



Our Five Branches



2022 Diocesan Vision Course

Diocese of Monmouth
The Church in Wales

PUBLISHED BY

The Diocese of Monmouth
in the Church in Wales

Diocesan Office 64
Caerau Road
Newport
NP20 4HJ

Email: monmouthadministration@churchinwales.org.uk

Phone: 01633 267490

monmouth.churchinwales.org.uk

WRITING TEAM

The Ven Ian Rees
Revd Philip Averay
Revd Canon Jeremy Harris
Revd James Henley
Revd Sally Ingle-Gillis
Revd Will Ingle-Gillis
Revd Rebecca Stevens

USE OF THIS MATERIAL

Permission is granted to adapt, reproduce and/or share this material for use within your local Ministry Area or Parish.

To seek permission for any other purpose, please first contact us.



Contents

Welcome! 4

Discipleship 6

Stewardship 11

Social Justice 16

Equality & Diversity 21

Environment 27



Welcome!

We hope that you will find these sessions to be interesting, informative, challenging but above all enjoyable. The Diocese of Monmouth have chosen 5 themes as the focus for our Diocesan Vision.

Discipleship – Growing more like Jesus

Social Justice – Serving together to make a difference in our communities

Stewardship – Living as thankful and generous people

Environment – Caring for God's Creation

Equality and Diversity – Welcoming all

They are themes that are potentially life giving and transformative – for us, for our churches and for other people and having the opportunity to meet with others to discuss these themes will inevitably bring questions but also open up a recognition of the opportunities we have as a church.

Whether we are part of a large church, a small church or no church at all at the moment, we are all part of God's family. Jesus said, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' (John 10:10). As Christians we want to enjoy that fulness of life – a fulness of life that is best achieved as we recognise the gifts we have in life, the power we're given through a relationship with God and the opportunity to care for others and be cared for ourselves.



As you go through these sessions remember:

God loves you!

That God wants his church to grow – we can be part of that!

We are called to be part of a church that is rich in tradition and diversity – value each other and enjoy talking and working together!

How do we do it?

The easiest answer is to follow the sessions in the way that suits you!

Each session has an opening prayer, a Bible reading and then moves into some commentary and questions and some further reflection before more questions. Towards the end of each session, there is a bit of a challenge – you may want to discuss this in your group, or you might just want to think about it on your own. There's no hard and fast rules. The session then ends with prayer.

Some groups may want to build a bit more into the worship either at the beginning or the end, some may value a good bit of social time – there are no hard and fast rules. If you're meeting together in person, or following the sessions online, being together is a really important element of this. Have a cup of tea (or something similar!) and get to know one another a bit better. In the discussions recognise that we're all on a journey together, be willing to listen, willing to share and willing to grow in your faith.

Above all, enjoy it!

Ian Rees

Archdeacon of Monmouth

Diocesan Director of Ministry & Discipleship

Thanks

Thank you to those who have been part of putting these sessions together. Some material has flowed from the Vision upon which the themes are based, but for specific sessions I'd like to thank Revd Rebecca Stevens, Revd James Henley, Revd Canon Jeremy Harris, Revd Sally Ingle-Gillis, Revd Will Ingle-Gillis, Revd Philip Averay



Discipleship

– Growing more like Jesus

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord God, we give thanks for the witness of generations who have gone before us in the Diocese of Monmouth and in your church throughout the world. Help us today to be a church that is **growing** more like Jesus as we seek the strength and will to pray, to study the scriptures, to worship and enjoy fellowship with others, whilst faithfully seeking ultimately to live out our faith not in words alone, but through our every word and action, that your love may shine out from us and from your church everywhere. This we ask through our Saviour Jesus Christ. **AMEN.**

Reading

Romans 12. 1-2 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Biblical Commentary

St Paul's journey of conversion and discipleship provides perhaps one of the most dramatic transformations in the scriptures. A devout pharisee and self-proclaimed persecutor of Christians, it is on the road to Damascus that Saul, as he was then known, is struck blind by an encounter with the living Jesus. This encounter ultimately results in a fresh start as a follower of Christ, and even a change of name, from Saul to Paul. Today, we still often describe a dramatic change of heart as a 'Damascus Road experience.'

