of sharing the Good News and Inclusion are interwoven through this whole section. Interestingly, as Friday’s reading highlights, success in mission can bring trouble at home. The Early Church also struggled with its humanity!

   What elements of sharing the Good News further afield have stood out to you as you have reflected on this week’s passages?

2. “We see a pattern in this early story of the Church as to how easy it is to relate to people like ourselves … We may feel unsure about going outside our circle of friends and acquaintances” (Fr Roger Zohrab).

   How you might these words, and the readings of this week, encourage you in “Encouraging Inclusion”?

3. What is the lesson from these readings of the Early Church (Acts 11.19 to 16.10) for you and your parish today?

CLOSE
With a time of prayer.
Week 5: Seeing is Believing

VALUE: Using Our Resources Well
Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

Walking along with his disciples, Jesus sees and heals a man who has been blind from birth. For all involved, it is the same scene and the same events, and yet those events are seen very differently. Jesus sees a man, a person with the potential to become whole and to live fully. The disciples do not see the man. Instead they see evidence of sin: “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” The neighbours see a puzzle. “Isn’t this the man born blind? How can he see?” The Pharisees see a breach of the Law. “This man, Jesus, does not observe the Sabbath.” The man’s parents see a threat to their place in the community- they could be put out of the synagogue. And what of the man himself? What does he see? He sees firstly a “man from God” who can heal someone born blind. On meeting Jesus again, he sees even more clearly. He sees who Jesus truly is. He sees the One who is “Son of Man”, who is “Lord”, who is worthy of worship and therefore God.

Of the many characters in the story, it is the man born blind who learns to see truly. He is the one who sees that Jesus is “the light of the world” offering not merely physical but spiritual sight. The others are blinded by assumptions (sickness must be sinful), by ignorance (how can this man see?), by rigid belief systems (the Sabbath must be observed), by fear (expulsion from the synagogue). Jesus, the light of the world, enables us to see what really matters. He enables us to see those whom we meet, not as sinners, or puzzles, or law breakers, or threats, but as persons, beloved sons and daughters of God, with potential for wholeness and fullness of life. Jesus enables us to see truly if we are willing to see him as he is, the light of the world, the Lord worthy of worship.

Points to Ponder

1. How often do you put a label on someone you meet for the first time before you even get to know him or her?
2. What prejudices do you hold that prevent you from seeing clearly certain groups of people?
3. Does fear stop me from getting to know some people?
4. How do you see Jesus?

Prayer

Sight-giving God,
through Jesus, the Light of the World,
you give light to our minds and spirits:
heal us from the blindness of obsession,
ignorance, prejudice and fear,
and enable us to see the people we meet,
as Jesus sees them,
with eyes of compassion and love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever. Amen.

The Reverend Dr Barbara Howard
Christ Church Cathedral
Day 27: Monday 23rd March  
Acts 16:11 – 40  

The Power of the Gospel in Philippi: The conversion of Lydia, the slave girl and the Jailer

Can you imagine being part of this story? I wonder how I would have reacted hearing Paul preaching in Philippi, a brand-new gospel, a confronting and topical situation that was raw and fresh in everyone’s mind. As we read this passage, we can see how three people from three totally different backgrounds did respond and make a decision to follow Jesus.

Let’s take a look at Lydia, an Asian woman, a dealer in dyes and specifically purple cloth so we know she was wealthy. Lydia was successful and rich and seemed to be in control and yet she knew something was missing, she was empty. She was seeking God and was at a prayer meeting when God opened her heart to hear and respond to Paul’s message, and with God’s help she got it. Everything she knew about prophets, kings, suffering servants, sin, need for atonement, all pointed to Jesus, the lamb that takes away the sin of the world and it changed her life.

Then there is the slave girl. Someone so insignificant we do not even know her name, someone who was oppressed, impoverished, unwanted and exploited. She knew the truth about Paul and Silas’ preaching and when good and evil meet head on, Jesus’ name was victorious. She was freed from her torment and while it was not all a bed of roses, it changed her life.

Lastly to the jailer, he was changed by the way Paul and Silas lived, even while being tortured. Paul and Silas had a joy that he had never seen before, they displayed it by singing songs of praise, by not taking revenge rather by overcoming evil with good. This example changed his life.

Knowing Jesus changes lives, the gospel message has power to breach barriers caused by race, ethnicity, class and crisis and it’s a gospel for all people. God has the power to make the change, our role is to be an instrument for change, a person who shows God’s love, who confirms God’s power and who demonstrates that our faith in Jesus makes us different. Our every action, personally and as a church is an advertisement for Jesus and my prayer is that during Lent, we can be see-through servants to Jesus in everything we do.

Points to Ponder

1. When have you seen Jesus transform the life of someone unexpected?
2. Do you ever put barriers on the gospel, thinking people might be too rich, too poor or something else?
3. When you see-through everything, what is Jesus doing in your life?

Prayer

Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(© APBA)

Margaret Wicks  
Parish of Scone
Day 28: Tuesday 24th March
Acts 17:1 – 15

The Uproar in Thessalonica, Paul and Silas in Beroea

Is open-mindedness a gift or a decision?

“The world changes, but things just seem to stay the same” is a common comment when we do not seem to learn from the past. Are first century circumstances different from today? Are we prepared to listen to ideas that might have a different perspective to our own? Are we thinking about our response before we have heard the other’s point of view? Is our position combative or reflective?

These are questions which are as relevant today as they were during Paul’s visit to Thessalonica and Beroea. Last year’s elections in Australia or in the UK illustrate the point.

Paul faced factions. There were the Jews who had a view of the Messiah markedly different from the one that Paul was demonstrating carefully and methodically from scripture - “explaining and proving”. The Greeks brought with them a different religious experience. In Athens, for example, Paul speaks of a statue “to un unknown god”, amongst a vast array of gods. There are the Romans – in power, but plagued, as history reveals after the death of Julius Caesar, by many civil wars between people claiming to be king.

Paul speaks in the midst of this climate. The response involves acceptance and rejection. The rejection is both religious – not the anticipated Messiah of the Jews, but one who literally does “turn the world upside down” – and secular. This proposition is interpreted to promote a king when there is already a king, Caesar himself. A riot occurs stirred up by “some ruffians”. Unfortunately, we see some of this pattern in our modern world also – and you can name examples.

Many believed him – accepted his teaching (including influential Greeks we are told in Beroea). The point: they made a decision to listen, to be open-minded.

Those who believe Paul protect him and he moves on from Thessalonica to Beroea; and then to Athens.

Application

To be open-minded requires each of us to make a decision to be open-minded.

