



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
Diocese of St Edmundsbury
and Ipswich

Living Faith in Suffolk



Living Lent 2 Who is this Jesus?

Images

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Living Lent 1 is one of the Living Faith in Suffolk resources produced by the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and available on www.cofesuffolk.org

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Introduction

Living Lent 2 is a Living Faith in Suffolk course to provide opportunity for reflection during Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and finishing on Easter Sunday. Its aim is to give the reader the opportunity to learn more about Jesus, whose disciples we are; to meet him at different points in his life and ministry, enabling exploration of his character and priorities and, through them, to build a closer relationship with the God to whom he points.

Each day contains reflection on a Bible passage and some questions to stimulate personal thought.

This course is intended for individual use but it may be that users would like to meet each week during Lent to discuss reflections. Page 27 includes some questions to help with such group discussions.

This electronic course booklet is formatted for printing on A4 paper; users who would prefer an electronic document which prints as an A5 booklet can obtain this from lesley.steed@cofesuffolk.org.

Ash Wednesday: Emptying

Reading: Philippians 2:6-11

Lent is traditionally a period of reflection, taking stock of our life and our relationship with God. It begins with Ash Wednesday when many Christians attend a solemn service at which they receive ashes on their foreheads as a symbol of repentance. This repentance is not just about being sorry; it also signifies a 'turning around', a change in life's direction, the intention to be different from this point forward in a renewed decision to live as disciples of Jesus. It includes recognition that living in relationship with God involves the emptying of oneself, and reliance on him.

This 'emptying of oneself' is modelled for us by Jesus as described in today's reading: he 'made himself nothing... humbled himself... became obedient...'. God, out of love, emptied himself for us in order to be human alongside us, making possible a relationship with us. In the circumstances of his birth, his life, his love, he made himself vulnerable.

- At the start of these Lenten readings, how would you answer the question 'Who is this Jesus'? How do you see him? How do you think of him?
- What are your reactions to the idea of Jesus as God making himself vulnerable? In what ways is this a comfort, and a challenge?

Thursday: Good News

Reading: Luke 4:14-21

Jesus' listeners would have recognised these words from Isaiah 61 as part of God's promise of restoration to the Israelites who were returning from exile in the sixth century BC, facing the practical, emotional and spiritual difficulties of starting again, rebuilding their lives and reshaping their faith in the light of their experiences. These words offered hope, the promise of a new quality of life, gladness instead of mourning, praise instead of despair (Isaiah 61:3).

Jesus' hearers also lived in difficult circumstances: living in occupied territory with the undercurrent of revolution never far away and with their own faith under threat, they too looked to God for change. Jesus promises them the same hope and declares himself as the one to bring it to fruition. His ministry is based around the proclamation of 'good news': freedom and hope, the promise of a new quality of life, life in all its fullness (John 10:10).

- What might it have meant to people around Jesus to hear such a promise? What does it mean to you, in whatever circumstances you currently find yourself?
- What image of Jesus is portrayed in these verses? How do you react to this?

Friday: Rest

Reading: Matthew 11:28-30

Not only did Jesus' hearers live in difficult circumstances, but the demands made by the teachers of the religious law were many, governing every aspect of life in minute detail in an effort to help people to avoid sin. To people worn down by the demands of life and the practice of their faith, Jesus' words – drawing on the beautiful wisdom poem in the book of Ecclesiasticus in the Apocrypha – must have seemed like an oasis of water in the desert. Rest. Gentleness. An easy yoke and a light burden. Life-giving rather than life-draining. The 'good news' he came to proclaim.

Jesus saw himself not as overthrowing the existing religious law but as fulfilling it, removing from the people the burden of trying to please God and presenting to them instead God who wants a relationship with them based on mutual love. Rest for the soul.

- What does Jesus' claim in today's reading indicate about how he saw himself and his understanding of relationship with God?
- To what extent do you experience your faith as a burden? In what ways does Jesus' invitation challenge this?

Saturday: Apart from us

Reading: Mark 4:26-29

There are many who work exceptionally hard to grow God's Kingdom - to maintain church buildings and communities, sustain a regular pattern of worship and facilitate a myriad of church activities. This was no different in Jesus' day. But this method of growth doesn't sit terribly well with Jesus' understanding of how the Kingdom of God grows.

In this parable the man scatters the seed but the seed grows 'all by itself'. The sower has a responsibility, but not sole responsibility - the growth is not all down to him. In Jesus' understanding of the kingdom we have a part to play but the Kingdom has a life of its own. God can grow it apart from us. Again Jesus demonstrates his perspective on the life of faith as a life which is not intended to be burdensome: God invites participation but the buck stops with him.

- In this teaching Jesus presents a challenge to an accepted way of thinking. Why do you think he did this?
- The buck stops with God. How does this challenge our assumption that it all depends on us?

First Sunday of Lent: Blessing

Reading: Matthew 5:1-10

To be 'blessed' is to have a sense of happiness, purpose and fulfilment independent of external circumstances. It comes, Jesus says, from living out the values and priorities of God's Kingdom, which contrast with the qualities often prized by society. Rather than focusing on success, wealth, achievements and ambitions, Jesus points to the worth of humility, reliance on God, caring for others, dealing with private thoughts and attitudes rather than only what others can see, reconciliation rather than opposition.

