

DYING TO LIVE

2021 LENT COURSE
DIOCESE OF MONMOUTH



INTRODUCTION

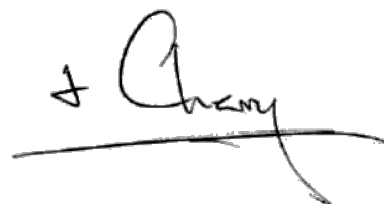
People are drawn to following Jesus in all manner of ways and at different points in our lives. Each of us has a story to tell that is unique. What is common to all of us, however, is that we never stop learning what it means to be a disciple. When the first disciples responded to Jesus's call to 'follow me', it was only the beginning of their relationship with him. Over the years that followed, both before and perhaps particularly after his crucifixion and resurrection, they continued to grow in their understanding of who Jesus was and what the implications of that were for the way they lived their lives. It is no different for us today.

Study groups are a wonderful way of exploring our faith and discipleship in the company of others. We learn and grow together as we discuss our thoughts and perspectives on the stories of Jesus and as we each share our experiences of the ways in which God has worked in our lives. Listening to others can be encouraging and inspiring. Telling our own story can be empowering and affirming. We can find hope and strength together as we realise that we are not alone. Others are journeying with us and God is drawing us all into a deeper relationship with him.

The season of Lent calls us to reflect on Jesus's invitation to take up our cross and follow him. To do this in the company of other Christian pilgrims can be particularly enriching. It may require a degree of courage, even sacrifice, on our part as well as trust in the One who is drawing us ever deeper into his love. Learning to die to ourselves in order to find the new life that Jesus offers is never going to be easy. But my own experience of both leading such groups and participating in them is that they can change and transform us.

I am delighted to commend this home-grown course, 'Dying to Live' as a diocesan resource for this Lent and am immensely grateful to the clergy who have written each of the weekly sessions. The themes of Lamentation, Forgiveness, Prayer, Generosity, Solidarity and Calling will help us to unpack and explore together six different aspects of being a disciple of Jesus and so, more faithfully, follow the One who calls us.

My hope and prayer is that in engaging with these themes in the company of others we will, as a Church and as individuals, become more Christ-like, live out the gospel more faithfully and be heralds of the Kingdom of God in the communities of our diocese and beyond.



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5 STEPS TO GET GOING

1. MAKE A PLAN TO PROMOTE YOUR COURSE

As with all things, taking a little time to plan a way forward goes a long way. In particular, think carefully about how you will encourage others to get on board with your Lent course:

- **Think about your ‘target audience’** — Who are the people your group will be for? What stage of life are they in, and when are they most likely to be free? You may decide to hold more than one group in order to cater for different people in different walks of life. Consult with a few people who are most likely to take part to find a good day and time to meet.
- **Advertise generally** — Don’t be afraid to advertise the course early as widely as possible. For many people, they need to hear a message several times, before they are in a place to seriously consider responding.
- **Invite people individually** — At the same time, people are most likely to respond to a personal invitation or word of mouth recommendation. Take a bit of time, either on your own, or with others in your Ministry Team, to list the individuals who you think would most benefit from being part of your Lent group. Then decide how to approach them individually to invite them to join in.
- **Have a clear signing up process** — Advertisers call this a ‘Call to Action’ and say it is key in eliciting a response. How will people sign up to be part of the group? Is there an online form? Can they leave a comment on a social media post? Do they need to email or call a particular person?

2. TAKE TIME TO GET TO KNOW ZOOM (OR YOUR OTHER PREFERRED VIDEO PLATFORM!)

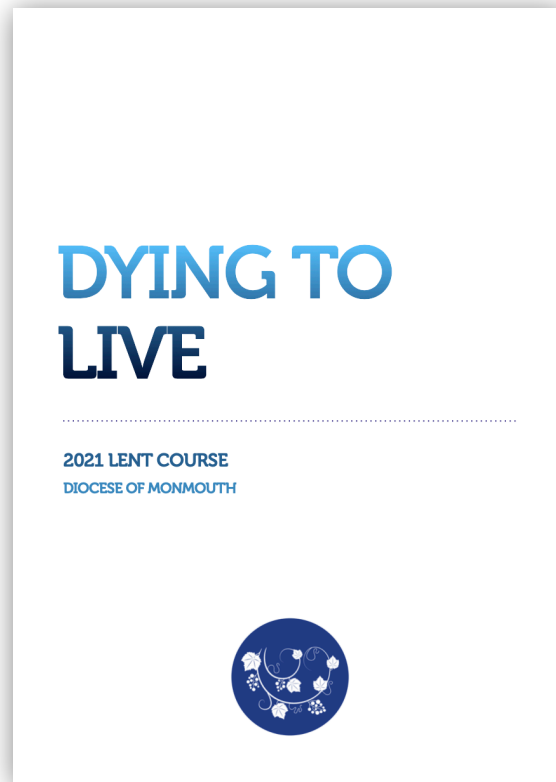
Many people are now familiar with Zoom, although other platforms are around, for instance Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. Each of these will have its own help or support section with directions for how to use it. Give yourself plenty of time to learn how to use your chosen software:

- **Zoom yourself!** — One of the best ways to build confidence in a particular program is simply to take time and play around with it. Did you know that with the click of one button, Zoom will allow you to set up a new meeting (in your private meeting room) with only you in it? This way you can learn and experiment safely, before your course begins. In particular, learn how to ‘screen share’ and find your way around the other ‘hosting tools’ along the bottom of the screen.
- **Recruit a Tech Person** — If you are really concerned about leading your group and managing the technology by yourself, you could recruit a ‘tech person’. They can handle the tech side and act as ‘host’ for the meeting in Zoom, leaving you free to focus on facilitating.

3. SET GROUND RULES DEPENDING ON YOUR GROUP'S SIZE AND CONTEXT

As meeting online is very different to face to face, and may be new to some in your group, it can help to agree some basic ‘online etiquette’ at the beginning of the course. A lot of this may well depend on your group’s size and context:

- **Muted or unmuted** — In a smaller group of less than ten people, it is possible to hold a video conference where everyone is unmuted. This is certainly the most natural way of holding a conversation together. However, in larger groups, audio interference and echoes can creep in. If this is the case, it may be easier to ask people to mute themselves, and then unmute in order to speak.
- **Breakout Rooms** — Similarly, in a group larger than ten, you may like to use the ‘breakout rooms’ function to split up to enable better group discussions. Will these breakout groups stay the same throughout the course or change each week? What size will they be? Usually no smaller than four people, and no larger than ten is a good rule. Would you like to recruit a facilitator for each smaller group or leave them to manage themselves?
- **Respect & Confidentiality** — People will be invited to share their own personal experiences throughout the course. What boundaries will you set around respect and confidentiality at the outset, in order to ensure a safe space for all the participants?



4. MAKE THE MATERIAL YOUR OWN

Don't be afraid to block out, switch up, add to or move around the material we've provided to suit your own group! Some groups require more initial material to fuel the discussion, others can chat for hours quite happily right off the bat. Find the right medium for your group:

- **Don't feel you have to cover everything** — If your group is making slow progress, you might feel the need to speed through the material in order to cover it all. Please don't! Your group's learning journey is more important than doing everything in the book — and there's no test at the end!
- **Decide what material to circulate to group members** — It may well be helpful to send a copy of this PDF to each group member, or to send them a print copy (the Diocesan Office can help with your printing for you if you drop them a line!). Alternatively you could copy/paste just the sections in solid boxes (that are read or said together) each week, and either put them in an email for participants to look at, or in a powerpoint to be shared on screen.