Points to Ponder

1. How do we respond to ideas different from our own? How should we respond?
2. From Paul’s ministry, what would be his advice/direction?

Prayer

Father, may the words of Jesus be my prayer today – “give me ears to hear” so that I might listen to you.
Amen.

The Reverend Chris Bullock
Parish of Kotara South
Day 29: Wednesday 25th March  
Acts 17:16 – 18:28

Paul in Athens, Corinth, Athens and Ministry of Apollos

Our faith is always a journey and as we explore the scriptures we often find a common thread with the challenges of sharing the Good News in our time.

In today’s reading St Paul spends a lot of time travelling, not on holidays but in response to God’s call to him. That call has trained his eyes to see opportunities, to see where God might already be active, and to help others glimpse and join in with enthusiasm.

Paul arrives in Athens before Silas and Timothy and was impatient to get on with the work. He is troubled by the idols and initially fights against them but quickly recognises an opportunity with the Altar to the Unknown God to talk about Jesus and the Resurrection. He speaks about his faith and what God offers them in Christ, and some joined him as a result of his preaching.

Paul then moves on to Corinth where he met Aquila and Priscilla, finding commonality with them as a fellow tentmaker and they worked together. When Silas and Timothy arrived to join Paul, a number were baptised, and he remained there for 18 months. He continued the good fight and God spoke to him telling him not to be afraid and not to be silent. This renewed and strengthened Pauls passion and when he came under attack, he was protected.

Then the journey continues as Paul sailed to Syria and onwards to Ephesus, Antioch, Galatia and Phrygia. He took Priscilla and Aquila with him and their insight helped lead Apollos and others to greater understanding and a more mature faith. Paul always worked in a ministry team; with each member bringing their own gifts.

A disciple is called to use their gifts for the benefit of people and the Kingdom and we too must always be ready to move forward – to respond to God’s call with enthusiasm.

Remember that our path should always be shared and that in relationship we build bridges and gain renewed strength from others.

Points to Ponder

1. What do you see as Paul’s gifts?
2. Have you considered what gifts you bring to the sharing of the gospel?
3. Who is my team? Who might be part of my team?

Prayer

God, through the Holy Spirit, you have always gifted us for the benefit of the world and people around us. Help us to recognise those gifts, to apply them in ways to bring blessing and to work graciously in teams to bring your kingdom to reality where we live. We ask these things through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

The Reverend Peter Tinney  
St John’s, Taree
Day 30: Thursday 26\textsuperscript{th} March
Acts 19:1 – 41

Paul in Ephesus, The Sons of Sceva, The Riot in Ephesus

On his return to Ephesus from Jerusalem and Antioch, the Apostle Paul encountered resistance to his preaching in the Synagogue when evil assertions were made about the early Christians. Having overcome this resistance, a violent riot several years later eventually caused Paul to leave Ephesus, very likely, demoralised.

Paul’s mission and ministry in Ephesus had been so successful that imitators, including the seven sons of the high priest established their own ministry of deliverance and healing, in the name of “the Jesus that Paul proclaims”. But, like in the Gospel stories, daemons don’t show restraint when it comes to recognising Jesus or his disciples (or not, as the case may be). So, when a demon turns on these fraudsters, even the Jewish and Greek Ephesians who were worshipping idols and practicing magic, were awestruck and they destroyed their idols and magic books. The word of the Lord increased and prevailed amongst the Ephesians.

But the evil forces would not sit back while the pagan Ephesian culture was converted by the Gospel message. The makers of the silver idols of the fertility goddess, Artemis, were outraged that Paul would denounce their hand-made gods and cost them their profits. The silversmith Demetrius incited a frenzied and violent riot against the Christians.

Paul’s mission in Ephesus suddenly went horribly wrong. Evil had struck back against the spread of the Gospel. Paul left Ephesus with his mission in tatters.

Application

We know from Acts and Paul’s epistles that all was not lost, but these were dark times for Paul’s mission. Evil had also attempted to prevent Jesus’ mission, from his birth until he was crucified, when Jesus conquered evil, rising from the dead and ascending into heaven.

Paul overcame these dark times and, even in the captivity epistles, we encounter an encouraged missionary, prepared to endure whatever was necessary to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus for all people. Mission is never easy, with highs and lows as the forces of good and evil compete for the hearts and minds of both believers and non-believers. Paul’s example inspires us to keep going even when the mission seems impossible.

Points to Ponder

1. The Christian life is a constant challenge between the power of good and evil, especially if we are committed to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.
2. When the mission seems impossible, we are challenged to believe in God’s immeasurable greatness against all that challenges us and the working of his great power in us and in others.

Prayer

As Paul prayed for the Ephesians, we pray that God will give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know him. May we always know the hope to which God has called us, and the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. Amen. (Ephesians 1:17-18)

Rev Angela Peverell
Sub Dean Christ Church Cathedral
Priest at St Peter’s Hamilton
Day 31: Friday 27th March
Acts 20:1 – 16

Paul Goes to Macedonia & Greece, Troas, Miletus

Paul’s Encouragement of the Early Church
In today’s passage we find ourselves with Paul on his third and final missionary journey (Acts 19:21 – 20:17). On this journey, Paul travelled from Antioch around to Corinth and back to Jerusalem, over a period of 4 to 5 years. (See map at www.understandchristianity.com/timelines/pauls-third-missionary-journey/). While travelling he stayed in the various communities he visited, ministering to and encouraging them.

We can note in this passage some important aspects of Paul’s ministry:
   a. Paul travels with companions with whom he shares his ministry (verse 4);
   b. Paul gathers with the community for worship and “the breaking of the bread” (verse 7); and
   c. Paul teaches this community with great passion. We read in verses 7-11 of possibly the longest sermon ever, beginning in the evening and going through to dawn!

This passage also includes the very human story of Eutychus, a young man, who fell asleep while Paul preached and fell out of the window! It seems that Paul restored him to life before the people of this concerned community. There was then an overtone of Jesus’ ministry of healing and resurrection in this event – no doubt very significant for this early community of followers.

Paul’s mission on this trip was to attend to the daily nurture of the church. William Willimon writes: “The ministry of teaching and strengthening the church may not be so glamorous or satisfying as preaching before mobs, winning new converts, founding new churches. … No one forgets Paul’s conversion … but who remembers the day to day teaching and nurture in which Paul engaged during his ministry of strengthening churches.”