So, it is perhaps no surprise that, when Paul comes to explain what discipleship looks like to the early Church in Rome, he emphasises first and foremost the extraordinary, transformative power of God's grace. I wonder what insight Paul might provide for us, as we reflect on what it might mean for us to grow in discipleship today?



As a Pharisee, Paul would have known the complex Jewish system of temple sacrifices like the back of his hand. But what Paul does in this passage, is to turn the concept of sacrifice on its head. Paul argues that the only appropriate response to the grace of God, revealed in Jesus, is not to offer an animal sacrifice in the way previously prescribed by the Jewish religion. Instead, following Christ's example, we are to offer the sacrifice of *ourselves*.

In response to the living God, we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, offering God our whole lives as one seamless act of worship and devotion. In the words of Eugene Peterson's modern paraphrase of the bible (The Message): 'Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.'

This is what it means to be an ordinary, everyday disciple of Jesus! To offer up all the ordinary, everyday parts of our lives, so that God can use them as the raw material to grow God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. The beauty of this is that, by focussing on God and letting go of our own desires, we are allowing God to transform and renew us. By emptying ourselves, like Jesus who humbled himself to become servant of all (the theological word for this is 'kenosis'), we enable the Holy Spirit to shape us more fully into the image of God (this is sometimes called 'theosis').

Tom Wright, a former Bishop of Durham, puts it like this in his own translation of the New Testament: 'Don't let yourselves be squeezed into the shape dictated by the present age.'

One of the great paradoxes of our modern world is that the more we focus on personal happiness or fulfilment, the more elusive it seems. Many, many books, courses, podcasts and TV series have been produced, all of which promise to help make us happier. Paul offers a different approach, urging us to resist the self-centred, and yet ultimately unfulfilling, patterns of our world and instead ask God to transform and renew us.

The final thing which stands out about Paul's choice of words in this passage, is that he mentions both the 'body' and the 'mind'. There is an age-old question about which is more important to the spiritual life, whether we should focus on the practical first or the intellectual. Is it growing in our understanding of the faith which is most important, or the practical good works we can do for others? For Paul, it appears the answer is both! In offering our bodies for God's service, we also open the way for God to transform us by the renewing of our minds.



Questions

What have been the most important milestones on your own journey of faith? How do they compare with Paul's Damascus Road experience?

How might it change things to see your everyday life as a seamless act of worship and devotion to God? Which area of your life might pose the biggest challenge – work, study home, family, friendships, neighbours?

Have you ever felt squeezed into the shape dictated by the world? How does leading 'Jesus-shaped lives' liberate us from this pressure?

Reading

Romans 12. 3-5 (NRSV)

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Theme Commentary

The ultimate result of St Paul's Damascus Road experience is that he is set on a new 'career path'. Rather than a persecutor of Christians, he is called instead to a life of ministry. His new life is focused on sharing the good news, helping to establish new churches across the Roman Empire, and guiding these new disciples of Jesus in how to grow together in faith.

If we look at the New Testament as a whole, we see that, following the letter to the Romans, most of the books written by Paul are actually letters doing just this. Paul writes continually to the Christian communities he has helped to establish, encouraging them, challenging them and guiding them through the problems they face. Because, as we have probably all experienced, we don't always find it easy getting on together as disciples of Jesus Christ!

And so, after he has described how God's grace transforms us as individuals, inviting us to each lead our life as a living sacrifice, Paul naturally describes the way discipleship builds up the life of the Church. Once again, his starting point is one of self-emptying or service – not thinking of ourselves too highly, but instead living humbly alongside others. How many of our arguments and disagreements in the Church are made worse by injured pride! Instead, for Paul, the mark of true discipleship is humility.

Paul tells us that humility means being able to look carefully at ourselves in the mirror with 'sober judgement'. In his book, 'Being Disciples', Rowan Williams writes about how



growing in discipleship is connected to growing in self-awareness – our understanding of how we are, our emotional responses and how these affect others. He describes some of the questions he often asks himself to reflect on his own emotions and behaviours. ‘Am I capable,’ Bishop Rowan writes, ‘of looking at how I’m thinking and how I’m feeling with a bit of distance, a little coolness?’ When we step back and take a moment to reflect, asking God to illuminate our thoughts and feelings, often this enables us to grow both as individuals and in community with our siblings-in-Christ.