5. BE A FACILITATOR, NOT A PREACHER OR TEACHER!

Finally, as you begin your Lent course, remember that your role is to facilitate discussion and not to teach, or even preach at, the group members:

- **Encourage and nurture the discussion** — As a facilitator, your role is to encourage natural discussion among the group. Be careful not to speak for long periods yourself, and instead ask plenty of open questions (there are lots of these in the material). If the discussion is struggling to get going, you can also ask gentle probing questions to encourage participants to share more of their thoughts or experience. Be careful, though, not to interrogate anyone! And don't try to force anyone to speak who doesn't want to — sometimes people need space to sit and listen.
- **Don't be afraid of silence** — When the discussion gets started, as well as during times of prayer, there may be periods of silence. Don't be afraid of this! Many people need time to reflect and consider before they feel able to speak. If you are nervous, then count to ten in your head after asking a question — chances are someone else will always speak up before you reach ten! Similarly, count slowly in your head (or just breathe slowly and deeply), to ensure you have allowed plenty of space for silent prayer.
- **Have the background notes up your sleeve** — There are several background notes sections throughout the material which are to help you as a group leader. Rather than reading them as they are, you can slip some of the insights into the discussion as needed, or use them to keep the discussion on track.
- **Remember! The journey is as important as the destination** — There are no required learning outcomes to this Lent course, or assessments at the end! Your role as facilitator is not to impart knowledge or learning, but to allow people the space to explore for themselves. Embrace all the twists and turns, changes of tack and tangents that this involves. And enjoy the uniqueness of your group and its members! Then you can be sure to have an enjoyable, and fruitful, Lent journey.

STRUCTURE OF EACH SESSION

Each session is designed to cover around an hour and a half, split into these sections:

SUMMARY

Each session has a short summary with the main discussion / learning points, and how the session connects to the whole course.

OPENING PRAYER

An opening prayer, which you may like to use to begin your session. You could consider allowing a few moments of silence prior to using it, to allow people to clear their minds and focus.

ICE BREAKER

The first session has a fun ice breaker activity to help the new group participants to feel at ease, and get used to interacting.

 **EXPERIENCE**

Each session introduces the particular discussion topic by inviting the participants to share their own experience from their lives.

 **EXPLORE**

This section is about exploring all the different facets of the topic, through the lens of current affairs, art, music or literature.

 **REFLECT**

The 'reflect' section helps participants to consider how Christian tradition and the scriptures enable us to understand the topic more deeply.

 **RESPOND**

This final section encourages the participants to prayerfully consider their own personal response to what they have discovered, and to bring all they have learned together in prayer to God.

WEEK 1: LAMENTATION

SUMMARY

Our first session begins with Lamentation, reflecting on all that the last year has brought up for us emotionally and spiritually. In the biblical practice of Lament, we can bring our honest selves to God, expressing grief, loss, fear and anxiety, and asking for God's help.

OPENING PRAYER

Encourage people to light a candle, and then say these words:

This candle is to remind us of God's presence with us,
wherever we are gathered.
As we light our candles,
we invite the Light of Christ into our presence.

Say this prayer together:

**Lord,
I know that you are faithful over all things,
even the hard, dark times of my life.
Help me not back away from you in my time of grief.
Help me instead to lean into you
and to trust in you.
Amen.**

 **ICE BREAKER**

Read each of the following sentences and ask people if they think it is from:

- (a) The Book of Lamentations (the Message version);
- (b) A lyric from a song by Taylor Swift.

1. I remember it all—oh, how well I remember—the feeling of hitting the bottom.
2. Have you ever seen anything like this? Ever seen pain like my pain, seen what he did to me?
3. It rains when you're here. And it rains when you're gone.
4. Long were the nights when my days once revolved around you.
5. Walls of insincerity, shifting eyes, and vacancy vanished when I saw your face.
6. I weep, weep buckets of tears, and not a soul within miles around cares.
7. I gave up on life altogether. I've forgotten what the good life is like.
8. Did you have to do this? I was thinking that you could be trusted.
9. Like shadows in a faded light. Oh, we're invisible.
10. Oh, Oh, Oh...

(Source: Pinterest)

Answers on next page.

Answers: *Book of Lamentations: 1, 2, 6, 7; Taylor Swift Lyrics: 3, 4, 5, 8, 9; Both: 10*



EXPERIENCE

Background Notes

We step into this world with a cry. Although none of us remembers the moment, the first sound we uttered after leaving the warm and protected confines of our mother's womb was a loud protest. We enter, wailing. To cry is to be human. Lament is not the same as crying, however. It's different.

The Bible is filled with this song of sorrow. Over a third of the Psalms are laments. The book of Lamentations weeps over the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus lamented in the final hours of his life.

Lament is different than crying because lament is a form of prayer. It is more than just the expression of sorrow or the venting of emotion. Lament talks to God about pain. And it has a unique purpose: trust. It is an invitation to pour out our fears, frustrations, and sorrows in order to help us to renew our confidence in God.

Mark Vroegop beautifully captures it when he said "Laments turn toward God when sorrow tempts you to run from Him."

Discuss together:

- When it comes to the coronavirus outbreak, what's the word related to mental health that you hear most?

If you said "anxiety," you're not alone. But what you might hear just as often is the word "loss." Because of this pandemic, most of us are experiencing an unusual amount of loss.

- What kinds of loss have you felt in the past year?

Most obviously, there's loss of life. But it's not just death. We are experiencing loss on so many more levels. Loss of jobs. Loss of income. Loss of going to school or church. Loss of sports... and weddings... and holiday... and hugs... and handshaking... and restaurants... and haircuts!

There is something powerful about naming this as grief and inviting God to be God in that.

A question for people to reflect on as we go through this session:

- Over this past year you have probably experienced some loss. In everything we're facing now — in everything you're facing personally — where do you believe real help will come from?

EXPLORE

1. BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

Background Notes

There are numerous biblical examples to draw upon for examples of lamenting from Genesis to Habakkuk to the Psalms to Job to the Gospels and so for purpose of time we will focus now on the Book of Lamentations.

The original name of the book in Hebrew, ekah, can be translated “Alas!”. Lamentations is a collection of Hebrew poems that focuses on the grief, pain, and suffering that came out of living in Jerusalem when it was besieged by the armies of Babylon and eventually captured, plundered, and destroyed. The poet acknowledges that Jerusalem’s fall was an act of Yahweh’s justice, but he still laments, and even protests, the suffering that took place. He draws attention to how terrible the situation was and then calls for God to hear the suffering of his people and respond. These laments give a sacred dignity to the emotion we feel when we see injustice and suffering.

Read Lamentations 1. 1-12, and discuss:

- What would you draw attention to in the world today?
- What suffering or injustice do we need to cry out about?



2. ART

On the previous page is a depiction of the moment that Jesus is brought down from the cross by Sandro Botticelli, called 'Lamentation of Christ'.

Here is a link to show the image to the whole group on a screen:

<https://imgc.allpostersimages.com/img/print/u-g-F58S0L0.jpg?w=550&h=550&p=0>

Discuss together:

- As you look at the picture what emotions can you see in the faces of those around Jesus?
- Have you ever wanted to cry out to God?

Background Notes

Art offers a powerful tool for accessing feelings—be they unconscious or just beneath the surface. Art concerns itself with life—the underbelly of it, the glory. The beauty, the mess, the truth. It says what we cannot say. Art's subject matter is emotion; its purpose is expression. Thus, art communicates — artist to audience.

3. MUSIC

Lamenting with music finds its basis in the Psalms and as the icebreaker demonstrated can be seen in music throughout history. A famous opera lament can be found in Dido and Aeneas. It recounts the love of Dido, Queen of Carthage, for the Trojan hero Aeneas, and her despair when he abandons her.

Here is a link to listen to Dido's Lament: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yWda4RJ00I>

Listen to the piece, and discuss together:

- What emotions did you feel as you listened to this song?
- Did it make you feel sad or happy?
- Where you transported to another place — perhaps more peaceful and serene?

REFLECT

Ask someone to read this version of Psalm 13:

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.

When you look at Psalm 13, we see three main parts to lamenting. The first part is a time of **venting**, the second part is a time of **asking**, and the third part is **praising**.

1. VENTING

In the first two verses of the Psalm, David vents. He's not really requesting information; he's venting his frustration and his confusion directly to God. *'God, are you going to forget me forever? Are you going to keep hiding your face from me?'*

Discuss together:

- Why might it be important to vent our feelings?
- What do you need to vent today?