And again, on the early church’s worship he writes: “Here is where the Body re-forms, receives nourishment and encouragement in this weekly rhythm of renewal and reiteration of our identity as God’s family…. Without the sustenance received at its Sunday gatherings, the church might lose itself in mere busyness, might forget who it is and whose it is, might lose heart amidst the myriad of demands and assaults upon it by the surrounding world.”

Is not the life and call of the church that we read of here in Acts also the life and call of our church today. For like that early church we are called:
   a. to participate in the church’s ministry, each of us bringing our unique gifts to the whole;
   b. to gather for worship and ‘the breaking of the bread’, as well as maintaining our own practices of prayer and Bible reading; and
   c. to share our faith with passion in the communities to which we belong.

Points to Ponder
   1. What is one insight for me as I reflect on Paul’s ministry in the early church?

Prayer

   Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits thou hast given me, 
   for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me. 
   O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, 
   may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, 
   and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen. 

(Richard of Chichester)

Bishop Sonia Roulston
Assistant Bishop (Inland Episcopate)

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2 Ibid, p153
Day 32: Saturday 28\textsuperscript{th} March

Acts 20:17 – 38

Paul Speaks to the Ephesian Elders

Large white cruise ships disgorge thousands of visitors during tourist season at the Aegean port city of Kusadasi in modern day Turkey. Coaches take them to the nearby ruins of Ephesus which was in New Testament times the second most important city after Rome with a population that may have been as many as 250,000 and a centre of trade. It was famed as the site of the Temple of Artemis (Diana) [now sunken in a swamp] and in Acts 19 there was a riot started by a man named Demetrius who made silver coins featuring the goddess and was upset about the Way - the gospel teaching of Paul.

Paul stayed in the city for almost three years (verse 31) because it was a strategic location for the spreading of the gospel to the areas around it. Paul established local teams to take care of the new churches and gave local pastoral oversight to elders. After travelling to Greece, he returns on his way back to Jerusalem and arrives at the port of Miletus and sent a message to the elders in nearby Ephesus to come to him (verse 17). In his emotional farewell speech, he speaks of prison and hardship that await him and they are reduced to tears that “they would never see his face again”(verses 25,38).

Consider

a. He served the Ephesians sacrificially and in humility and in tears (verse 19).

b. His message was “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (verse 21).

c. He passes on an Apostolic pastoral responsibility to the elders to "keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (verse 28).

d. He warns that false teachers and teaching will come in like wolves to attack the flock with false teaching (verse 29). Some will be locals so be on guard.

e. He commits them to God in prayer (verses 32,36).

Points to Ponder

1. Serving Jesus can be tough, have there been times of tears for you? Have you still managed to do your Christian service in humility?

2. What is the essential message that we need to pass on to the community about Jesus?

3. How can we be on our guard about the “wolves” Paul speaks of?

4. Paul says, in Acts 20:35 ”It is more blessed to give than to receive.” How does this characterise our Christian service?

Prayer

Almighty God, help me to serve you even in difficult times and help me to serve others by giving and not just receiving. Help me also to stand firm for the truth of the gospel. Amen.

The Reverend Kevin Wares
Director of Formation
STUDY GUIDE
Week 5: Seeing is Believing

VALUE: Using our Resources Well

PRAYER
Open with a brief prayer seeking God’s guidance as you reflect together.

SHARE

• Insights from your readings this week.
• Anything that arose for you from the ‘Points to Ponder’.

DISCUSS

1. John records the healing of the blind man by Jesus as an occasion on which he receives both physical and spiritual sight. The Acts readings though the week tell the story of those who in finding faith truly SEE who Jesus is as the engage with Paul and the apostles and church leaders.

   Share in the group how you have gained spiritual ‘sight’.
   What keeps your spiritual vision clear?

2. This week’s readings also highlight that Paul worked always worked in a team, and encouraged others to bring and share their gifts as part of his ministry.

   Encourage each other in sharing and using their gifts by discussing the gifts each brings to your context. How can you equip and enable others?

3. What is the lesson from these readings of the Early Church (Acts 16.11 to 20.38) for you and your parish today?

CLOSE
With a time of prayer.
Week 6: Life and Death

VALUE: Engaging in 21st Century Mission
Day 33: Sunday Lent 5
John 11:1 – 45

The raising of Lazarus

Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”.

If I had been there I could have shouted out... I could have held onto her... I could have stopped him from running into the road... I could have done something... I could have driven him... I could have helped her... Lord, if you had been here... you could have saved him.

Thirty years ago a young friend of mine ran into the road just near his home in Rosemeadow while he was on his way to school. He ran right in front of a car! Till her death, his mother was completely disabled by her grief for him. Lord, if you had been here...

Jesus replies to Martha, “Your brother will rise again”. And her answer, the Pharisees’ answer, our answer is, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day”.

The problem is that moments later Lazarus is walking out of that tomb and the world has not ended yet. The Last Day is not here but Lazarus doesn’t stink any longer. Jesus weeps and a stone is rolled away and the dead walk the earth — only it is not “Dawn of the Living Dead” but just another “Days of our Lives”. The problem is that Jesus is Resurrection.

When Jesus walks up the dead sit up! It is that simple. Salvation saves!

For all our criticism of the Pharisees we have done no better than they! We are, almost without exception, the children of those Jewish Pharisees and not of Jesus the Christ. For us, resurrection is something that will happen one day in the future. Pie in the sky when you die—that’s resurrection for most of us, most of the time.

But resurrection and life is bursting out from Jesus as he approaches the tomb of Lazarus. Eternity—the very presence of the God of Life—is present to Martha and Mary that day.

Are we Pharisees or Christians? Is resurrection infusing our dry bones and our dead souls and our dying churches? Is life coursing through our veins? Are our words and our actions proclaiming new life every day? Is the eternity of God the reality we are living now, and tomorrow, and the next day?

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Points to Ponder

1. In the Metallica song, 'To Live Is To Die', Cliff Burton asks, “Cannot the Kingdom of Salvation take me home?” How do we, as Christians and as the church, speak and live resurrection with those whose lives are filled with death—pain, tragedy, regret, loneliness, depression, or poverty?

2. How do we speak and live resurrection in the face of our own pains, tragedies and regrets?

Prayer

Life-giving God, your Son came into the world to free us all from sin and death: breathe upon us with the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ, and serve you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The Reverend Doug Morrison-Cleary
Parish of Beresfield/Thornton
Day 34: Monday 30th March
Acts 21:1 – 36

Paul’s Journey to Jerusalem, visit to James and arrest

Acts 21 is a powerful statement about the witness of the Apostle Paul being so committed to God’s command to spread the message of salvation in Christ alone that he is willing to be imprisoned or even die for the name of the Jesus (verse 13).