The burden of being right in everyone else's eyes is lifted here, and replaced with the hope that comes from knowing that all that matters is to live out of relationship with God. But it is hope tinged with challenge, because a relationship with God affects life in particular ways. Living like this is not always going to be easy. It can involve persecution. Jesus presents a picture of life which is not burdensome, but which can be difficult.

- In these verses Jesus again presents a contrast to an accepted way of thinking, and he does so with authority. Where do you think this authority comes from, in the minds of his hearers, and in his own perception?
- What are the challenges, for you, of trying to live out of relationship with God?

Monday: Authority

Reading: Luke 8:22-25

What kind of person is able to speak to the natural elements and be obeyed? What kind of authority is it that can calm a storm? This goes way beyond teaching a crowd with tones of confidence. This is another level of authority altogether. The disciples' plea for help suggests that they had some expectation of Jesus acting to save them. From their reaction, however, Jesus' behaviour and the resulting consequences were clearly unexpected, demonstrating that such a display of power and authority was not an everyday occurrence.

There was a real, physical danger from which the disciples were rescued. There were lessons to be learnt about the nature of the one they were following, and the trust they could properly place in him. There were questions raised about who this man was. But at the heart of the story, once help was asked for, the natural world submitted to Jesus' authority.

- What image of Jesus is presented in today's reading? How does this contrast with the Jesus we have met over the last few days?
- What are your reactions to the image of Jesus as one with authority over the natural world?

Tuesday: Choices

Reading: Mark 10:46-52

The question 'What do you want me to do for you?' initially seems a curious one in this context. Jesus has established his reputation as a healer, so surely the desired outcome would be obvious. Being blind entailed not only a lack of sight, but an inability to work or to fully participate in Temple worship. Disease and disability were seen as punishment for sin – one's own or one's ancestors' – and thus carried a stigma. Healing would mean a return to society, rebuilding of relationships, restoration.

Healing would also, however, entail a level of responsibility. It would have consequences. A healed person cannot continue to live in the same way as before. Jesus therefore gives Bartimaeus the opportunity to express his desire, to choose, to make his own decision about his future. There is no coercion here, only compassion. When the choice is made, Jesus demonstrates his authority over sickness as the man is made whole.

- What are your reactions to the image of Jesus as a compassionate healer?
- How would you respond to Jesus' question?

Wednesday: Conclusions

Reading: Luke 4:33-37

Authority over the natural elements, authority over physical ailments, and here Jesus demonstrates authority over a spiritual sickness. Whether or not you believe in evil spirits as distinct entities, it is clear that, for this man, whatever was wrong went beyond the physical to another level of the man's being.

Displays of authority, and yet Jesus was not keen for people to hear the declaration of his identity as the 'Holy One of God', preferring instead to leave people marvelling at what they had seen. It is easy for rumours to spread; perhaps Jesus preferred to let people come to their own conclusions about him.

What conclusions would it be appropriate to draw? Jesus was not the only person of his time to behave in such a way; he was not the only miracle-worker in the vicinity. What was unusual was the simple way in which he did it, as if acting by his own authority rather than invoking that of some unseen power.

- What conclusions might people have drawn about Jesus' identity? What conclusions would you have drawn if you had been present at this occurrence?
- What implications does this picture of Jesus have for us as his followers today?

Thursday: Restoration

Reading: Mark 2:1-12

Only the priests could declare God's forgiveness, acting as God's spokesmen, speaking in his name from the Temple. They were not able to forgive sins - only God can forgive sins - but they had the unique role of reassuring people of that forgiveness. Jesus wasn't issuing such reassurance, however. He wasn't taking upon himself the priestly role. He was speaking with the immediate authority of God.

The physical healing was secondary to the forgiveness. Although more dramatic to watch, it served mainly to provide confirmation of Jesus' authority to forgive. His concern was with the man's wholeness. He addressed not only, or even primarily, the man's physical state; his concern was to restore him to the person God created him to be.

- These were acts of both authority and compassion. How is each of these characteristics affected by being coupled with the other?
- Why do you think Jesus had such a concern for the whole person? What does this have to say to you?

Friday: Boundaries

Reading: Luke 5:27-32

Tax collectors were unpopular in Jesus' time because they worked for the Romans (the occupying force in Israel) and collected far more money than the basic taxes, thus being labelled as greedy traitors. They were categorised alongside other sinners who persistently broke religious laws and behaved immorally (prostitutes, for example). They were the members of society with whom respectable people didn't associate. They were regarded with suspicion and ostracised. Challenging these boundaries was not likely to be well-received: showing God's love was acceptable; refusing to demand that people change as a result could lead to questioning about why it was necessary to maintain such strict religious protocols in order to meet with God's approval.

Jesus' concern for the whole person led to a disregard for these boundaries as he focused his attention on showing God's love to those who may have been unsure that it was for them, leaving them to draw their own conclusions about how, if at all, they might respond.

- For what reasons might Jesus have been unconcerned about following the behavioural conventions of the time? What impacts might this have had on those who witnessed this? What does this tell you about Jesus?
- What are the behavioural conventions he might wish to challenge now? What are your reactions to this?

Saturday: Purity

Reading: Mark 7:1-5, 14-23

Jews had strict purity regulations. Some of these were of practical value, addressing issues of hygiene. Many were of spiritual significance. They were a way of marking the Jewish people out as different from their neighbours, demonstrating their identity by their practices.