All of this connects our own individual discipleship to the life of the Church. Using that famous image, the Body of Christ, Paul describes the wonderful combination of unity and diversity that makes up the family of God. This image reminds us that we all have a different, individual journey of faith, and yet can still all care for and support one another. And we also all have unique gifts, passions and expertise that enable us to play our part in the body, ministering to one another and to our communities. Many members, all with a different appearance, purpose and function, but all making up one body in Christ.

Questions

Which do you feel is more important to you – your individual faith or your role within the Church community?

How can we overcome problems together in a healthy way when we encounter them in Church life?

In what ways does being part of the Church family help you to grow in faith and discipleship?

Challenge

In his book, *Being Disciples*, Rowan Williams writes,

‘Discipleship is a state of being. Discipleship is about how we live; not just the decisions we make, not just the things we believe, but a state of being... In other words, what makes you a disciple is not turning up from time to time... it doesn’t mean turning up once a week for a course (or even a sermon). It’s not an intermittent state; it’s a relationship that continues.’

Is there a difference between attending church regularly, and being a lifelong disciple of Jesus?



Closing Prayer

Take some time in silence to read through and reflect on the words of this prayer, written by Bishop John V. Taylor for his enthronement as Bishop of Winchester in 1975. Then finish by saying the prayer together.

Lord Jesus Christ, alive and at large in the world,
help me to follow and find you there today,
in the places where I work,
meet people,
spend money,
and make plans.
Take me as a disciple of your Kingdom,
to see through your eyes,
and hear the questions you are asking,
to welcome all with your trust and truth,
and to change the things that contradict God's love
by the power of your cross
and the freedom of your spirit. **AMEN.**



Stewardship

– Living as thankful and generous people

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord God, help us in the Diocese of Monmouth and all your church, to be people who recognise your love for us and the gifts you give to us; help us to recognise those gifts and to use them wisely and to be people **living** our lives thankfully and generously, helping to reveal to others your abundant love through our words and through our actions. This we ask through our Saviour Jesus Christ. **AMEN.**

Bible Reading

Matthew 25:14-30

The Parable of the Talents

¹⁴ “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I



did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Commentary

For so many years, I never understood the parable of the talents; more specifically, I never understood how God could be so thoroughly mean (as I then thought) to the guy with the one talent.

What had he actually done wrong? The story says directly that he had saved the money given to him; he had cared for it and ensured that nothing bad had happened to it; and when the master came back, he was rewarded for that care by being thrown into outer darkness — and his stuff was given to the one who already had loads.

“How is that fair?”, I asked. How does “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” square with the Gospel? Isn't this what Christians have been saying is wrong with our society for all these years? When I ask someone to house-sit for me, I don't expect to find four more houses when I get back, do I? I just want my stuff safe and the cat fed. But then one day the penny dropped: this story isn't about safety, nor is it about fair distribution of wealth. There are plenty of stories in the scriptures about how God is our stronghold, but this isn't one of them. There are plenty of exhortations to feed and clothe the most vulnerable amongst us, but this isn't one of those.

Instead, this story is about bravery, and faith, and hope, and risk-taking. And the man with one talent — he has none of these qualities. The master in this story isn't trusting his servants merely to look after his stuff and keep his cat alive. He doesn't want a safe pair of hands. What he's asking them to do is invest themselves in his business and, in so doing, to create thriving around them.

The man with five talents does just as he's asked. And it's important to note that “here, I've taken your five talents and made five more” provides us only the most cursory summary of the tale — an end result. What's left unsaid — and what we are left to imagine and unpack ourselves — is just how much effort, how much planning, how much passion, how much sweat and fear this servant must have poured into making those five extra talents appear. They didn't just magic themselves up.

The real question we must ask ourselves is this: would the master have been happy if the man with the one talent had invested the allowance given him, worked hard and passionately and sensibly to make it grow, only then to find out he'd backed the wrong horse and lost it all? I think the answer, actually, is yes — a strong yes: he would have applauded the effort. People who do investment know better than most of us that making money grow into something useful always comes with risk, that there are no



“sure things”. And for the man with the one talent, the problem wasn’t that he failed to make money; the problem was that, in his fear of reaping negative result, he cut himself off from all possibility of reaping a glorious result. The experienced master can teach thriving to a willing servant who tries and fails. But the one who refuses even to try — well, in a case like that, there’s really nothing more to be done.

Questions

Do you agree with this commentary?