As the Lord Jesus himself had set his face towards Jerusalem to suffer, die and rise again (Luke 9:51), so in this chapter Paul continues resolutely his journey towards Jerusalem despite the many voices attempting to stop him. Paul goes because of the task that the Lord Jesus had given him – “of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

Importantly, this chapter provides an example of the Apostle testing what the Spirit is saying through various prophets, against the authoritative word that had already been given to him by the Lord himself.

In verse 4, disciples through the Spirit urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. In verse 10, a prophet named Agabus bound himself to Paul and warned him through the Holy Spirit that if he continued to Jerusalem he would be bound and handed over to the Gentiles. It is hard to avoid hearing the words of Jesus in Luke 18:31–33: “We are going up to Jerusalem [... the Son of Man] will be delivered over to the Gentiles”.

Though these disciples considered their words an act of love and protection for Paul, he had the words of Christ ringing in his ears: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Paul put his own welfare second and the salvation of others through the proclamation of the Gospel first. “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done”.

We would do well today to follow the Apostle Paul’s heart for the lost. Speaking the message of salvation may be risky and dangerous, as it has been through the history of Christ’s Church. But Jesus has called us to make disciples, with the promise that he will be with us to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20).

Points to Ponder

1. How willing am I to risk my own safety and security in order to give others the opportunity to hear the news of salvation through Christ?
2. How can I stand firm in the Gospel when there are many voices around me trying to turn me away from God’s word?

Prayer

Father, I pray that you would give me the strength to follow the witness of your Apostles as they followed the Lord Jesus. Put on my heart a desire to testify to the good news of God’s grace to those in desperate need of salvation. Enable me to listen to your voice handed down to me through the Apostolic witness of the Scriptures and to stand firm in your truth. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

The Reverend Rob Llewellyn
Parish of Gloucester
Day 35: Tuesday 31st March

Paul defends himself

The accusations we read in this passage were that Paul had defiled the temple, but he never had a chance to defend himself before he was attacked, and the mob formed. When they heard Paul speaking in Aramaic, they stopped and became quiet. Paul identified himself with the people who were trying to kill him. He was standing there on the steps of the barracks trying to relate to the mob. Paul’s account of his conversion on the road to Damascus will not convince the crowds that they were mistaken. Instead, Paul’s words send the crowds into an even greater frenzy, yelling for his blood. Paul says a lot about himself in this passage.

Paul had a clear identity. Paul wasn’t the Egyptian and he wasn’t the man who defiled the temple. Was he a Jew? Yes, but that isn’t his identity. Was he born in Tarsus and raised in Jerusalem? Yes, but that is not his identity. He was a Roman citizen, who studied under a great Rabbi. He knew the law inside and out, he was so zealous for the law that he led the persecution of the church. He had men and women thrown into jail and killed because they believed. He went to Damascus to find more Christians, but instead he found Christ. All these things are true and yet none of them are his identity. They add to his life, but they don’t change who he is. Like Paul we are not based on what we do, what we wear, whom we like or where we live. It is based on something more, something deeper. Paul had a clear identity and of what was going on around him.

Paul’s identity is revealed in his calling, when Ananias came to Paul to give him back his sight, he said, “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard”. Paul’s identity was to know God’s will, to see his Righteous One, and to hear the words from his mouth. Paul’s identity was to be a witness of who Jesus is especially to the Gentiles.

Points to Ponder

1. How can we respond to God’s call to be more like Paul?
2. Spend some time reflecting on what it is to know our identity is to glorify God.

Prayer

Loving Father,
We give you thanks, for Paul and his witness,
help us to know our identity to dedicate our being to you.
Renew us in will and deed to work together with you
Great is your compassion, breath a new spirit into us and
make all things new to bear witness to your love and to cling to your vision.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lyn Carter
Cessnock Parish
Day 36: Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> April

Paul Before the Council

Having been unnerved by the revelation that Paul is a Roman citizen by birth, the tribune releases him and brings him before the chief priests and the entire council. He is anxious to find out what the basis of the Jews’ accusations against Paul is. Paul used his time of persecution as an opportunity to witness. Even his enemies were creating a platform for him to address the entire Jewish high council.

Unafraid of the consequences of possible physical and verbal abuse, Paul launches his own attack against the illegal command that Ananias had given to those near him to strike him. Ananias had violated Jewish law by assuming that Paul was guilty without a trial. Paul didn’t recognise Ananias as the high priest for that reason - that he had broken the law he had pledged to represent. Paul respects the office, though clearly, not the present holder of it.

Then follows Paul's declaration that he is a Pharisee whose belief is in the Resurrection, angels and spirits. An ensuing clamour with the Sadducees, who believed in none of these, erupts. Paul's words move the debate away from himself towards the festering controversy about the Resurrection.

In response, some of the Pharisees stand up to defend Paul. While they won't agree that Jesus had actually been raised bodily from the dead, they are prepared to concede that perhaps the person whom Paul met on the road to Damascus was the "angel" or "spirit" of Jesus, still alive and awaiting resurrection on the last day. And if this is what Paul is claiming, then they are prepared to support him.

The debate becomes increasingly violent and Paul is removed from the fray. That night he receives a message of encouragement from the Lord to be brave and continue his witness in Rome as he did in Jerusalem.

Application

- To never be afraid to confess our faith in the face of opposition.
- To be strong in the face of adversity.
- As Christians we are to represent Christ. We are not merely His followers; we are His representatives to others.
- God will help us when we are under fire for our faith.

Points to Ponder

1. Do you have adversities in your life?
2. What present challenges are you faced with, where it can be helpful to reflect on God’s presence with you?
3. How might you focus on Jesus in the face of opposition or challenge?

Prayer

*Heavenly Father, may we be inspired by the Apostle Paul’s courage, insight and above all, his faith in the face of opposition and danger. May we always be able to draw on his example of faith to be ready to present our testimony. May the Holy Spirit and the angels give us the strength to speak boldly and with conviction. Holy and everlasting God, we give you thanks for the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead and the gift of eternal life. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.*

The Reverend Wendy Jackson
Parish of Murrurundi
Day 37: Thursday 2nd April
Acts 23:12–22

The Plot to Kill Paul

“Flourishing by Grace is all about transformation – becoming more like GOD.”

The Jewish leaders had allowed the enticements of power and politics to separate them further and further from GOD. Paul was in custody. “That night our LORD appeared to Paul and stood before him and said: ‘Receive miracle power. For just as you have spoken for me in Jerusalem, you will also speak for me in Rome’” (verse 11). Then we are told that: “The next day, more than forty Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath to have no food or water until they had killed Paul” (verse 12).