Jesus challenges this on several levels. He challenges the perception that to follow such customs results in being pure, or 'clean'. People are pure because of their pure attitudes and behaviour; they are defiled by their evil thoughts and behaviour. Ritual washing does not change this. He challenges the perception that following these customs is necessary in order to emphasise their distinct identity. He does not need to practise these customs in order to be secure in his Jewishness. Perhaps most provocatively of all, his challenge means that the traditional refusal to associate with non-Jews - personally or in business - is unnecessary, and this opens up all sorts of possibilities.

- In what ways might this teaching of Jesus be seen as comforting? What difficulties might it cause?
- What are your reactions to the image of Jesus as provocative?

Second Sunday of Lent: Rules

Reading: Mark 2:23-3:6

Life is rhythmical; there is rhythm to the seasons, to day and night, to our need for work and for rest. The rhythm of keeping the Sabbath is another example of a custom which marked the Jewish people out as different from their neighbours. From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday they should not work; this was to be a holy day, a day set apart in the week for rest and recuperation and a day for worship.

Instead of being a day of refreshment, however, the keeping of the Sabbath had become cumbersome, bound up in a multitude of rules intended to help people avoid doing too much inadvertently. The rules might have been useful, but when they were used to prevent something good and life-giving they were exposed as problematic. Once again Jesus challenged the burden they had become, provocatively bringing restoration.

- When is it right to make exceptions to rules? What are the consequences, both positive and negative, of doing this?
- To what extent is it reasonable to see Jesus as a troublemaker?

Monday: Confrontation

Reading: John 2:13-17

Much of Jerusalem's economy centred around the Temple. The moneychangers, those selling animals for sacrifice, those engaged in building work at the Temple, could all have interpreted Jesus' actions as a threat to their livelihoods and thus to the wellbeing of their families. Causing chaos amongst those facilitating people's sacrifices could be seen as a challenge to the God-given sacrificial system, put in place more than 1000 years before when the Jews, freed from slavery, were learning how to live out their relationship with God. The Temple was the centre of Jewish worship and identity, the focal point of the nation. Was this also being challenged?

Or was Jesus' challenge to those who had become so focused on the centrality of the Temple that they had forgotten its primary purpose, as the place where God had promised to live in the midst of his people? Was this purely confrontational, or was it an invitation to change?

- In what ways might people have felt threatened by Jesus' actions?
- What are your reactions to the image of Jesus as confrontational?

Tuesday: Uncompromising

Reading: Luke 6:27-36

Already we have an image of Jesus as offering hope and freedom, compassionate authority, rest and a lack of pressure, alongside provocative and confrontational behaviour and teachings when faced with those who place burdens on people. Here, however, we have some teachings which seem to contrast with this unconventional approach to faith. To 'love your enemies' and to 'turn the other cheek' are not behaviours which come naturally and there is an uncompromising tone to these instructions which does not allow for excuse or appeal to circumstance.

To show mercy towards those who don't deserve it is a hefty demand. To show mercy to the same extent that God shows mercy is to aim for perfection. This is a unique, and far more challenging, way of indicating the distinct identity of God's people.

- How do the demands of these teachings fit with the hope offered in previous passages?
- What are your reactions to this uncompromising side of Jesus? What is non-negotiable in the practice of your faith?

Wednesday: Servant-like

Reading: Mark 10:42-45

In a social order which valued symbols of status, slaves – alongside women, children and animals – were considered as possessions, having no worth in their own right. To advocate that his followers should be servant-like towards each other was to provide a startling contrast with the convention of the time. To extend this conduct to the Son of Man – a term used in the Jewish scriptures to refer to prophets and to the one who would receive dominion, glory and a kingdom after God's judgement (see Daniel 7:13-14) – was to put forward a very different understanding of what is valued by God.

To empty oneself, to serve and to give one's life, is another example of the challenging way in which Jesus sees the identity of God's people being demonstrated.

- What could it mean, in your context, to serve others in the way Jesus described?
- The 'Son of Man' Jesus refers to in this teaching is generally accepted as referring to Jesus. How do Jesus' comments about the Son of Man add to your understanding of who he is?

Thursday: Attitude

Reading: Matthew 5:21-30

Is it really possible never to be angry or lustful? Is it realistic to believe that one can avoid thinking of someone else as foolish? Surely it is not conceivable that reconciliation can always take place before coming to worship God, or before legal proceedings come to their natural conclusion! Is anger really as bad as murder, or lust as bad as adultery? Surely if these thoughts are kept private and under control then they do no harm!

Jesus' uncompromising perspective recognises that the harm that can be caused may be different in nature or degree, but is no less real. What happens on the inside of a person shapes their outlook, their priorities, their identity. The impact of this is not just for this lifetime, it is eternal.

- Why do you think Jesus felt it necessary to give such extreme teachings? How do these fit with his claim to give only a light burden and to bring rest?
- To what extent do you think that these teachings of Jesus' are achievable? How realistic are they? To what extent are they necessary?

Friday: Attachment

Reading: Luke 18:18-27

The gospel accounts do not tell us how the rich ruler responded to Jesus' instruction to sell up, beyond his initial sadness. Whether he complied or kept his wealth, and whether or not he remained sad at Jesus' answer, can only be matters of speculation. Was it the amount of his wealth that was the problem, or was it his attachment to it? His sadness would seem to indicate that it was the latter; Jesus' comment in verses 24-25 would suggest that this problem was common.