How does this affect the way you might respond to God’s generosity to you?

Theme Commentary

There’s a debate that sometimes goes on about stewardship: more and more these days we hear it said, that it’s about more than money — maybe not even primarily about money. To which someone, normally someone who reckons he’s seeing it more clearly than these “spiritual types”, always responds, “yes, but it is about money somewhere, right? I mean, you do want people to give, right? Got lights to keep on and such, don’t we?”

And, yes: of course we have to keep the lights on; of course we need to re-point the masonry now and again too. No one’s saying we don’t.

But let me ask you this: when was the last time you got all worked up and inspired by weeding the concrete blocks on your patio? When was grouting the downstairs toilet ever the risky, life-affirming, reward-bringing option for anyone? Did you ever celebrate the money spent on these things? Or did you view it, as I do, as basically a somewhat necessary and certainly inconvenient drain on your wallet?

On the other hand, what happens when you want to re-design your kitchen? Do you put in the work to plan? To find and demand the finest materials you can afford? To review the current physical layout — with all its little inconveniences — and re-work the flow so that cooking can be not just a chore, but a pleasure? And, perhaps most importantly: if it becomes that important to you do you not find the money for it? I mean, there’s a choice here. You get to wish, like the man with one talent does, and never have a new kitchen. Or you get to do what it takes to have a kitchen you can revel in. And then, when it’s all done, do you thrive with the final result? Is that not a more joyful use of time and money than the aforementioned toilet grout?

I want to suggest that stewardship starts with vision, and that money — though necessary — is a tool to that end. Nothing more. I’m not saying we should be recklessly extravagant; I’m not saying we should be silly; I’m not saying we shouldn’t be financially responsible. (Indeed, that last point, fiscal responsibility, is paramount.) But I am suggesting that there’s a reason that when, at the end of a wedding or baptism, I ask (as I’m expected to do) for money in the retiring collection, nobody ever gives much. It’s that they’re not inspired. They don’t give because we haven’t sold them a credible



vision of what the Kingdom of God might look like. Keeping the lights on is boring, and we seem to be the only ones who can't see that.

So, looking at it this way, I want to say that stewardship starts with our decision to look more like the man with five talents than the man with one. That is to say: inspired, hopeful, expectant, willing to put in energy to build something — anything — good and desirable. Willing to be Good News rather than Mediocre News, willing to invest ourselves to make that happen, and willing to take the risk that it might not even work. It also means that our real talents — in the normal English-language sense of the word — our skills, our passions, our interests, our love, our welcome — all of these things are crucial to stewardship. Money may be one result, and an important one. But you can't buy life-affirming for a tenner; you have to invest yourself into that.

The point of the parable and the point of stewardship is that God asks for bravery — for throwing oneself out into the world in faith, with passion, just as he gives himself to us, totally, and without reserve — and that when we take the leap of faith to give back to him as abundantly as he gives to us, the money is something that we can and will find. We have to have it before we can be responsible with it. And if we can't build thriving into our community and our world, then in the end, we will not need it anyway.

Questions

What has God given to you?

How and what is he asking you to give back?

Challenge

God loves us with passion, unreservedly. Our human frailty makes us conditional in our response to his generosity. It is our Christian responsibility to give with passion, unreservedly, and with love. The joy is in the giving, not the receiving.

What does it mean to be a really generous church? A generous individual?

*As we come towards the end of the session, think about and then pray together this prayer. The **General Prayer of Thanksgiving** has been prayed for hundreds of years but still challenges us to reflect on, and live out, the words in our lives.*



Closing Prayer

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,
We your unworthy servants
give you most humble and hearty thanks
for all your goodness to us and to all people. We bless you for our creation, preservation
and all the blessings of this life;
but above all for your immeasurable love
in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ,
for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.
And give us, we pray, such a sense of all your mercies
that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, And that we show forth your praise,
not only with our lips but in our lives,
by giving up ourselves to your service,
And by walking before you in holiness
and righteousness all our days;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit,
be all honour and glory for ever and ever. **AMEN.**



Social Justice

– Serving Together

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord God, we pray for peace and justice in our communities through the Diocese of Monmouth and in the world today. Help us and our churches to be people of action, **servi**ng together to make a positive difference in our communities and further afield. Help us to work practically, to pray faithfully and to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves and to help protect the rights of any who are struggling as a result of poverty or injustice. This we ask through our Saviour Jesus Christ. **AMEN.**

Bible Reading

Luke 4:16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed, go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Commentary

Jesus says he came, “to bring good news to the poor ... proclaim release to the captives ... recovery of sight to the blind ... to let the oppressed go free.” If that’s not a cry of justice, I don’t know what is.