When Paul’s nephew heard of this plot, he went and told Paul, who then asked one of the centurions to take the young man to inform the commander.

Paul’s mission to the Gentiles was important. Some biblical scholars believe that Paul’s family had disowned him when he became a Christian. Paul tells us in Philippians 3:8, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things.” But Paul’s nephew was able to become God’s messenger who was used to save Paul’s life – just as He used the angel to speak to Joseph to move the Holy Family from Bethlehem to Egypt to escape the tentacles of Herod – and again to bring them back from Egypt and eventually to Nazareth, where they settled down. Just as He used Moses and the Exodus to bring the people of Israel out of slavery from Egypt back to the Promised Land.

All of us need to be encouraged and engaged in sharing our faith with others. God will use any person, of any age, for His purposes and in His perfect timing – no prior qualifications are required apart from a willingness to yield to Him.

Points to Ponder

1. “Within your heart you can make plans for your future, but the LORD chooses the steps you take to get there” (Proverbs 16:9, The Passion Translation).
2. “Simply be confident and allow the Spirit of Wisdom access to your heart; and he will reveal in that very moment what you are to say to them” (Luke 12:12).

Prayer

Gracious GOD prepare our hearts so that we may always be ready and willing to listen to you and yield to your leading. Help us understand that You want only what is best for us. Amen.

The Reverend Stephen Niland
St John’s Raymond Terrace

3 Young, Sarah; JESUS Calling Morning and Evening; Thomas Nelson, Nashville Tennessee; 2015; p.719
Lucky Felix. That’s what his name means, Felix means lucky, or successful. Felix was once a slave, freed by Emperor Claudius, and now governor. Luck and success? Well, perhaps, it might look like that to some, and yet Felix was also known for his harshness, and Tacitus describes him as ‘tyrannical’. Felix’s expectation of bribes at the end of Acts 24 also shows a considerable level of self interest.

Into this milieu comes Paul, who epitomises 1 Peter 3:15, always being ready to give an answer. Paul maximises the opportunities he has, listens, and then using the common ground between them as a starting point for talking about Jesus, whilst never withdrawing from his integrity or beliefs.

Engaging in mission today means we are called to do the same: finding common ground and using that as an opportunity to talk about Jesus. We’re great at telling people about a book we read, or meal we ate, but do we share with the same enthusiasm about something we read in Scripture, or about our gathering around God’s table? If we are open to the opportunities, then we will find ways in which we can share our faith. It might sound trite to say, “And doesn’t that remind you of Jesus?”, but if we are open to the opportunities, then we can find a way to connect.

It takes courage to share, because sometimes we’re afraid of the response. Paul is certainly presented to us as courageous, but I wonder if sometimes Paul, too, had a moment wondering which way things were going to go. His track record shows that his message wasn’t always welcomed, and yet, he persisted. May we be likewise.

Points to Ponder

1. Do I view things through my lens of faith?
2. How do I find common ground with those whose views might differ from mine?
3. What would help me to share my faith?

Prayer

*God of wisdom, teach us in all things to seek first your honour and glory. May we perceive what is right, have courage to pursue it, and grace to accomplish it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

(adapted Prayer for Synod, A Prayer Book for Australia, p. 213.)

The Very Reverend Katherine Bowyer
Dean of Newcastle
Christ Church Cathedral
Day 39: Saturday 4th April
Acts 25:1 – 26:10

Paul Appeals to the Emperor, Sent to Agrippa

Acts is full of drama. Shipwrecks, adventure and plots to kill Paul. It’s a ripping read. At first glance this passage seems like a dull moment in an otherwise action filled plot. The action happens on either side with Chapter 24 describing the trial before Felix and in Chapter 26 Paul dramatically pleads his case to King Herod Agrippa.

But a close examination of this passage shows that it’s a critical moment. It’s a point in time where Paul is stuck in the bureaucracy, he has no control over his life at this point and he is about to face one of the most powerful men of the time, King Herod Agrippa. For the last two years he has been waiting for this moment. What he says, his arguments and explanations will determine what happens next. He’s under big pressure.

Know the feeling? How would you feel? Your throat would be dry, palms sweaty and you’d probably have that feeling of sickness deep in your stomach.

There are many modern contexts where life feels like this. Working in a big organisation which constantly faces job cuts I know the feeling where control has disappeared, and the future is uncertain. If you’re on a farm and you’re in the middle of drought, you know the feeling. If you’re about to go to court or you’ve got a bad diagnosis, you know the feeling. When control leaves our lives like it has in this passage it’s confronting and scary.

But Paul’s focus doesn’t change despite the loss of control and the pressure. He is fearless, his words are strong, and he later says, “But God has helped me to this very day; and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike” (verse 22). Not only is Paul calm and forceful, he sticks to his guns and states his case in a dramatic moment in the next chapter. It’s a lesson for all of us when our lives feel like they’re spinning out of control. Paul’s example of trusting, of praying and listening to that still-small-voice is one that we can follow and use to demonstrate how our trust in God gets us through these testing moments.

Points to Ponder

1. In your life, what are the things which feel out of your control and uncertain?
2. Using Paul’s model, what are the ways God has helped you in the past?
3. How might God help you in these moments of uncertainty?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, when life feels out of control and I’m about to be tested, help me to follow Paul’s example, help me to hear your voice, know your unending love and speak your truth. Amen.

Phil Ashley-Brown
St John’s, Cooks Hill
STUDY GUIDE
Week 6: Life and Death

VALUE: Engaging in 21st Century Mission

PRAYER
Open with a brief prayer seeking God’s guidance as you reflect together.

SHARE
• Insights from your readings this week.
• Anything that arose for you from the ‘Points to Ponder’.

DISCUSS
1. In the church’s year it is the fifth week of Lent, and the shadow of the Jesus’ Cross is becoming increasingly apparent. The raising of Lazarus heightens this sense, and also the opposition to Jesus. Meanwhile in Acts, trial, death threat, shipwreck, and finally house arrest await Paul. All for proclaiming the life and death of Jesus.

On Sunday we were asked if resurrection was “infusing our dry bones and our dead souls and our dying churches?... Is the eternity of God the reality we are living now, and tomorrow, and the next day”.

Share your reflections on this question in your group.

2. “Paul maximises the opportunities he has, listens, and then using the common ground between them as a starting point for talking about Jesus, whilst never resiling from his integrity or beliefs. Engaging in mission today means we are called to do the same: finding common ground, and using that as an opportunity to talk about Jesus” (Dean Katherine Bowyer).