Background Notes

This type of frustration is echoed in the book of Job. Philip Yancey wrote a book called *Disappointment with God*, about this subject. He writes,

'One bold message in the Book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment—he can absorb them all. As often as not, spiritual giants of the Bible are shown contending with God. They prefer to go away limping, like Jacob, rather than to shut God out... 'God can deal with every human response save one. He cannot abide the response I fall back on instinctively: an attempt to ignore him or treat him as though he does not exist. That response never once occurred to Job.'

Even though Job deeply questioned God—and in Psalm 13, David was questioning God—they never gave up on God. It's good to vent our feelings to God.

2. ASKING

In verses 3 and 4, we hear David saying “Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death”.

Discuss together:

- How easy do you find it to ask for help?
- What would you like to ask God today?

Background Notes

That Hebrew phrase “give light to my eyes” might mean that David was sick, and he was asking for healing from his sickness. Or it could be some other trouble David was in, and he was asking God to enter in and rescue him. So David is boldly asking for God’s intervention and God’s help.

3. PRAISING

Look again at verses 5 and 6: *‘But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise, for he has been good to me.’*

Right in the middle of the crisis, David made a choice to praise. He made a choice to sing.

Discuss together:

- How did Jesus enter into the sufferings of the world?
- How does Jesus’ resurrection change your perspective on the state of the world?
- What can we praise today?

Background Notes

The phrase ‘unfailing love’ is a translation of the Hebrew word ‘hesed’, which means God’s commitment to be faithful to his covenant. In other words, “God, there is so much I don’t know, and so much I can’t control, but here’s what I know: I’m in this covenant relationship with you. You are my Father, and I am your child, and I know God takes care of his children”.

Note: You can find material for further discussion or individual reflection, as well as suggested reading, in the Bonus Material section at the back of this resource.



RESPOND

As we come towards the close of this session, we return to prayer, knowing that God holds us in the palm of his hand through the bad and the good.

Say this prayer together:

**Take, O take me as I am,
Summon out what I shall be,
Set your seal upon my heart
and live in me.
Amen.**

Listen to this hymn together quietly, giving to God all that you are carrying:

It is well with my soul — Horatio Spafford

Here is a YouTube link to play the hymn: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6yDFn3OAFo>

Background Notes

The hymn writer was a man called Horatio Spafford and he carefully planned a trip from America to France and booked tickets on a huge ship for his wife and four daughters. He was planning to join them a few weeks later. On their voyage, the ship was rammed by another vessel and sank, carrying his wife and four daughters to the bottom of the ocean. All his plans suddenly were crushed. As his ship passed over the watery grave of his wife and four beloved daughters, he wrote this famous hymn in grief and lament as he offered all he was to God.

Finish by saying this prayer:

Lord, lift up our weary spirits
so that we might find rest and eternal peace within you;
May we stand upon mountains and walk on stormy seas.
Give us that unspeakable joy to dance in the rain.
Amen.

WEEK 2: FORGIVENESS

SUMMARY

In this session, we explore forgiveness, which is both powerful and deeply challenging. What does it mean to forgive or be forgiven? Are there situations in which forgiveness can or should be withheld? And how might 'dying to live' enable us to let go of past hurt?

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ,
you bear our sins and bind up our broken hearts.
As we share our experiences today,
make this a safe space.
Hold us in your love,
help us to love one another,
And although we may be physically distant,
draw us together in your Spirit.
Amen.

EXPERIENCE

Often stories of grace and forgiveness, whether in popular culture or real life, really resonate with us.

- Can you think of a story of forgiveness that has happened to someone you know, or to yourself?
- One that has stayed with you, or really influenced you.



Do you agree that forgiving should automatically involve forgetting?

There has been much controversy surrounding the removal of public monuments that recall or celebrate a past many people would rather forget.

Last summer, Black Lives Matter protestors removed the Colston statue in Bristol, which commemorated someone whose fortune had been made in the slave trade.

Think also of a parallel situation in the US where the Senate has passed a bill (which Trump tried to veto) calling for the re-naming of military bases that honour confederate officers in the Civil War. The confederates upheld the institution of slavery.

Discuss together:

- Was it right to remove the Colston statue in Bristol? How does 'forgiving and forgetting' work in the context of historic wrongs?
- Thinking of both Bristol and the US, what needs to happen for the work of forgiveness and healing to begin, particularly in regard to racial tensions?
- What kind of grudges or resentments get in the way of forgiveness and healing?

Background Notes

This Lent course is orientated around the idea of dying to live. This session invites us to think about forgiveness, so when we talk about forgiveness, in any context, the question we must ask ourselves is what kind of dying does forgiveness require?

Forgiveness involves dying to those grudges and resentments that get in the way of healing. It may also involve dying to old assumptions about the nature of forgiveness itself. Of these, one of the most pernicious is the idea that we 'forgive and forget'. To forgive is not to forget, although forgiving can eventually lead to a kind of forgetting, but only if the hurt has been properly atoned for and healed.

Atonement, as the word suggests, is about making two people, or groups, or nations 'at one' again. Atonement is the healing agent of forgiveness. It is what makes forgiveness 'work'. It therefore needs to be desired by all parties as much as forgiveness itself, but it also makes certain demands on them. The most significant of these demands has to do with 'dying' to, or letting go of, that bit of the self that is resistant to the giving or receiving of forgiveness.

Linked to this idea of being willing to die to, or let go of, inbuilt resistance is the ability to *ask* for forgiveness. Human beings, with very few exceptions, find forgiveness that is not asked for almost impossible to give. Jesus, in his final moments, is the prime exemplar of one who bestows forgiveness without it having been asked for. For the rest of us, it is much harder.

You may tell yourself that you forgive someone, but if they do not want your forgiveness, or feel the need for it, there is nowhere for it to go. So your forgiveness returns to you, leaving you unsure about what to do with it. This is perhaps what Jesus was thinking of when he told his disciples that the sins that they pronounced unforgiven would remain unforgiven (John 20:23). Other translations use the word 'retain'. He understood this very human predicament. He was not thinking of forgiveness withheld, but of forgiveness refused by the one being forgiven.

For some, this session may provoke memories of real hurt or trauma. In this instance, it may be appropriate to suggest they talk with a priest or qualified spiritual director, or look for the opportunity to speak to a fully qualified mental health professional.

Note: In the Bonus Material section, you can find further material on processing significant past trauma and hurt.

REFLECT

Read Matthew 6. 12 together:

Forgive us the wrong we have done,
as we have forgiven those who have wronged us.

Discuss together:

- What does it mean to forgive those who have wronged us?
- Is it comforting or disconcerting for God to forgive us 'as we forgiven' others?

Read John 20. 23:

If you forgive anyone's sins they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.

Discuss together:

- In what circumstances might it be right not to forgive, or to 'forgive but not forget'?
- If you 'retain' a wrong, does that mean you can't or don't want to forgive it?

Read Matthew 16. 24:

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must renounce self; they must take up their cross and follow me.'

Discuss together:

- How might forgiving others require us to 'die to ourselves' or renounce ourselves? By forgiving, how are we 'dying to live'?
- To take up one's cross often involves being counter-cultural, being willing to challenge accepted behaviour and cultural norms. What areas of our society might need challenging in this way?



Take some time to quietly reflect on these questions:

You might like to play some appropriate music, and invite people to mute themselves and switch off their cameras, to enable the group to take their time over this reflection. They can switch their cameras back on when they feel ready to continue.

- Are there any blocks to forgiveness and healing in your relationships?
- Are there memories of hurt which you are still living with? Or that you have attempted to bury?
- Is there anything you might need to 'let go of' (ie die to)?
- When Jesus meets the paralysed man at the pool of Siloam he asks him if he *wants* to be healed. Do you, or any other party to a dispute, really *want* to be healed?

To conclude the session, share in this liturgy of reconciliation:

'Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'

— *Matthew 11.28*

Let us bring to God all that burdens us, trusting in Christ who bears and binds up our wounds, in his own broken body:

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May the Father forgive us
by the death of his Son
and strengthen us
to live in the power of the Spirit
all our days.