At first glance Jesus, in this passage, is as uncompromising as in the last three days' readings. There is a difference here, however. Jesus is clear that we are not in this on our own: what is impossible for us is possible with God.

- What attitude to wealth do you think Jesus was advocating here?
- How do you think you might have reacted had you been in the position of the rich ruler?

Saturday: Loss

Reading: Mark 1:16-20

The impact on life of choosing to follow Jesus is apparent, right from the beginning of the journey. In those short phrases 'left their nets' and 'left their father' a huge lifestyle change is indicated, not only for those who are following, but also for their families. There was an expectation that sons would remain in, and ultimately take responsibility for, the family business. The business would provide for the families of all those working there. To leave involved leaving behind not only their business but their families, those for whom they had responsibility. Responding to Jesus' call to 'Come, follow me' has far-reaching effects.

Jesus' expectation is that following him, being his 'disciple' or 'apprentice', involves an entire lifestyle change, a shift in focus and priorities, as he takes precedence. The would-be disciples must have seen something special in Jesus, though. To make this change was their choice; they were not forced to follow.

- What do you think the disciples might have seen in Jesus that motivated them to take such a drastic step? How does this fit with your own experiences of Jesus?
- What are your reactions to Jesus' expectations of those who follow him?

Third Sunday of Lent: Offence

Reading: Luke 12:49-53

Much of the artwork depicting Jesus over the centuries has portrayed him as meek and mild, peaceful and serene, a part of the idyllic Holy Family, hardly someone who could be perceived as leading a revolution or challenging the status quo. But here he speaks of the suffering he will experience because of his message, and his distress as he anticipates this; and he points to the division that will result from his message. Considering the lifestyle changes that Jesus expects of his followers, it is easy to see how family conflict could ensue. It is easy to see how the impact of his teachings could cause offence.

Jesus seems unconcerned about the offence that could be caused, however. Far from promoting the idea that following him means avoiding tension he is clear that it can lead to anger, resentment and hurt feelings.

- What are your reactions to Jesus' expectation that following him will cause division? How do these shape your picture of him?
- To what extent do you think tensions involving Christians stem from following Jesus, and to what extent do they come from holding onto tradition?

Monday: Family

Reading: Matthew 12:46-50

It is common to speak of the 'church family', perhaps without thinking about what that description might mean. In Jesus' time family ties were of utmost importance, and it was from family that one gained one's identity. For Jesus to emphasise the ties that come from being co-followers of God as being on a par with, if not more noteworthy than, family ties is a radical move disregarding social boundaries and demonstrating both the importance of the relationship with God and also the significance of the relationship with fellow believers.

Jesus seems to be pointing people towards a reassessment of the meaning of their place in the faith community. He is clear that following him will impact their understanding of the structures of life and will change them, however difficult this might be for others to accept.

- What could it mean, for you and for your church community, if all members understood their place in the community as akin to that in a family?
- In what ways does Jesus' approach to the faith community challenge and encourage you?

Tuesday: Cost

Reading: Luke 9:57-62

Although the very first disciples to be called left everything - apparently without hesitation - in order to follow Jesus, in this reading Jesus makes clear that it is a useful exercise to think through what this following will mean in practice. He paints three more pictures of the cost of following him. It is demanding, involving a possible lack of the things that give us security. It takes priority: nothing must be allowed to get in the way of putting him first. It needs absolute focus; without this, there is much to distract us and throw us off course.

Weighing up Jesus' promise of hope and an easy yoke and his compassionate authority alongside the provocative challenge of his teachings, means that a decision to follow Jesus is not made on a whim. He wants his followers to be aware of the cost, as well as the gain, involved in being his disciple.

- How far is it possible to weigh up what it means to follow Jesus? How useful an exercise do you think this is?
- In what ways might today's reading shape your perception of Jesus?

Wednesday: Judgement

Reading: John 8:3-11

The purpose of applying the death penalty to those who commit adultery is to 'purge the evil' from society (Deuteronomy 22:22), ensuring that God's people remain pure. But there are errors in the way this case is presented to Jesus. The man who was involved in the adultery should also be put to death, but he is not present. The woman is brought publicly, thus humiliating her. The leaders' concern is less obedience to the Law of Moses and more the testing of Jesus' attitude to that law.

Jesus does not condone the woman's behaviour. He tells her to be different from now on. Purity is important. But he does not condemn the woman's behaviour. Rather, by responding as he does, he leads her accusers to recognise similarities in themselves as they have to admit their own sinfulness. Perhaps the picture being painted by Jesus' unusual attitude is less about judgement and more about journeying together, learning to change as the journey progresses.

- How might each of the characters have felt about the events in this story? What responses towards Jesus might have been provoked?
- What do you learn about Jesus from his unwillingness to follow the letter of the law?

Thursday: Vulnerability

Reading: John 4:1-30

Jews and Samaritans did not generally associate with each other. Men and women kept apart. Women who went to the well on their own in the middle of the day – rather than with the other women when it was cooler – were segregated for a reason. Three reasons why there would be no expectation of this encounter taking place.

To have one's story known as this woman's story was known to Jesus meant that she was vulnerable in this encounter. To this woman Jesus declares that he is the Christ, a claim he makes infrequently, making himself vulnerable. Two reasons why this encounter was deep, and perhaps uncomfortable.