Discuss the implications of this for your mission as a church in your context.

3. What is the lesson from these readings of the Early Church (Acts 21.1 to 26.10) for you and your parish today?

CLOSE
With a time of prayer.
Week 7: For God So Loved the World

VALUE: Flourishing by Grace
Day 40: Palm Sunday
Matthew 21:1 – 11

Triumphant Entry

Can you think of some famous donkeys? I can think of Balaam’s Donkey (Numbers 22), Simpson’s Donkey of Gallipoli fame, ‘Donkey’ from the children’s movie Shrek, Winnie the Pooh’s friend Eeyore and even ‘Benjamin’ from George Orwell’s Animal Farm. I must admit, however, the Donkey and her Colt in this passage didn’t spring to mind at all. However, Matthew repeatedly focusses our attention on this donkey because this is a ‘Zechariah prophecy fulfilling’ donkey.

If you were to read Zechariah 9 you would find a powerful promise to Israel of military victory over their enemies. In Zech 9:1-8 God has been on the move toward Jerusalem and so we are expecting him to turn up, but the one who arrives is God’s king, the promised Messiah, God’s chosen ruler and representative.

Zechariah says this ruler will be different to the rulers of the nations. God’s king will ‘rule from sea to sea’, his rule will be ‘righteous’, and he comes unarmed, riding a donkey rather than a war horse. God’s king is a preacher who will proclaim peace to the nations, a wholeness and wellbeing-type peace, unmatched by any other. God is triumphant, but rather than overthrow his enemies he comes with salvation.

No wonder the people were excited as they saw Jesus on this donkey, riding in victory, but in humility, into Jerusalem. No wonder they shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They knew salvation was near.

Matthew shows us Jesus’ meticulous orchestration of this event as the donkey and colt is prepared. Jesus wanted everyone then to know - and us as well - that he is the humble, peace preaching king promised in Zechariah.

Application

Through Jesus death and resurrection, God has claimed victory over sin and death. Now the humble king’s message of peace will go to the nations on the lips of humble disciples through the ages. Have you heard this message of peace? Have you received the peace Jesus offers? Do you know the forgiveness of sins? Are you a disciple who passes on the message of peace?

Points to Ponder

1. What does this peace look like in your life?
2. How can you share this peace with someone you know?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for Jesus, your colt riding humble king who now has all power and authority. Thank you for his peace bringing death on the cross. Thank you for this day - the beginning of Holy Week, the start of the journey towards the cross, the victory of the Resurrection, and the rich truth that Jesus truly is our humble King of Kings. So I say, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord...” Amen.

The Reverend Captain Nathan Killick
Parish of the Camden Haven
Day 41: Holy Monday
Acts 26:11 – 32

Paul Before Agrippa

For Paul, the abundance of sin is met by the superabundance of grace, so that we, trapped in sin, may be set free by Christ to flourish by grace.

Saul, the Pharisee, shared the zeal for the law of the Pharisees, who sought to renew by their righteousness, the covenant between God and his people. The aim was to end the exile of the people from God and bring in end-time resurrection by which God’s purpose in creation might be fulfilled. Then, in a “light-bulb moment”, he realised that the such righteousness had been achieved by Jesus Christ. Acts tells of this conversion experience three times to different audiences, and each time we learn more.

In today’s passage, Paul tells of his conversion to Roman Governor Festus and Jewish King Agrippa. After a powerful vision of light, Saul hears the voice of Jesus, telling him that in persecuting Christians, he is persecuting him, the Lord.

So, Jesus is both Lord and Israel in person, representing his people to achieve on their behalf the covenant righteousness by which the exile caused by sin is ended and final resurrection begun. In this telling of the story, Jesus acts in order that, through the Jews, God’s promise to Abraham of blessing for all nations may be fulfilled.

Therefore, Saul/Paul is called by the Lord to go to Jews and Gentiles so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul insists to Festus and Agrippa that the prophets had indeed told of a suffering and risen Messiah who would bring light to Jews and Gentiles. Agrippa and Festus agree that such a message does not merit persecution of Christians.

Points to Ponder

1. Paul is extending the range of those for whom Christ died and rose. How should we be working today to extend our understanding of the range of those represented by Christ, the Lord, and open to his grace?
2. Notice today, the ways God’s grace extends throughout the world.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, by your righteousness, revealed in your life death and resurrection, you have freed us from the exile of sin, shared with us the love that unites Father, Son, and Spirit, and opened the way to eternal life. May we flourish by your grace. Amen.

The Reverend Dr Chris Garland
Parish of Telarah/Rutherford
Day 42: Holy Tuesday
Acts 27:1 – 44

Paul Sails for Rome

The events described in Acts 27, the storm and the sinking of a boat, were not caused by poor shipbuilding and rotten weather in the Mediterranean. The storm began with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, far from the sea. The Book of Acts follows on directly from the gospel of Luke. There, we are told, very specifically, that Jesus, the King of Jews, was born under the rule of a Roman Emperor. The scene is set for a great conflict between two rival claimants to the throne of heaven. There will be tempest and storm. There will be thunder and lightning. We are shown over and over again that there is an absolute distinction between the Pax Romana (the Roman peace) and the peace of Jesus. There is a complete contrast between Rome’s self-serving rule and the kingdom of God. The reader is asked to decide whether Caesar or Christ is the true Lord. Only one of them is the Saviour. We will either worship this highly successful and organised earthly empire, with all its glory and brutality, or we will take up the cross and walk the way of Christ. In the gospel, Roman justice was put on trial. If Rome was righteous, then Jesus would go free. If the Emperor was a false god, Jesus would be crucified.

The Book of Acts presents the apostle Paul as the preeminent Christian of the early Church. Purely by divine intervention, while engaged in a campaign of persecution directed at the disciples of Jesus, Paul undergoes a complete transformation. He is converted from being the greatest enemy of Christianity and becomes, instead, its paramount exponent. In this role, he too suffers, is persecuted, beaten and stoned. He is shipwrecked three times even before beginning this last voyage. Arrested in the Jerusalem temple, he finally appeals directly to Caesar, and begins a journey from the physical and spiritual heart of Judaism to Rome, the epicentre of worldly power, where he will proclaim to Caesar that Christ is Lord.

Paul goes to sea in a vessel that is not a New Testament version of Noah’s Ark. The boat is not a safe refuge. It is lethal. The shipwreck is, for Paul, a kind of crucifixion at sea. It is as if he took up his cross and it sank. Luke makes it clear, however, that Paul was the one who saved the day and got everyone safely to the shore. He knew that anyone who stuck with him would be all right. His time to die had not yet come. He had a great task that was still incomplete. He had to represent his Lord and speak the word of God in the very face of false religion.