Amen.

Let us go in peace — mending what is broken; uniting what is divided; living the gospel.

In the name of Christ. Amen.

WEEK 3: PRAYER

SUMMARY

This session explores prayer, which lies at the heart of discipleship. Sometimes praying comes easily to us, other times praying can be a real struggle, but if we persevere we can find forms and styles of prayer which work for us, and sustain us in our spiritual lives.

OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, you call us to prayer and assure us you will answer.
Yet sometimes it is hard to keep praying; sometimes our prayers seem to go unanswered;
sometimes you seem more absent than present to us.

So as we gather today, help us learn from one another,
and draw us deeper into your eternal love.

Amen.

EXPERIENCE

Discuss together:

- What ways of praying are you familiar with? (If you are struggling, think of a Eucharist in church – there are several ways we pray in that service alone.)
- Is there a way of praying that you have found helpful and has this been different at different times in your life?
- Recall a moment when you felt close to God. Where were you? What were you doing? Was this prayer?

Background Notes

Prayer can be a very intimate experience and most of us feel that our own prayer is inadequate. So as we come together to reflect on prayer, we recognise that we walk on hallowed ground and in vulnerable territory. We will honour this ground by listening carefully to one another and acknowledging that God deals with each of us uniquely and we each relate to God uniquely. In all our sessions together confidentiality is important – especially so as we meet to share with one another about prayer.

We all have our own way of praying. There is no right way or wrong way of praying. In fact, how we pray is likely to be different at different stages of our life and of our faith journey. There are times when we come together to pray and times when we pray individually. We are all familiar with many different types of prayer and ways of praying (even if we don't realise that we are!).

EXPLORE

Many, many people have written about prayer:

- We find people's experiences of prayer in both the Old and the New Testaments.
- Poetry has been written about prayer.
- Hymns talk of prayer.
- Myriads of books are available to act as a guide to prayer.

The choice can be overwhelming and when our ability to pray doesn't match the apparent experience of the authors, it can be easy to become discouraged. Others are brave enough to acknowledge that prayer can be difficult, times can be dry and sometimes God is more of an Absence than a Presence.

Read through the poem and some or all of the quotes on the next two pages, which express something of those experiences:

The Absence

by R. S Thomas (Welsh priest and poet, 1913-2000):

It is this great absence
 that is like a presence, that compels
 me to address it without hope
 of a reply. It is a room I enter
 from which someone has just
 gone, the vestibule for the arrival
 of one who has not yet come.
 I modernise the anachronism
 of my language, but he is no more here
 than before. Genes and molecules
 have no more power to call
 him up than the incense of the Hebrews
 at their altars. My equations fail
 as my words do. What resources have I
 other than the emptiness without him of my whole
 being, a vacuum he may not abhor?

‘Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays’
 — *Søren Kierkegaard (Danish philosopher and theologian, 1813-1855).*

‘We need to pray to God, not in order to make known to Him our needs or desires but that we
 ourselves may be reminded of the necessity of having recourse to God's help in these matters’.
 — *St Thomas Aquinas; Summa Theologiae (Roman Catholic scholar, 1225-1274)*

‘You move us to delight in praising You; for You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are
 restless until they rest in You’.
 — *St Augustine; Confessions, Book 1, Chapter 1*

'Prayer does not depend upon your natural capacity. What does depend upon your natural capacity is the *kind of* prayer, because it will be *your* prayer. But prayer itself is as simple as conversation between friends. No one would dare write a book on how husband and wife are to talk to each other--what topics are appropriate, what tone should be used--because obviously every marriage is different and goes through different phases....In prayer the relationship is between God and ourselves. God is always the same, but each of us is completely different.'

— Sister Wendy Beckett; Extract from 'Sister Wendy on Prayer' [Penguin 2007]

'When you're lying on the beach something is happening, something that has nothing to do with how you feel or how hard you're trying. You're not going to get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You give the time, and that's it. All you have to do is turn up. And then things change, at their own pace. You simply have to be there where the light can get at you.'

— Rowan Williams (Extract from Radio 2 'Pause for Thought' broadcast in October 2005)

'I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?'

— Mary Oliver; from *The Summer Day*

Discuss together:

- Which of these quotes most speaks to you?
- What is it, do you think, that we bring to prayer? What do you think God brings?
- Do you have a quote, an author, website or app on prayer that you find helpful?



REFLECT

Background Notes

As early as Genesis, in the second story of creation, we read of God speaking with human beings and walking with them in the garden. The patriarchs and prophets are often found talking to God, seeking his face, listening for his word, sometimes acting out their prayer and God's message in a physical way. We can also find people having a good rant at God from time to time (e.g. Jonah 4.1-3)! Many of the psalms are, in themselves, prayers. In the New Testament we find the disciples and Jesus praying in temple, synagogue, field and mountain.

There are many Bible verses that speak to us of prayer. Here are just a few verses we might use to reflect on prayer together today.

Read through these bible verses together:

'[Anna had lived] as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day'.

— *Luke 2. 37*

'Now during those days he [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God'.

— *Luke 6. 12*

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.'

— *Acts 2. 42, 46-47a*

'Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective'.

— *James 5. 16*

'So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours'.

— *Mark 11.24*

'As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?'

— *Psalms 42.1-2*

Discuss together:

- Consider the different patterns of prayer we see in the bible verses above – times when Jesus drew aside from others to pray, the life of the widow devoted to prayer, the early Christians coming together to pray. **What might this variety mean for us in our own lives, individually and as church?**
- There are Bible verses, such as those from James and Mark given above, which are sometimes used to make Christians feel that if they don't get what they have asked for in prayer then it is because their faith is lacking (or we can lay this guilt on ourselves). **How might we deal with such verses, and the challenge of unanswered prayer, in a better way?**
- The psalmist in psalm 42 expresses a thirst and longing for God. There are all sorts of things we might feel when we pray – bored, or doubtful, or full of love. And this might be different on different days. **How do you feel when you come to pray in church or at home?**
- Is there a Bible passage about prayer which you find helpful, or that you use in your own prayer?

Note: Find suggestions on the topic of unanswered prayer in the Bonus Material section.



RESPOND

Perhaps the best known prayer of all is this prayer which Jesus taught his disciples. We use it in church almost every time we meet. Many of us use it in our own prayers. It is woven into our experience of God. It comes from our scriptures.

We bring our time together to a conclusion by using these words as a vehicle for our prayer, our longings, our failings, our hopes, our trust:

This might easily be used with one, two or three voices and others muted.

1: Our Father...

2: You who created us, depth of our being. You to whom our hearts reach out, for whom our souls long... we dare to bring ourselves before you trembling, thirsting, loving.

ALL: To you we come.

1: Who art in heaven...

3: Heaven, a haven, a refuge, a sanctuary in times of darkness, where the meek shall inherit the earth and the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. So far away, so very near;

ALL: To you we come.

1: Hallowed be thy name...

2: We love you name, your holy name. We reach out to you in praise and gratitude for all that you give us and for all that you are.

ALL: To you we come.

1: Thy Kingdom come...

3: Teach us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you that we might create a world where we reach beyond our own selfish desires.

ALL: To you we come.

1: Thy will be done...

2: Open our eyes to let you in so that your compassion may shine through us in all that we do. May your rays of light gently change us as we bring ourselves to you.

ALL: To you we come.

1: On earth as it is in heaven...

3: May the work of our hands be the work of your hands that offer your love to all. May we honour the earth, your good earth, and treat it with reverence and care.

ALL: To you we come.

1: Give us...

2: Weak and powerful; rich and the poor; neighbour and foreigner; sheltered and homeless; free and imprisoned; sorted and confused; ragged and tidy... All of us holy children of God, one Body of Christ, reaching to you with empty hands.

ALL: To you we come.

1: This day...

3: May we live and love in this day, this moment, the only one we truly have. Here and now.

ALL: To you we come.

1: Our daily bread ...

2: Give us just what we need for today - not for tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow;
Give us just what we need: not to excess when so many have so little. For our daily bread...