Jesus asks for this woman's help, and the result of their unusual encounter is that she embarks on a mission to tell others of the one who not only 'told me everything I ever did' but crosses barriers to accept her for who she is.

- What are your reactions to Jesus' disregard for convention? What implications does this have for us as his followers today?
- How do you respond to the vulnerability that threads through this story?

Friday: Emotion

Reading: Luke 7:36-50

Many people feel uncomfortable with expressions of emotion, and uneasy at the use of touch in communicating those emotions. Such expressions involve making oneself vulnerable, exposing to onlookers what is going on within the person. They may challenge the carefully secured masks worn to keep others at a distance. When, as in this story, the emotion comes from an uninvited guest, a woman, with a bad reputation, and is expressed in an overtly tactile way, the host's displeasure is unsurprising.

Sometimes, though, the change taking place inside a person is at such a deep level that no restraint, no other expression, is possible. This woman has understood herself, and God, in a new and life-changing way. Jesus understands this. He is not concerned with socially acceptable practice, but with her honesty, her heartfelt response to the love and acceptance that he represents.

- What do you learn about Jesus, from the emotion that he provokes and from his response to it?
- What are your experiences of emotion in expressing response to God? In what ways do these experiences help, and challenge, you?

Saturday: Touching

Reading: Matthew 8:1-4

In the first century being a leper resulted in becoming an outcast, considered unclean and literally untouchable. Lepers were cut off from their homes, families and friends and were made to live outside the towns and villages, associating only with other lepers. No one would go near them, much less touch them, for fear of catching the disease themselves and for fear of being unclean. To be a leper was to be isolated.

Jesus, far from being concerned with the social boundaries surrounding leprosy, takes the opposite approach. Rather than avoiding them, he welcomes them. Rather than seeing contact with lepers as making him unclean, he makes them clean. Healed and whole, he draws them back into the community, enabling them to once more play their part in family, religious and social affairs. His touch, unexpected, changes them.

- In what ways was Jesus' behaviour risky? What might this mean for you and your church community?
- What is the importance of being restored into the community as a part of healing?

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Empathy

Reading: Luke 7:11-15

Responding to the grief of another is difficult. Nothing can prepare us, or them, for the level of pain being experienced. While losing someone is always painful, for this woman it also meant the difference between security and possible destitution. Already a widow, women could not inherit property or money and so she would become the responsibility of the community, who had a duty to care for her. Alongside her sense of grief, loss and loneliness, the woman had to come to terms with her uncertain future. In the healing of her son, much of this was reversed.

Jesus' heart 'went out to her'. We often speak of this as empathy. He did not act out of a sense of duty, a desire to display authority or a wish to please a crowd. He acted out of compassion, in order for her present and future to be transformed.

- What are your reactions to the image of Jesus being motivated by compassion? How does this shape your understanding of him?
- What is the balance between compassion and duty in the way you live out your faith?

Monday: Welcoming

Reading: Luke 14:16-24

Most people enjoy a party; the opportunity to eat, drink and celebrate, to put cares aside and have some fun. To host such a party can be exhilarating: catching up with old friends, strengthening relationships, sharing stories, relaxing in each other's company... To invite people to a party only for them to back out at the last minute is disappointing, distressing even. To invite all those who initially did not have an invitation is a drastic measure, but for the gregarious, generous host who loves to throw a party there is no better way to set aside the barriers that exclude and to welcome people in.

Jesus' stories are shaped by his understanding of God and here he demonstrates the motivation for his provocative, indiscriminating approach to those he meets: God welcomes all.

- What is your reaction to Jesus' understanding of God as one who welcomes all? In what ways is this evident in the biblical stories you know?
- What could it mean, for you and for your church community, if you all adopted this approach?

Tuesday: Putting aside

Reading: Luke 15:11-32

Family dynamics can be so difficult. Children's behaviour towards their parents – and vice versa – can be a source of trauma, regret, disappointment, anger and misunderstanding, as well, of course, as joy. In this story the younger son's request for his inheritance is tantamount to wishing his father dead. Selling it off means halving the size of the family farm, publicly bringing shame on the family.

Jesus' understanding of God is depicted in the father figure. He does not take offence at the disrespect shown and the shame caused. Unlike his older son, he puts aside his pride as he watches and longs for his son's return, his dignity as he runs to welcome him home, and his rights as he rejects the possibility of his son living with the consequences of his behaviour. All this as an expression of unbounded love, the same love Jesus demonstrates to those he meets.

- What is your reaction to Jesus' understanding of God as abundantly loving? In what ways is this a comfort, and a challenge?
- How does this image of God contrast with the ideas you often hear expressed?

Wednesday: Worth

Reading: Matthew 18:12-14

Given the opportunity, sheep have a habit of wandering off, and then getting lost or stuck. It would be easy to write off these lost sheep as expendable, rather than putting finite energy into a possibly fruitless search.

In life, too, there are some people who seem more rescuable than others. The image of God as shepherd, desperately concerned for the welfare of each individual sheep, actively seeking any that are lost, underpins Jesus' determination to reach those who are routinely considered insignificant. In this image, it is not enough to count how many are 'safe'; the issue is the number who are still 'lost' and need to be rescued. The joy that comes from rescuing one indicates the worth of each individual.

- What is your reaction to Jesus' understanding of God as valuing each individual? How does this fit with the way you see yourself, and with your perception of the worth of others?
- In what ways can the worth of each individual be celebrated?