In Acts 27, Paul is continuing the ministry of Jesus. It is very clear that the apostle Paul is Christ’s chosen personal representative in this scene. He is making a wet entry into the arena of judgement. It is part of the courtroom drama that began with Pontius Pilate. Paul is on his way to Rome in order to be tried, in the name of Jesus Christ, not by a mere procurator, but by the Emperor Nero himself. The significance of this case is staggering. In the end, Paul will be judged, condemned and beheaded. Rome will fall, and Christ will rule as king forever. Caesar is not Lord.

Application
Acts 27 is about chaos, storms and shipwreck. If this is a depiction of the Christian life, it is terrifying and will make no sense unless we understand certain basic things:

We need to know where we are going. We need to know why we are going there. We need to know what we are going to say when we get there. Most importantly, we need to know the One who accompanies us through every storm and shipwreck.

Points to Ponder
1. Who rules your world?
2. Reflect on God’s presence through your own chaos, storms.

Prayer
“Oh God, the sea is so big. And my boat is so small”

(Breton Fisherman’s Prayer)

The Reverend Bruce Perry
Parish of Bateau Bay

58
Day 43: Holy Wednesday
Acts 28:1 – 31

Paul on the Island of Malta and on to Rome

At the end of the Acts of the Apostles, we draw again the message of the growth of Christianity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8 we heard Jesus tell the disciples that they would be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth”. Paul’s journey to Rome, the political centre of the Empire and the western world at that time, brings a certain satisfying reality to Jesus’ words at the Ascension. However, it is not just the arrival in Rome itself (verse 14), but how that came about which is significant. Paul and his companions are being led inexorably towards Rome, but there is work for them, and for Paul to do, on the journey.

After the great storm and shipwreck in Acts chapter 27, Paul winters on the island of Malta. Whilst there, he continues to do those things which he is called by God to do and which he particularly can do for the glory of God. He accepts the warm hospitality of the islanders. He astounds them by surviving an attack by a viper. He prays over the father of Publius, the chief official, who is ill. He places his hands on him and heals him.

After the winter was over, Paul continued to Rome where he not only met members of the fledgling church in Puteoli, he preached to the local Jewish population and tried to persuade them about Jesus. Most importantly of all, perhaps, he stayed and for two years offered welcome to all, while proclaiming the Kingdom of God to all! It is as well to remember this pattern of faithfulness to God’s call. Paul was called by God to do both the ordinary and what might seem extraordinary. He continued to do this wherever he was, through times of fair weather and times of storm and shipwreck, in familiar and unfamiliar places.

As we continue our journey through Holy Week towards the Triduum, the great three days, a cornerstone of our faith, we are presented with some powerful stories of Paul’s work on the journey across the Mediterranean to Rome. His message was the message of the saving power of the Risen Lord. Unlike our own journeys in the twenty-first century in a culture of speed and instant gratification, Paul’s journey was staged, punctuated by the opportunity to meet people, to greet and get to know them in community, to sit around a fire and talk, to eat and converse, to encourage one another.

As a person who yearns to be the living Church in our time, there are urgent lessons I need to relearn from the infant Church of Paul’s time. The lessons seem both individual and collective. The Acts of the Apostles shows me that I need to “own” my own call to do the work God is calling me to do right now. In my growing relationship with God I seek to discern what it is that is unique to me that God is asking of me. The season of Easter is a great time to recommit myself to this enlivening process.

As the Church in this place and this time, we can learn to slow down, to take time to journey beyond the familiar in order to be with and know the great variety of people in community. As Church we need to remember who is the Teacher and who are the disciples. Like Paul, we are to welcome all, proclaim the Kingdom of God to all, and, as Madeleine L’Engle famously said, “draw people to Christ by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”

Points to Ponder

1. Having journeyed through the Acts of the Apostles during Lent, what lessons are there to be drawn for the Church of our time in “being Church” here and now?
2. Paul accepted that there were things that he had to do. Going to Rome was one of these. What is the work that God is calling on me to do for the Kingdom at this time and place?

Prayer

God of all holiness, you call us out of the mundane and familiar and into your glorious light, the light of Resurrection. As we journey through Holy Week, journey with us, as you did with St Paul all the way to the end of the earth. As we negotiate the storms and shipwrecks of our lives, give us courage and the spirit of lovingkindness for all whom we meet on the way. Let us find a place of rest and reinvigoration in You. Amen.

Katherine Lindsay ObISB
Parish of Morpeth
Day 44: Maundy Thursday
John 13:1 – 35

The Last Supper

As we come to this passage on this Maundy Thursday I want us to imagine that we were in the room when these events took place. Imagine that you were a disciple who celebrated the Passover with Jesus. Imagine that you were there at the Last Supper.

The Supper commences, but then, out of the blue, Jesus starts taking off his outer garments. We wonder what on earth he is doing. Then, with a towel around his waste he starts washing everyone’s feet. Now foot washing was done by the least important person. So Jesus is the last person who should be washing our feet.

Then Jesus arrives at your feet. He unbuckles your sandals. You would like to tell him to stop. Jesus should not be washing your feet. You think that he is the Messiah, God’s promised King. You think that he has been sent by God to rescue your people from the Romans. Jesus is the leader. He should not be washing your feet. But he is washing your feet. You feel very awkward. But you say nothing. Jesus finishes washing your feet. You are glad it is over.

Jesus works around the room, washing the feet of one disciple after another. Nobody speaks. What does Jesus think that he is doing? Finally, it is Peter who breaks the silence. Peter tells Jesus: “you shall never wash my feet”. Jesus says: “If I do not wash you, you have no share in me”. Later Jesus says: “If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet”. We again wonder what Jesus is meaning.

Then, while we were thinking about all of this Jesus says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me”. Again we are confused. Then Jesus gave Judas a piece of bread, but we know that Judas would not betray Jesus. Judas was one of us. Then Judas left the supper. We thought that Jesus must have sent him on an errand, but as Judas left everything seemed to turn very dark.

Then Jesus started speaking again. He spoke of the Son of Man being glorified and God being glorified. Again we could not work out what he meant. Jesus spoke of people knowing that we were his disciples by our love for one another. That at least made more sense.