ALL: To you we come.

1: And forgive us our trespasses...

3: For our sin runs out behind us and often we are unaware. But you take our burden and free us to find holiness in ourselves and others.

ALL: To you we come.

1: As we forgive those who trespasses against us...

2: Our egos are so quick to take offence and so slow to forgive. Soften our hearts that as we know your mercy we may be merciful to others.

ALL: To you we come.

1: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...

3: For what we think we want and what truly gives us life are not always the same. So lead us in the ways of goodness and abundant life, and turn our feet from the paths that lead to death.

ALL: To you we come.

1: For thine is the Kingdom

2: Here on earth where all find a welcome, where all are fed and where poverty exists no more.

1: The power

3: Of the mighty river of justice that flows through us and this earth, cleansing the world of all oppression.

1: The Glory

2: Shining through relationships of justice and love.

1: For ever and ever

3: For the trappings of power and privilege will pass away but faith, hope and love will remain. And the greatest of these is love.

ALL: To you we come.

Amen

So be it

Keep silence for a few moments for people to spend in prayer individually.

We end our time by saying together the Lord's Prayer.

One person might say this with the rest of the group muted, or with everyone unmuted for a 'glorious cacophony' to end!

WEEK 4: GENEROSITY

SUMMARY

In this session, we explore the importance of practising generosity, both because all things have been given to us by God, and to follow Jesus' example of sacrificial giving.

OPENING PRAYER

'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein'
— *Psalm 24:1*

As we come before you now,
we pray for wisdom,
the wisdom of God who knows us well
and the wisdom to be generous to others. **Amen.**

As we come before you now,
we pray for understanding,
the understanding of God's word to us,
and the understanding to discover something new. **Amen.**

EXPERIENCE

Discuss together:

- What do you understand by the word 'generosity'?
- Can you think of ways in which you've experienced 'generosity' recently?



EXPLORE

Saint Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:15 describes generosity as ‘God’s indescribable gift’, so perhaps it might not be too surprising if we struggle to find a satisfactory definition!

Slowly read the following definitions of generosity and identify which ones most resonate with you:

‘Generosity takes an open heart and a love that asks for nothing in return’ — *Unknown*

‘Everyone can experience the joy and blessing of generosity; because everyone has something to give’ — *Jan Grace*

‘Generosity is a practical expression of love’ — *Gary Inrig*

‘Generosity is the heart of God’ — *Sarah Bennington*

‘Generosity is impossible apart from our love of God and his people; but with such love, generosity not only is possible but inevitable.’ — *John MacArthur*

‘Remember: sow sparingly, and you will reap sparingly; sow bountifully, and you will reap bountifully’ — *2 Corinthians 9. 6*

‘Yours, Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour, and the majesty; for everything in heaven and on earth is yours... All things come from you, and of your own do we give you. Amen.’ — *1 Chronicles 29. 11, 14*

Background Notes

The Church In Wales publication ‘Generosity and the inheritance of Lent’ (2019) describes it like this: ‘Generosity is a way of living and being, it is a gift and an inheritance from God for each of us. Generosity has been described as a spiritual gift which we are encouraged to share with others so that they may be blessed too.

Generosity draws upon, and comes from, a faith in the God who was born in human form and gave us everything upon the cross, and afterwards through the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The gift of faith is our inheritance as we are welcomed into the family of God, through which we are to ‘take on’ the qualities of Jesus to become more Christ-like.

Through the inheritance given to us in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are called to be a generous people. Generosity cannot be separated from our call to follow God, the call to be a disciple and the call to be a good steward of creation. Stewardship encompasses caring for the environment, striving for justice and peace, and seeking a good and enabling relationship with our neighbours – all people.’

REFLECT

Read Luke 7. 36–50 together slowly:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Questions for discussion:

- To what extent do you identify with Simon or the unnamed woman in this story? Why might we find it hard to be generous to those we feel don't 'deserve' our generosity?
- In what ways have you experienced God's generosity?
- Just as the woman gives her best away as an expression of her gratitude, how could we (a) as individuals and (b) together as a church give our best to those around us this week?

Background Notes

Simon, a Pharisee, has invited Jesus to his house to share a meal. A woman who is described as 'sinful' has heard reports of Jesus' ministry and is desperate to see him for herself. It would have been traditional for Simon to greet Jesus as his guest with a kiss and to ensure his feet were washed and his head anointed with oil. The woman realises this hasn't happened and so she washes and dries Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair; she kisses Jesus' feet and anoints them with her perfume. Such an act of worship would have come at a great personal cost to the woman: the perfume would have been very expensive and as someone considered to be a 'sinner' she was considered to be untouchable and socially unacceptable. And yet such is her devotion to Jesus that she is prepared to face rejection and to take on the role of a lowly servant.

Simon questions why if Jesus were truly a prophet then why didn't he know that she was a sinner and why did he allow her to do such an outrageous thing. Jesus uses this event to encourage Simon and the others present to see beyond the surface of the woman's life and to see instead the wonderful act of generosity that she has performed. To illustrate his point further Jesus tells a parable about two men who owe money to a moneylender; both are forgiven their debts, but one owes ten times what the other owes. Jesus asks Simon *'Now which of them will love him more?'*

Jesus tells this parable to emphasise that God's forgiveness, love and acceptance is available to everyone and that by recognising that our 'debts' have been repaid we should be filled with a sense of love and gratitude. Jesus emphasises that those who are forgiven much love much in return; to love generously is a gift. God has poured out his love and forgiveness upon each of us out of his abundant generosity of heart and so in return we are called to reflect something of that generosity in our lives.



RESPOND

This week you might wish to take some time each day to reflect on God's great generosity and to give thanks for all that you have received from him.

How might reflecting on God's generosity change us and what practical steps might we take to become more generous to others?

You might like to play some quiet music for a few moments as people reflect on the question.

Then ask someone to read the following Bible verses and prayer:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.

— *Romans 12:1,2,5,6a*

Generous God,
 you have given to each of us
 more than we can ever imagine.
 In the world you created,
 in the gift of your Son,
 and in the promise of eternal life.
 Enable us to respond with generosity,
 in our lives and in our church,
 that we might share your love
 and see your Kingdom grow.

Amen.

WEEK 5: SOLIDARITY

SUMMARY

This week's session looks at the idea of solidarity — that is, standing alongside others, especially those whose voices are silenced or marginalised. Christ's call to solidarity is about more than providing services or community project. It is about following Jesus by emptying ourselves, interlinking our own 'salvation' with the salvation of others.

OPENING PRAYER

O Creator,
our world is large, and yet the global community is so fragile.
We glimpse the needs of our sisters and brothers, and those needs are great.
We want to turn away, but you call us back.
We want simple solutions, but you want us to help solve the complex problems.

Through your Church, you call us to listen, to learn, to reflect and to act.
Give us a deep sense of our place in this web of Creation.
Give us the wisdom of mind and generosity of heart to seek your will in the world today.
Open our hearts and minds this evening to hear your call to love without limit.
Inspire us to respond to the call to live in solidarity with each other.

Amen.

EXPERIENCE

You could use 'breakout rooms' of 3-4 people for this section to enable people to be more comfortable sharing.

Discuss together:

- When someone speaks of “Solidarity”, what immediately comes to your mind?
- Do you associate the concept of “Solidarity” with your Christian faith? Whether you responded yes or no, consider why you feel this way. How would you explain your reasons to someone else?
- Have you ever experienced someone standing in solidarity with you? If so who? What was the situation? How did you feel towards that person/people when they stood with you? How did they show their solidarity with you?
- Have you ever felt called to stand in solidarity with someone else, to be with them in their distress, hardship, loss or pain? Perhaps just recall the person and situation in your mind. How did you show your solidarity with them? How did they respond?

Come together again as a large group. You may wish to allow some time for people to share their insights from the small group discussions.

EXPLORE

Christianity is filled with stories of Christians standing in solidarity with others. Some of these stories are extraordinary and heroic, but most are of ordinary shows of solidarity towards one another during our ordinary daily life. Most of the ordinary acts of solidarity go unrecorded, but let us look at two stories which have been recorded for us.