The Greek word used in Luke 4:18 for “bring good news” is euangelizō, which is the verbal form of the word usually translated as “gospel” (euangelion). This means we could translate this passage as Jesus saying, “because he [the Lord] has anointed me to bring the gospel to the poor.”



Jesus here defines his gospel as having a social component. It means the impoverished being lifted up; the “captive” to society’s wrongful norms being released; the physically hurting finding healing; and the spiritually or physically oppressed finding freedom. Social justice is central to Jesus’ gospel.

Jesus’ ministry was defined by the voice of Israel’s prophets (v18-19). And that voice pointed to a need for societal-level justice and for individuals to live justly (rightly). For Israel’s prophets, belief in God and social justice was inseparable.

Look at these three examples (ask people to read the three verses):

Isaiah 1:16-17 : Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doing from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Jeremiah 22:3 : Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.

Amos 5:23–24 : Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The common Hebrew word for “justice,” which is used in these three passages, is ‘mishpat’. And common is the right word for it. The theme of justice, mishpat, surfaces over and over again in the Old and New Testament, dominating the Bible as one of its most major themes. For example, of Abraham, God says, “I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (**Genesis 18:19**).

Just as Abraham was called to social justice, God asked Abraham’s descendants—the people of Israel—to treat everyone in their midst in a just manner.

Read these verses (ask people to read the three verses):

Leviticus 19:35–36 : You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

Exodus 22:21 : You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.



Leviticus 19:33–34 : When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

“Love him like yourself.”

Justice in the Bible means justice for all, not just a select group.

Questions

In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus reads Isaiah 61:1,2. Who are the poor, the broken-hearted, the captive, the blind and the oppressed today? Is God calling you to reach out to any of these?

Who would Jesus relate the church to today and why? What verses would He read to the Church today? How about to you?

Theme Commentary

In Luke’s account of the gospel what Jesus reads in this passage are his first recorded public words. And he speaks them in the town in which he grew up, Nazareth, in the synagogue where he worshipped as a child, among the people who know him and his family. It’s almost as if he is saying, “I’m back and let me tell you who I am and what I am about.” Jesus is naming what God is concerned about in this world. He’s describing the work and direction of his life. He’s taking a stand, a very public stand.

So how far will we go to enable this gospel passage to be truth? What are we willing to do and what are we not? These are choices that we may struggle and wrestle with every day. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, the gospel asks us to make a choice, to take a stand, that will inconvenience us, be contrary to our self-interest, or put us in conflict and even opposition with others, ourselves, our family, our country, our religion.

Let me give you a few examples:

- “For God so loved the world” (Jn. 3:16) is great, but “love your enemies” (Lk. 6:27) not so much. Do we consistently do this?
- And I suspect most of us would rather fight back than turn the other cheek and we’d rather be secure than risk welcoming a stranger.

So, the question for us to think about is:

For what and with whom do you and I stand? Where do we struggle with this and where are we doing okay with it?

This is less about what we believe and more about how we live. It’s about taking a position and not just asserting a proposition. That’s the challenge Jesus set before the people in the synagogue. And it’s the challenge Charles Sheldon set before his



congregation. Sheldon was a congregationalist pastor in Topeka, Kansas, in the late 1800s. He preached a series of sermons that later became a book entitled *In His Steps*. Each week's sermon became a chapter in the book and told the story of First Church in a small town named Raymond.

In the first chapter the sermon has just ended when the congregation is startled by a man's voice from the back of the church. In the book he is described as a tramp, homeless and out of work. As he walks down the middle aisle to the front, he tells a story of having lost his job as a typesetter in a print shop. He says his wife got sick and later died in their apartment, owned by Christians. His daughter now lives with friends because he can no longer afford to care for her. He describes how he spent the last three days wandering their town looking for help and how just the other night he sat outside a church prayer meeting and heard the people singing,

"All for Jesus, all for Jesus,
All my being's ransomed powers,
All my thoughts, and all my doings,
All my days, and all my hours."