Thursday: Mutuality

Reading: John 15:1-17

Jesus paints three pictures of the relationships between himself and God and us. The first picture, of the vine, shows the relationships clearly: the branches need to be connected to the vine in order to grow; they need to be cared for – pruned – in order to be fruitful (unfruitful branches are destroyed); and it is the gardener who cares for the plant in its entirety. The second picture talks of the relationships being rooted in love, a flow of love in, between and through Jesus, God and us. The third picture identifies us as friends rather than servants, with the change of relationship that implies.

Jesus' understanding of God as desiring a mutual loving relationship with us lies behind his treatment of all those he encounters, as he demonstrates God's love to them and gives opportunity for them to love him back.

- What do you understand by Jesus' assertion that his followers are not servants but friends? How does this change their relationship? What is your reaction to this?
- How might this image of relationship be put into practice?

Friday: Grief

Reading: John 11:1-7, 17, 32-44

Healing, controlling the natural elements, speaking God's forgiveness, challenging accepted attitudes and practices, breaking boundaries: Jesus is clearly someone out of the ordinary. In debates about his identity people thought of him as a prophet or as the Christ (Mark 8:27-29). In Church History people debated how it could be possible for Jesus to be both fully human and also God. Even without this debate, there can be a tendency to minimise the human side of him in order to accept the authority of his words and actions.

Jesus' friend died, and Jesus weeps. Even though, as God, he knows that he is able to reverse this death, he is still experiencing grief. Witnessing the anguish and confusion of his friends, and experiencing his own very human sense of loss, he gives expression to those emotions in tears.

- How easy or difficult is it to hold in tension an understanding of Jesus both as fully human and as fully God?
- What are your reactions to knowing that Jesus experienced human emotions such as grief?

Saturday: Humour

Reading: Matthew 7:1-5

There is a mental image conveyed here, of someone squinting at the dust in their eye while their helper, with the best of intentions, stumbles around with a great lump of wood sticking out of their own eye. The cartoon image of them turning this way and that, knocking things over with the plank as they do so and seemingly unaware of the havoc they are causing, is not out of place here!

Clearly the picture Jesus paints is not intended to be taken literally; he is exaggerating to make a point and to make it memorable. But it demonstrates a side of Jesus that is often missed: his use of humour. Lost in translation, and in the reading in serious tones in church services, Jesus nevertheless has a sense of humour. Can you hear him joining in with the laughter?

- How easy or difficult do you find it to think of Jesus as having a sense of humour? What are your reactions to this idea?
- What place does humour play in your experience of faith? What place does it have in your church community? In what ways might you want to affirm or challenge this?

Fifth Sunday of Lent: Solidarity

Reading: Luke 22:39-46

No one wants to go through difficult experiences, to suffer. To have trouble accepting such experiences is natural; to ask God to take them away is to be expected. To sweat drops of blood indicates the level of stress being experienced by Jesus in this passage.

As God, having the divine authority Jesus has already demonstrated over the natural elements, sickness, death and sin, it would be possible for Jesus to remove himself from the situation or to use his divine resources to protect himself. As a human, though, Jesus expresses solidarity with other humans – with us – in his apprehension of what the future holds, his desire to avoid extreme suffering, his struggle to accept God's will.

- What difference does it make to you to know that Jesus experienced such very human struggles?
- How does this image of Jesus shape your understanding of him?

Monday: Revelation

Reading: Mark 9:2-8

In hindsight, mountain-top experiences are a tremendous way of building faith, giving revelation and reassurances to hold onto when the going gets tough. At the time, though, they can provoke a range of emotions: excitement, fear, elation, bewilderment...

The disciples have lived alongside Jesus as he displays divine power and human emotion, unmatched authority and basic human needs. Their understanding of him has grown and changed as they see different aspects of his character. Now they have a dramatic confrontation with the essential nature of who he is. On this mountain-top, amidst their fear, they see his glory, he is met by two key figures from the history of the faith, and they hear God claim him as God's loved Son. In hindsight, this is a mountain-top experience which, for the moment, leaves them in no doubt about who they are following.

- In what ways has your faith been built by mountain-top experiences? How do you hold on to the revelations and reassurances of these experiences when you are in the 'valleys' in between?
- How does this image of Jesus fit with those of the last few days? How does it shape your understanding of him?

Tuesday: Who?

Reading: Matthew 4:23-5:2a; 7:28-29

The sight of a wandering rabbi (teacher) and his band of disciples was common in Jesus' time. The role of rabbis was usually to teach accepted interpretations of the Jewish scriptures. Their listeners would learn these interpretations; their disciples (usually the most outstanding students) would not only learn them but would listen to and watch and imitate every aspect of their rabbi's life in order to become like him.

The experience of those listening to Jesus' teaching is different. His disciples are not the most outstanding students, but are rather more of a mixed bunch. His teachings are not accepted interpretations of the Jewish scriptures but rather his own interpretations, hence the question about the source of his authority: depending on your perspective he could be seen as a prophet, a cynic, a revolutionary, a magician or a teacher of the law.

- Which description do you think best fits Jesus? How does this shape the way in which you understand him?
- How does this understanding of the role of a disciple contribute to your understanding of what it means to follow Jesus today?