Read the Biographies of Romeo and Day provided on the next pages.

Depending on your group, you could:

- *Ask people to prepare in advance by reading the accounts before the session.*
- *Break for 10 minutes to allow people to read them now.*
- *Read them beforehand yourself, and then tell the stories of St Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day to the group.*

The Transformation of St Oscar Romero

Oscar Romero's life as a priest started out in a very ordinary way. He was very much a bookish person and noted for his excellent sermons. Although he was a compassionate priest and undertook the parish responsibilities of visiting prisons and providing help and food for the poor, which made him admired by many, he has not known for his willingness to call out the injustices that caused the poverty in the first place.

He had many close friends among the worker priests, priests that devoted their lives to living and working among the poor, and once Romero had been made bishop implored him to take a stand and speak out against the government and military. He not willing to rock the boat at this time and was considered weak and a pawn of the institutional church by many of his worker priest friends. When Romero was made Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, the wealthy and elites of El Salvador welcomed his appointment as they considered him to be "safe" and not to oppose the status quo and would stop priests from helping the poor to stand up for their basic rights.

So what changed? Why are we using Oscar Romero as an example of solidarity? Well not long after his appointment as Archbishop one of his worker priest friends, Fr Rutilio Grande, was shot and killed along with two companions. This personal experience of Romero's of the murder of his friend was a pivotal moment in his life and faith. It was this moment that galvanised his solidarity with the poorest and abused citizens of El Salvador. This priest that was reluctant to speak out and speak truth to power changed from that moment onward.

The Sunday, follow the murder of Fr Grande, Romero cancelled all Masses in the diocese and held just one Mass in the Cathedral, where he first spoke out against the murders. From this moment on Romero never stopped speaking out and in many ways became to the embodied symbol of the resistance movement. He would broadcast his sermon every Sunday over his radio station for all to hear.

On Sunday 23rd March 1980, Romero preached a sermon ordering the army to stop killing people: "In the name of God, and in the name of his suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I beg you, I implore you, I order you, in the name of God, stop the repression!". The very next day Romero was shot and murdered as he celebrated the Mass. It was later determined that Major Roberto D'Aubuisson had ordered Romero's murder. Thousands attend his funeral and the army fired into the crowd and killing 30 people and injuring hundreds of others.

The civil war was to continue until 1992, but the inspiration of his solidarity with the people lived on and on 15th March 2009 the new president of El Salvador announced that his government would be inspired by Romero and the "the preferential option for the poor", choosing to put the most vulnerable people first.

Source material: <https://cafod.org.uk/News/International-news/Oscar-Romero-life-timeline#>

The Transformation of Dorothy Day

If the life of Oscar Romero seems too removed from our own lives and too extraordinary for us mere mortals then perhaps the life of Dorothy Day might provide an example of we as regular people can stand in solidarity with others and see God make a difference in this world through us.

Dorothy grew up in a conventional middle-class home. Her parents seemed to create a caring home. Nominally Protestant, the Days seldom attended church. Dorothy remembered being interested in religion.

For Dorothy there was always a yearning in her soul for something deeper, more spiritual, more earnest. Many of Dorothy's experiences at university and subsequently as a reporter in New York exposed her to the vast disparity between the wealth and the poor in her society. In these early adult years struggled to see evidence that institutional church or religion did much to alleviate the plight of desperate people.

She devoted much of her early adulthood to promoting social justice for the poor and working people. Involved in women's suffrage and anti-war efforts. However it is clear from her autobiography she was like a boat with out anchor in choppy seas.

As Augustine would say, Dorothy's soul was restless until it finally found its rest in Christ. It was following the birth of her daughter Tamar that she found this rest in the Catholic church. Although her soul found rest it was not without its personal cost and it meant the end of her relationship with, Foster, her partner who could not make this journey with her.

Having found her anchor in the Church and it was her deep commitment to God and the everyday spiritual practices of prayer and the eucharist that sustained her and enabled her to start, along with Peter Maurin, first the Catholic Worker newspaper, which addressed the plight of the desperately poor and working class folk, bring much needed attention to them and being a lobbying voice to the powerful. Then secondly, the Catholic Worker's Movement which established "Houses of Hospitality" across the United States and now across the world.

These houses of hospitality welcome people who are poor and vulnerable and without support elsewhere. Those who co-ordinate these houses live in deep solidarity with those they welcome, living extremely simple lives too. It was this personal identification with the poor and vulnerable, from the basis of her deep faith, that enabled Dorothy to live in complete solidarity with the people her society had discarded and ignored.

Dorothy was an ordinary person who opened her heart and allowed her faith to transform her life in service and solidarity with others. It was a transformation that came at great personal cost of comfort and personal relationships. But Dorothy was just like us, we too can allow Christ to transform our hearts to live in deep solidarity with others.

In your groups consider the following questions:

- What were your initial thoughts about these two stories of standing in solidarity?
- What did both stories have in common? Were there any major differences?
- What role did their Christian faith play in their choice to stand in solidarity?
- Was their choice easy or difficult? How costly was their choice to them and those around them? What was that cost?
- How important was having a personal/intimate relationship with people they were acting in solidarity with?

REFLECT

Consider playing this video on Christian Solidarity (just the first 5mins 30sec):

<https://youtu.be/CXA7fFrNqeY>

Discuss these statements:

“Christ came into this world as an act of radical solidarity with the suffering and brokenness of humanity and he engaged in this suffering to his fullest of his humanity, to the point of taking upon himself all the world’s suffering and brokenness on the cross.”

“By fully engaging in the suffering of this world and being in complete radical solidarity with humanity, Christ was demonstrating to us what it looks like to live a fully human life and that when Christ call us to follow him he means for us to follow him in engaging fully with the suffering and brokenness of each other in radical solidarity.”

- What is your initial reaction to these statements?
- How does this correspond with your understanding of the Christian life or Christian Discipleship?
- How far might Christ ask us to engage? Unto death? What are your reactions to the possibility that God may call you to such radical solidarity that it may mean the ending of your earthly life?
- Why might this reality seem far removed from our lives as Christians in the UK?
- To what extent does this reflect the Christian witness of your local church?

Read Mark 8. 34-38 as a group:

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Discuss together:

- What might this passage say to us about the need to stand in solidarity with others?
- What cross might Christ be calling you to ‘take up and follow’ to engage the suffering and brokenness of the community in which you live?
- Are there certain people, community issues, injustices that you might be called to stand with or up for?

Read the ‘Hymn of Christ’ from Philippians 2. 5-11:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Discuss together:

- Thinking about solidarity with others, what might it mean to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”?
- If we follow Christ in emptying ourselves of all earthly and social status or status claims, how might this help us to identify with the least in our society, and be in solidarity with them?
- How might God be calling you to ‘empty yourself’ as an expression of love in solidarity with others?



Spend some time, either individually, or in discussion, considering what next step you could take to live in solidarity with others.

Here are some ideas to help you:

- Volunteer with a local community charity or to help your local church in serving your local community.
- Explore becoming a member of a Religious Society (eg. *Third Order Franciscan, Benedictine Oblate, the Northumbria Community or Iona Community*).
- Form or join an intercessory prayer group to pray for those in need.
- Find a way to speak out on behalf of a group whose voice is silenced in your community.
- Prayerfully find a concern you are passionate about, eg. The Environment, Refugees, Poverty, Children in Need etc. and volunteer for an organisation that works on behalf of that concern.

There are many ways to follow Christ in solidarity with his world, but the key is to take the first step, and then see where God leads you.

Background Notes

When we consider our call as followers of Christ to radical solidarity with others, the call to fully engage with the suffering and brokenness of this world and the potential cost of such solidarity, it can all be a bit daunting.

Remember God, in Christ's supreme act of solidarity with humanity, knows us and that we take time to grow and mature into our fullest expression of humanity. Jesus tells in "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much". If we start by attending to the little things, or foundational practices, then if and when we are called to be faithful in the big things, the things that could be very costly, we can trust that we will be faithful to the call.