Points to Ponder

1. Are the parts of your life you want to hide from Jesus?
2. What does it mean to be washed by Jesus?

Prayer

Holy God, source of all love, on the night of his betrayal
Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, to love one another as he loved them:
write this commandment in our hearts, and give us the will to serve others
as he was the servant of all, who gave his life and died for us,
yet is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Archdeacon Arthur Copeman
Archdeacon of Newcastle
Parish of All Saints ANEW
Day 45: Good Friday
John 18:1 – 19:42

The Passion of Jesus

The cross
The scene
one that we can only imagine,
for we were not there.
Yet… This scene is played out and listened to every year
Every good Friday
So... here we are,
We have come, heads bowed and hearts heavy.
This is when Jesus makes a decision
Jesus embraces everything
Everything! That has been coming, moving stretching to
this
PASSION
A strange word to use PASSION
But this is what it is.

And we find ourselves
Under the cross ...in the Passion
with
A menagerie of humanity
The executioner
Guards
Gamblers
Mourners
Friends
Disciples
And a mother

And some innocent by standers... just going about their
daily business
And it is there that we see ourselves!
We are Not left out...
This Passion story is for us.
We are drawn... once again.

We come
To look and search deeply.
Jesus loves us so much that he willing goes
To his Passion
giving himself totally for us
To forgive even those who betray the Son of God. This is
truly Passion

In this moment
We embrace
What God is like.

But... Like many
We can be left wondering ...
This is sheer brutality
This is callous behaviour! Why are we so cruel?
So many turn away
many will not wait and watch

We have experienced death and suffering and in justice
We have seen the raging and the ranting....
We know what humanity is capable of!

It is against all of this
Against this cross that we come
And here we find that
Death is not the last word!

No wonder shock waves go through creation
And the veil of the temple is torn in two and reveal who
God is!
Yes......
There is more to come!

Points to Ponder
Jesus is a living example of the power of God. He prayed with passion and chose to forgive even those who persecuted and killed him Jesus prayer was always to glorify God!
1. What do we pray for on this Good Friday?
2. Do we Glorify God in our prayers in our work or in our Lives?
3. Do we live as people of “the Passion?”

Prayer
It is time. God in Christ we know the hard places in our souls. We know pain and hurt. Today, Lord, we take all our suffering and we will lay them at the cross. We pray that you will take our wounding and transform it. Make us people of passionate care. Lord Jesus.... move us on. It is time. Amen.

The Reverend Canon Maree Armstrong
St John the Baptist, Lambton
Day 47: Easter Day
Matthew 28:1 – 20

The Resurrection

Previously we have met Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (the mother of James and Joseph). According to Matthew, these first two to encounter the risen Jesus were, with the mother of the sons of Zebedee, among many women who were there at the crucifixion, looking on from a distance. They had all followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him (verses 55-56).

The Friday Jesus died so did the lifestyle focused on providing for him. There would be no more cohort following Jesus on his ministry. It isn’t too hard to for those of us who have imagined our way into that cohort time and again to resonate with the shock. It happens in miniature every time we emerge from the wondrous world of the text into daily life.

Life comes in epochs. It’s a universal human experience. Sometimes the new epoch replaces the old gradually and gently. But often enough there’s trauma, grief, confusion. There’s a particular confusion when a longed-for new life comes and yet there is grief or at least a wrench in recognising that the previous life is gone. It is not biological, but it is a kind of death.

We are not told Mary and Mary go into shock; instead the story shows us. See them there on Friday evening, sitting opposite the tomb as Joseph of Arimathea rolled a great stone over the door where he had laid the body. What else are they going to do? Well, mercifully the second day after the end of Jesus’s ministry was a Sabbath. The routine observances might have been some kind of distraction.

But come the third day of life after the ministry of Jesus we find the focus of Mary and Mary again bolted to the tomb. There’s no hint they believed anything other than Jesus was simply dead and gone. Then even the only touchstone they have while they come to terms with who and what they’ve lost is taken from them. He is not there.

After the earthquake and the as-dead soldiers, despite appearing like lightning, that angel must have had a very reassuring presence to get Mary and Mary to fear and great joy in believing. And then, believing, they meet and worship Jesus who gives them new life then and there. No longer self-employed providing for his needs, they are sent these women, first apostles and angels to the brothers, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me”.

And there the brothers, James, Joseph, the sons of Zebedee and the rest might begin to see with Mary and Mary the shape of resurrection life. Jesus will be with them even to the end of the age. Restored, Peter will let go the life where he expected Christ the Conquistador. James and John will enter God’s reign humbly without worrying (or without their mother angling) for special status in it. They will all rise to a life closer to the gospel than any they had previously known, resurrection life on the way to the fullness of the kingdom.

Points to Ponder

1. An incumbent leaves, a new incumbent arrives. This epoch change is traumatic both for parish communities and for clergy households. Too many epochs ending and beginning in many lives. There is the temptation to attempt business-as-usual, but the old life is gone. And it takes a perfect moment of time to get any kind of handle on the new life that has been given, maybe a scriptural three days, maybe a great fifty days like those between Easter morning and Pentecost.

2. What do you make of the assertion that change in Christian faith communities is only intelligible when it is recognised as resurrection life, a new bodily life after an old life has truly died?

Prayer

Loving God, as the women at the tomb first heard the Easter message and believed, allowing their lives to be transformed, so may I too listen to message of love you have given the world in Jesus’ resurrection. May my belief be shown in a life radiating the teaching of Jesus. I ask this in his name confident that you will hear me.

(Sr Kym Harris OSB)

Bishop Charlie Murry
Assistant Bishop (Coastal Episcopate)
STUDY GUIDE
Week 7: For God So Loved the World

VALUE: Flourishing by Grace

PRAYER
Open with a brief prayer seeking God’s guidance as you reflect together.

SHARE

• Insights from your readings this week.
• Anything that arose for you from the ‘Points to Ponder’.

DISCUSS

1. A note of humility rings in these reflections. On Palm Sunday Jesus rides on a lowly donkey, whilst on Maundy Thursday he washes his disciples’ feet. These, as with all of the events noted in this week, are great acts of love – the love of God turning our world and expectations upside down.

   These readings reflect rich events in the life of Jesus and the early church. Reflect together on the revelation of the love of God seen through these days as they are focused in the Bible readings and reflections.

2. “Abundance of sin meets the superabundance of grace” (Fr Chris Garland).

   “And there [they] ... begin to see the shape of resurrection life: Jesus will be with them even to the end of the age” (Bp Charlie Murry).

What are the implications of these words, in light of the resurrection of Christ, for us as we seek to live into our call to be people who are “Flourishing by grace”?

3. What are the lessons from these readings of the Early Church (Acts 26.11 to 28.31) and the Easter Gospel for you and your parish today?

CLOSE
With a time of prayer.
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