Wednesday: Stories

Reading: Luke 12:13-21

Most people love stories. They engage with our imaginations, taking us out of ourselves and our lives and allowing us to interact on a different level. They are an excellent means of communication, more memorable than strings of information and so a good way of holding onto important beliefs and ideas. They are a safe way to explore relationships and emotions. They enable complex concepts to be examined in an accessible way. They can also speak to our hearts and bring about change.

Jesus understands the power of stories, to convict and to inspire. He uses them to illustrate a point, and allows people to draw their own conclusions about motive and make their own decisions about their place in a story. His stories tend not to be comfortable tales, though. People rarely get the answers they are looking for.

- In what ways could Jesus, as a storyteller, be perceived as a threat?
- What stories have spoken to you and inspired change? How do you react to the story in today's reading?

Thursday: Acceptability

Reading: Matthew 11:12-19

There's no pleasing some people! Determining acceptable behaviour can be really difficult; ascertaining boundaries, gauging expectations, humour and aversion levels, meeting people's requirements – all are tricky areas to negotiate.

Jesus' hearers are on the lookout for someone special, a messenger from God, perhaps in the style of one of the prophets found in the Jewish scriptures. Some see John the Baptist as the one they are looking for; others think Jesus fulfils this role. Both are criticised for their behaviour, and yet it represents polar opposites. Asceticism is disapproved of, and so is indulgence.

In the eyes of Jesus' hearers it is not a compliment to be described as 'a friend of tax collectors and "sinners".' Yet it is an accurate depiction of those with whom he associated. What seems derogatory to one could be a lifeline from God to another.

- What adjectives would you use to describe Jesus?
- What expectations have you had of Jesus? Which of these still remain? In what ways has he met, or failed to meet, these expectations?

Friday: Collaboration

Reading: Matthew 9:35-10:1

The helplessness that comes from confrontation with human need can be crippling. The desire to make a difference and the lack of available resources can lead to dejected inaction or an added motivation to change things. In Jesus, the result is to address the need: preaching, teaching and healing. But this meeting of needs draws further crowds of people, evoking Jesus' compassion, and an observation about the need for more people to do what he is doing.

Motivated by this compassion, Jesus commissions his disciples to heal as he is healing, giving them the authority to do this and instructing them to pray for others who will do the same. Motivated by compassion, he is willing to admit his own need for assistance, and to share his authority in order that more people can be made whole. This is not an exclusive form of leadership, but rather a mission in which all participate.

- To what extent is it a comfort, and a challenge, to see Jesus' mission as one in which we all participate?
- What are your reactions to this image of Jesus? How does it help to shape your understanding of him?

Saturday: Expectations

Reading: John 7:25-30, 37-44

Prophet? Christ? Or...? Compassionate yet provocative, vulnerable yet authoritative, promising both rest and challenge, bringing both wholeness and division – it is no wonder people are unsure about Jesus' identity! It is not often that Jesus speaks out about his identity as publicly as this, though; and doing so leads to further discussion as people are unwilling to accept what is becoming clear to them. The obstacle is people's expectations: Jesus does not come from the right town.

Perhaps the key question is whether Jesus is able to follow through on his promises. Does the Spirit flow through those who believe in him? With the benefit of hindsight, in the form of the rest of the New Testament and church history, we know that he does.

Prophet? Christ? Or...?

- How would you answer this question? What factors lead you to this answer?
- In what ways does Jesus not meet people's expectations? In what ways has he not met your expectations? How do you respond to this?

Palm Sunday: Kingship

Reading: Mark 11:1-11

The spreading of cloaks on the ground was the way in which the people proclaimed their choice of a new king, in defiance of the existing king who was, by implication, being given a vote of no confidence. On this particular day crowds of people are approaching Jerusalem in readiness for the forthcoming festival; spirits are high and this overt declaration of kingship is risky and inflammatory. The people's shouts declare this king to be not only the people's current choice, but the one for whom they have been waiting, who would lead them as King David did of old and who would save them from the Romans.

On the other hand, kings rode horses, the symbol of being a warrior, bringing defeat on enemies. To ride on a donkey was a peaceful symbol, a sign of humility. Jesus' kingship is declared; but perhaps his kind of kingship is not what people are expecting.

- What might be the tensions between the two types of king considered here? To what extent do you think Jesus meets each description?
- Which kind of king would you prefer Jesus to be? What are the benefits, and challenges, of each?

Monday: Outspokenness

Reading: Mark 12:1-12

It is quite clear in this story who is in the right and who are the 'villains'. Those who are supposed to be caring for the vineyard are so possessive that they protect it from its rightful owner who wants to share its benefits, trying to keep it for themselves.

In the early days of his ministry Jesus tried to keep his activity quiet, refusing to answer questions about his identity and instructing those he healed to tell no one. After the crowd's declaration of allegiance however, as Jesus moves through his last week, he becomes more outspoken. Already seen as a troublemaker because of his attitude to rule-keeping and his desire to associate with 'undesirables', now in this parable he identifies himself as God's Son and his hearers as the wicked tenants who are trying to keep God for themselves.

- What might be the reasons for Jesus' change in approach?
- What does this outspoken side of Jesus add to your image of him? How do you respond to this?

Tuesday: Conflict

Reading: Luke 20:19-26

For some people there is no conflict between 'church' and 'state', the sacred and the secular: the two are seen as covering completely different areas of life. For many, though, faith permeates all that they do, and the attempt to live a life of faith in a secular world presents a challenge and leads to opposition.