If you remember the story of Dorothy Day, she was faithful in the seemingly mundane, little things. These things built in her a solid foundation and relationship with God. She was faithful in developing a simple prayer practice and attending Holy Communion on a regular basis. She sought regular Spiritual Direction from others more mature in the faith and was embedded in a church/faith community. It was these "little" practices that enabled her to faithfully respond to God's call for her to stand in complete solidarity with the poor and destitute of her day, opening up houses of hospitality to welcome those with out home or hope.

Finish by saying this prayer slowly (known as 'The Grail Prayer'):

Lord Jesus,

I give you my hands to do your work;

I give you my feet to go your way.

I give you my eyes to see as you do;

I give you my tongue to speak your words.

I give you my mind that you may think in me;

I give you my spirit that you may pray in me.

**Above all, I give you my heart
that you may love, in me,
your Father and all humanity.**

I give you my whole self, that you may grow in me;

so that it is you Lord Jesus

who live and work and pray in me.

Amen.

WEEK 6: CALLING

SUMMARY

In our final session, we explore the way in which God calls each one of us. Dying to live means living in obedience to God's will for our lives, and embracing the freedom it brings to be fully ourselves in Christ.

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty and everlasting God,
by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church
is governed and sanctified:

As we explore the ways in which
you call each of us to serve you,
build us up in our own vocation and ministry
that we may serve you in holiness and truth
to the glory of your name.

Amen.

EXPERIENCE

Think about your experience of calling or vocation, and how God has guided you:

- What do the words 'calling' or 'vocation' mean to you?
- Have you ever experienced a call or purpose in your life? If so, what was it?
- What is the difference between having a call and having a job?


EXPLORE

Read through these quotes about calling to help you explore what the words 'calling' and 'vocation' might mean.

"Vocation is the place where the world's greatest need and a person's greatest joy meet."

— Frederick Buechner

"A calling is an activity that you find so compelling that you wind up organizing your entire self around it — often to the detriment of your life outside of it."

— Michael Lewis

"The crowning fortune of a man is to be born to some pursuit which finds him employment and happiness, whether it be to make baskets, or broadswords, or canals, or statues, or songs."

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

"If God gives you something you can do, why in God's name wouldn't you do it?"

— Stephen King

"To be saints is not a privilege for a few, but a vocation for everyone."

— Pope Francis

"Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice out there calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice in here calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God."

— Thomas Merton

Discuss together:

- Which of these quotes stands out to you, or resonates with your own experience?
- Can you call to mind any other stories, quotes or characters that express what calling means to you?

REFLECT

Read 1 Samuel 3. 1-20 together:

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. ²At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. ⁴Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" ⁵and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. ⁸The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. ⁹Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. ¹⁰Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Read Matthew 4:18-22:

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Take some time to discuss:

- What are the similarities and differences between the two readings?
- Have you ever felt God call you? Do any of these passages relate to your own experience.
- We may not experiences of Gods call like Samuel but what ways can god call us today?
- Is there something you would have to give up (to 'die to') to bring life to your calling?
- In light of our whole Lent journey, how do you feel God might be calling you to something new?



RESPOND

We are going to take some time contemplating our own sense of calling, and how God may be calling us today. We will be using Lectio Divina, which is a way of imaginatively praying through a bible passage. We will read through the passage from Matthew (above) several more times to focus our thoughts.

- *Each participant will need a paper and pen.*
- *Although you can pick different people to do each reading you may wish as a leader to do it all in order to allow group to focus on their meditation.*
- *You might like to invite people to mute their audio and switch off their video during the exercise.*

Slowly walk through these steps together:

1. Someone reads the passage slowly.
2. Ask everyone to identify a word or phrase sticks in their mind after a short time about 1min ask everyone to share what the word is. Do not discuss the reasons why or comment and what's being said.
3. Read the passage slowly again.
4. Imagine Jesus walks past you and ask you to follow him. How do you imagine him speaking to you? Where are you? What are your emotions at this point? Take some time 5mins to reflect. Each person can describe quickly what they imagined. Do not discuss the reasons why or comment and what's being said.
5. Someone reads the passage for a third time.
6. Have each person write down where God maybe calling them. Think about Jesus calling the disciples; call to mind the feelings which you examined in the previous section imagine Jesus calls you where you are like the disciples. Jot down those feelings you know have or maybe draw them you may wish to make a commitment to follow gods call on your life. Take around 5-8 mins on this section.
7. Invite people to share their answers if they wish. Do not discuss the reasons why or comment and what's being said.
8. Allow some additional time for silence.
9. End by saying the Lord's prayer together.

BONUS MATERIAL

In this section is a variety of additional notes, reflections and further reading, that sit alongside each of the main Lent course sessions.

Feel free to use this as background material, some of which may be helpful to draw into the discussion for your particular group. Or you could invite group members who would like to explore the topics further, to look through this material in their own time and at their own pace.

WEEK 1: LAMENTATION

EXTRA EXPLORE MATERIAL

- **Biblical Example of Lament:** Read Habakkuk 3:17-18 and consider where you are in his prayer.
- **Art example of Lament:** Here is a link to a famous painting called 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch. What emotion does it make you feel? https://i.etsystatic.com/17699147/r/il/cc6fe/1743044374/il_fullxfull.1743044374_jrgu.jpg
- **Musical example of Lament:** Another example is a song entitled 'Take me to the River' which if you'd like to listen to can be found on this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQJxRRv3R_c . It is based on Psalm 137 which is a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem "By the rivers of Babylon-there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion."

PSALM 69 — AN EXTRA REFLECTION

Psalm 69 is one that is filled with anguish and despair. For that reason, it is often read on Good Friday, as it recalls how Christ thirsted on the Cross. It is a powerful and visual psalm. Sometimes we feel like things rush in on us from every direction and overwhelm us. The psalmist has captured that aspect of our experience wonderfully.

Read this version of Psalm 69 (verses 1-4, 13-18, 29):

Save me, O God, for the waters have reached my soul. I am stuck fast in deep mud, and there is nowhere to stand; I have gone into the depths of the sea, and a storm has swamped me. I am exhausted from crying out; my throat is sore; my eyes are worn out from looking expectantly for God. By my prayer to you, O Lord, it is at a time of your good pleasure, O God, in the abundance of your mercy, hear me in the truthfulness of your salvation. Save me from the mud, that I may not be stuck fast in it; may I be delivered from those who hate me, from the depths of the waters. Let the storm of water not swamp me, nor the deep drink me down; do not let the pit close its mouth upon me. Hear me, O Lord, for your mercy is kindly; in the abundance of your compassion, look upon me. Do not turn your face away from your servant, for I am afflicted- hear me without delay. Come near to my soul and redeem it. I am poor and in pain, but the salvation of your presence, O God, has supported me.

— Translation from Fr Nicholas King SJ

Think about these questions:

- What are the different images the psalmist uses here to express grief, distress, sorrow and loss?
- Where is God in the psalm?
- Is there a word, or a sentence, that jumps out at you?
- Which of these words are for you today? Why?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS YOU COULD TAKE FORWARD THIS WEEK

Use some of the imagery in Psalm 69 to create a picture or painting that expresses: Lamenting, grief and how it feels to be in an impossible situation. But also, where God might be found in those times as well.

and/or:

Tie knots in a piece of rope or string with each knot representing a situation you want to cry to God about:

- In the World
- In the Church
- In the Community
- Family/friends
- Yourself

Make the string into a bracelet or necklace, as a reminder to pray for those situations each day.

FURTHER READING

- Angelou, M. Still I Rise, 1978 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>
- Study Guide of Book of the Lamentations for personal use: https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Lam/Lam-1.cfm
- Thomas, H. Lamentations and the gift of Prayer, 2016 <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/bible-articles/lamentations-and-the-gift-of-prayer/>
- Vroegop, M. Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament, 2019
- Yancey, P. Disappointment with God, 2013

WEEK 2: FORGIVENESS

REFLECTING ON FORGIVENESS, ACTS OF VIOLENCE & DOMESTIC ABUSE

There has been a sharp increase in domestic abuse since the Covid pandemic first broke a year ago. People have been confined for weeks on end, often in small spaces not designed for family living. Lockdown brings out the worst in relationships, often reviving old tensions and resentments which in turn can lead to violence and abuse, including the abuse of children.