Jesus' transformative teaching and behaviour has just this effect, which is exacerbated as he becomes more outspoken, hence the desire of the religious leaders to arrest him. He does not speak out against the state, however. He does not encourage uprising, or refusal to participate in meeting the demands of the secular rulers. Neither does he encourage a turning away from the costly demands of the life of faith. Rather, he brings the two together: both require commitment. Is this the behaviour of one seeking rebellion? Or of one pursuing the gentle but challenging rolling-out of a new way of living?

- In what ways can there be a conflict between the 'sacred' and 'secular' areas of life? In what ways is this a false division?
- What are your reactions to the image of Jesus presented in this story?

Wednesday: Humility

Reading: John 13:1-17

The roads were dry and dusty; walking in sandals meant that feet were filthy. It was the job of the lowest servant to wash people's feet. Some people have a real dislike, even a fear, of feet. Certainly dirty, smelly, worn, calloused feet are not the pleasantest part of the body to care for! There is also a certain vulnerability in kneeling at someone's feet, an easy target for one who wants to lash out.

In the gathering of people present at this meal are Jesus' closest associates, those with whom he has lived and travelled for the past year, who have witnessed his teaching, actions, compassion, grief and humour. Amongst them is the one he knows will, later that night, betray him. All have their feet washed. For Jesus to do this is an act of supreme humility, servanthood and love. He presents it to his disciples as a pattern to copy.

- How do you respond to the knowledge that Jesus knowingly washed the feet of his betrayer?
- What does it mean, now, to act out of humility, servanthood and love? In what ways might you copy this pattern of behaviour?

Maundy Thursday: Freedom

Reading: Matthew 26:26-30

The Passover is the Jewish freedom festival. The Passover meal, through its symbolic foods, words and actions, tells the story of God setting his people free from slavery by miraculous acts and demonstrations of power over a thousand years previously. For those eating the meal, this was not just the remembering of an historical event, but was celebrating as if it had happened to them, bringing the past into the present and giving hope for the future.

Now Jesus gives the meal a new significance. 'This is my body... This is my blood... forgiveness of sins.' Not just the remembering of an event, but something happening to them over the coming hours – and to us as we celebrate it – and giving hope for the future. The freedom meal.

- In what ways does Jesus' ministry, and the following of his teachings, bring freedom?
- How does this perspective relate to your understanding of the Eucharist/Holy Communion?

Good Friday: Earth-shattering

Reading: Luke 23:33-47

People die, every minute of every day. Back then, people were crucified with alarming regularity. But usually the victim does not forgive his killer; life is too precious. Usually the sun does not stop shining; creation is unmoved by what takes place. Usually the curtain of the Temple remains intact: death does not impinge on the place where God lives.

But this time, something is different. It is still a very human death, very painful, bloody, slow and agonising. But at the suffering of the one who has authority over the elements, disease, sin and death, creation becomes dark. At the death of the one who has given life-giving love, compassion, healing and rest, the curtain symbolising God's separation from his creation is torn aside so that they are separate no more. Something momentous has occurred today.

- How do you understand the response of creation, and the Temple curtain, to Jesus' death? How would you respond to the centurion's comment?
- How would you describe the momentous event that has occurred today?

Holy Saturday: Waiting

Reading: Matthew 27:57-66

What now? There is an emptiness following death; a waiting, for time to move on, some semblance of normality to resume, knowing that life will never be the same again. There is a numbness, in response to the heightened emotions of the preceding days. There is an exhaustion after all that has been coped with. There are questions, about what has taken place, about whether anything could have been different, about where the meaning is in these events. There is a dread about what the future might hold.

Sitting in that liminal place at the graveside they are waiting. Jesus transformed their lives. He loved them. He challenged them. He inspired them. But now he is dead. He was too provocative for some, too accepting of those who did not conform, too much for the protectors of the faith who were challenged by the representation of God he gave. What happens now?

- When have you found yourself in such a place of waiting? What can you take from the women's waiting that might help you in future?
- In the light of these recent readings, how would you now answer the question 'Who is this Jesus?' What are your images and perceptions of him? How have these changed?

Easter Sunday: Hope

Reading: John 20:1-18

Easter Day does not begin with 'He is risen!'. It begins with a further loss, additional anguish, searching, bewilderment... and then, belief. Now: He is risen!

Life does not return to its previous pattern. Jesus does not return to his earlier ministry; the disciples still feel his absence and are still afraid of what might happen next. But at the same time, everything is different! He is risen! He appears among them – just once, and then nothing for a week, so they are still in that liminal place – but the nature of the waiting has changed. Now there is hope, a reason to believe that what Jesus had said about himself is true, a reason to believe that something momentous is still occurring. Death was not powerful enough to put a stop to it. What happens now?

- Who is this Jesus?
- What happens now?

Questions for group discussion

If you meet as a group, you may like to open with prayer.

These questions may help your discussion:

- What have you noticed in your responses to the reflections and questions this week? What has particularly struck you? What has challenged you? What has encouraged you? What has surprised you?
- In what ways have your pictures of Jesus changed as you have reflected on each of the aspects highlighted this week? How do you react to this? How might you need to be different as a result?
- What questions has this week's material raised for you? Who or what may help you to address these questions further?
- In what ways has God spoken to you this week?

A good way to end your discussion could be to gather up what you have talked about by spending a few moments together in silence, before closing with a prayer.