So this Lent may be a good time to reflect on the challenging question of how the Christian idea of forgiveness works in the context of violence and abuse, both current and historic.

When we speak of 'dying to self', and of Christian forgiveness in the context of abuse, we need first to be clear about what the abuse has done to our sense of self, whether we do in fact still have a self to die to.

Domestic abuse is more often emotional than physical. It is about the diminishment of another person, of their selfhood. The abuser does this diminishing because she or he feels threatened, or potentially diminished by the strength, virtue, beauty, intellect or by any number of attributes of the person they are abusing. It is the abuser's own fragility that feels threatened by their victim.

Abuse, as we know, is not an emerging phenomenon. It has been around for centuries. There is always a history to abuse, so it helps to try to place one's own experience of abuse (if we have had one) in the continuum of the abuse suffered by the perpetrators and by those who preceded them. This does not exonerate the abusers. It simply broadens the perspective. It gives a sense of the bigger picture which invariably includes other people of previous generations. The victim becomes the abuser.

Being conscious of the trans-generational nature of abuse does not enable (still less oblige) us to forgive the abuser. Forgiveness is not purely a matter of understanding context, cause and effect, and thereby accepting the abuse as inevitable and even merited. This acceptance of the inevitability of abuse is how women, and many men who may have been physically abused in childhood, try to come to terms with what a generally abusive childhood or youth does to them, that they somehow deserved it.

WAYS TO RESPOND

- If you know of anyone who is abused or bullied, in any context, whether in the home, church or workplace, resolve to say something about it and to act to the full extent that your authority or personal capacity allows to challenge the bully or abuser.
- Pray into the abuse crisis and Covid – and not just for it. In silence, before God, bring these situations to mind (remembering, perhaps, your own experiences of abuse or bullying, of loneliness, of not being believed) and ‘protest’ to God for justice. Pray also for the bully or the abuser.

WEEK 3: PRAYER

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF PRAYER

What ways of praying are you familiar with?

Think about the ways they know from the liturgy in church but might not know that they know! e.g. praise and thanksgiving; confession; intercession; using the Bible in prayer; 'rote' prayers such as the Lord's Prayer, the sacrament as prayer, using the body in prayer (we don't do that so much these days but, for example, kneeling at an altar rail with empty hands is, in itself, a prayer).

You may also have experienced ways of praying such as lectio divina, contemplative imaginative prayer ('Ignatian' prayer), examen, glossolalia, meditation, use of a mantra, rote prayer – you might not use these words or other words to describe them.

Is there a way of praying that you have found helpful and has this been different at different times in your life?

Children are likely to pray differently to adults. Their concerns are different and so is their understanding. We might expect to outgrow certain ways of praying.

Similarly we might expect our relationship with God to go through different phases much as our relationship with people does. A loving relationship would be very strange indeed if the only communication consisted of one person asking the other for things. Similarly, our life of prayer is likely to be unbalanced and not as fruitful as it might be if it is largely petitioning God for our concerns.

Recall a moment when you felt close to God.... where were you, what were you doing - was this prayer?

People may feel the presence of God in all sorts of places – in nature, at the deathbed of a loved one, in their own sickness.

It is good to make space to acknowledge that there are times when we don't feel any sense of God's presence. What then? Sometimes this might have a purely physical reason – we are too tired, or cold, or hungry, or depressed, to be open to God; Sometimes it might be an opportunity to notice that we are being nudged to a different way of praying.

Prayer is not just 'saying things to God'; If our hearts are lifted at the sight of a tree and we are aware of God's presence, perhaps this too, is prayer. Times when we do our best to give our undivided attention to God are our 'prayer times' but sometimes God comes upon us unawares and we are caught up in a prayer we did not plan.

THE BIBLE AND UNANSWERED PRAYER

Scripture verses are chosen to widen our vision from the personal to the corporate; to show the importance of desire in prayer and to help a discussion linking prayer to action. They also pick up on some of the themes already raised.

The exception is the verse from James and Mark which suggest a simplistic link between faith and getting the outcome you ask for in prayer. As the text suggests, many people have unhappy experiences of such verses being used against them - and they are difficult to handle. Instead, a broader approach to the scriptures might help us to reach a more nuanced understanding of 'answered' and 'unanswered' prayer:

- Think of instances in the Bible where people of great faith have prayed and not received what they asked for.
- Imagine what the world would be like if every prayer anyone ever uttered was answered in the way that they asked.
- Reflect on who God would be if prayers were answered in such a way (a slot-machine God where, in fact, the intercessor holds the power and God does their bidding?)
- Think about what prayers we would utter if we were so in tune with God that what we ask for was the same as praying 'your will be done' (and this might be linked with the transformational nature of prayer in some of the quotations above).

WEEK 4: GENEROSITY

Find more material from the Church in Wales on the theme of generosity, stewardship and financial giving at:

<https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/faith/generosity/>

WEEK 5: SOLIDARITY

RESOURCES FOR A JOURNEY INTO GREATER SOLIDARITY

Membership of a Religious Community

Franciscans: <https://tssf.org.uk>

Benedictines: <https://mucknellabbey.org.uk/>
<https://www.benedictine-oblates.net/monasteries/>

Northumbria Community: <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/>

Iona Community: <https://iona.org.uk/>

Prayer Resources

Centring Prayer: <https://contemplativeoutreach.org.uk/>

Christian Meditation: <https://www.wccm.org/>

Daily Office Church of England: <https://www.churchofengland.org>

THE WELCOME PRAYER

Welcome, welcome, welcome
I welcome everything that comes to me today;
because I know it is for my healing.
I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, persons, situations and conditions;
I let go of my desire for power and control
I let go of my desire for affection, esteem, approval and pleasure;
I let go of my desire for survival and security;
I let go of my desire to change every situation, condition, person, or myself.
I simply open myself to the love and presence of God and God's action within me.
Amen.

FURTHER READING

- A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal, By Sarah Bessey
- Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice, By Cynthia Bourgeault
- Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer, By Thomas Keating
- How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People, Pete Greig
- Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina, by Thelma Hall

Follow the Wisdom's Table podcast:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBVaFGN057QZ2-ARnba_Cdw

WEEK 6: CALLING

EVERYONE HAS A CALLING

Christians believe that each one of us is created by God with a mixture of gifts, skills, experience and personality that is unique to us. Throughout our lives, from our earliest days, God invites us to delight in what he has blessed us with and use it in his service; the service of love.

Each person has a vocation to which they are called; a special work that only they can do which will make use of all that God has gifted to them. Growing into that vocation will be a life's work and will be shaped by our life experience.

All of us need other people to encourage and help us discern our vocation. The Holy Spirit uses all sorts of people and ways to help us on our journey. Sometimes that help is as simple as the relative or friend who encourages us towards something we are good at. Sometimes it needs a good conversation with a wise person who has travelled the road before us to discover how to move forward. Sometimes that help might even be in the door that closes a direction we thought we were going in.

BEING CALLED TO MINISTRY

Some will sense a vocation to ministry and leadership in the Church. That can be an exciting and awe-inspiring prospect, though often we are the last people to recognise that this is what God is inviting us into. The possible roles within the church, are many and varied. In addition to the more traditional roles of parish priest and licensed lay minister, they include chaplaincy in hospitals, prisons and other institutions as well as specialised ministries with distinctive groups such as young people, children and young families, people with disabilities.

If you are sensing God calling you into a particular ministry or you simply want to explore this further, then you should talk to your local Priest in the first instance. They will be able to help you discern the next steps and may point you towards the Director of Vocations who will listen to your story and advise about how to move forward.

Visit the Diocesan website to find more information on vocations:

https://monmouth.churchinwales.org.uk/en/prayer_and_spirituality/vocations/