"It seems to me," he tells the congregation, "There's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But what would Jesus do?"

What would Jesus do? Let's be careful here. This is not the WWJD of t-shirts and bracelets. This is not a question for others but for ourselves. The best clue we have is what he did do and what he said about himself.

- Good news to the poor;
- Release to the captives;
- Sight to the blind;
- Freedom for the oppressed.

That's Jesus' path. It's a way of living and relating more than a checklist of things to do.

Questions

What is it about injustice that bothers you most? Are there times you feel discouraged in the fight for justice? Why?

Ask those attending to imagine a world in which all people are celebrated for who they are. Give people time to write or draw a prayer to God expressing their hopes and dreams for this better world, starting with 'Dear God, help me build a better world where...!'



Challenge

Martin Luther King, Jr., was thirty-four when from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 he said:

"When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children -- black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants -- will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.'" (A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., 1986, p. 220)

Where does freedom need to ring today?

Closing Prayer

Listen to 'For the Healing of the Nations' while personally reflecting on where we stand today in living out our faith.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXtflE6jSYQ>

Let us Pray: Heavenly Father, you to teach us to seek justice, to defend the oppressed and take up the cause of the fatherless and the plea of the widow. We ask that when the scale of injustice seeks to overwhelm us, your spirit will be the encouragement we need to keep to speaking out against it. Today, we ask for breakthrough for those facing situations of injustice. May they know a sense of hope that only you can bring. **AMEN.**
(Source: *Compassion UK*)



Equality & Diversity – Welcoming All

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord God, help us on our daily journey in the Diocese of Monmouth and everywhere to recognise all those we meet as being in your likeness. Forgive us when we trample on the individuality and diversity you created in each person and give us hearts that celebrate and praise the wonderful gifts we have in each other and be people who are truly **welcoming** all as brothers and sisters. This we ask through our Saviour Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

Bible Reading

John 4:1-42

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’ — although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized — he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her,



‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ So the disciples said to one another, ‘Surely no one has brought him something to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest”? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, “One sows and another reaps.” I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’



Commentary

Jesus is travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee, and he takes the shortest route which takes him through Samaria, a place generally avoided by Jews. For over 700 years religious and racial prejudices had separated the Jews from the Samaritans. The well is thought to be 'Jacob's well', more than one hundred feet deep, not a springing well of water but one in which the water percolates and gathers; a well so deep you couldn't collect water from it unless you had something to draw the water.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman encounter one another at the well, a common space found in most communities at the time. It was generally the job of the women to go and draw water, nearly always in the cool of the early morning or evening. That this woman chooses to draw water at noon, the hottest part of the day, suggests she is trying to avoid meeting other people; her personal life is a mess, she has had several husbands and currently living with a man she isn't married to; she would have been the subject of much gossip and generally someone to be avoided.

At the well she encounters Jesus the 'stranger' in this space; she's surprised to find Jesus at the well and even more surprised that he should want to engage with her; conversation with a woman was considered undesirable in a Rabbi and even more so because of the tensions between Jews and Samaritans. By instigating a conversation Jesus is breaking the religious, political and social norms of the day. Jesus may be tired and thirsty and yet he still takes time to talk to her; he can never ignore human need. In this space Jesus intentionally crosses social, cultural, religious and geographical boundaries to engage with her.

Following what appears to be a simple request for the woman to draw some water for Jesus to drink to quench his thirst, the conversation develops into a conversation about 'living water' i.e., not water to simply satisfy human thirst but that which represents the unfailing spiritual supply which gives eternal life. Jesus recognises that the woman is 'thirsty' and promises that his living water will completely quench a person's spiritual longing and thirst. Later in John's Gospel (John 7:38-39) the author explains that living water represents the Holy Spirit.

The woman appears to be struggling to understand what Jesus means and he suddenly changes the subject to ask about her husband. The woman replies with honesty and Jesus commends her for this. He already knows much about her past and conveys these facts without the slightest sense of criticism or condemnation. In response the woman asks Jesus a theological question about true worship. Following Jesus' response, the woman, becoming increasingly aware of his spiritual stature says, "*I know that the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.*" Jesus answers this with an '*I am*' term thought to refer to God Himself and by so doing Jesus clearly identifies himself to her as the Messiah.

The woman immediately leaves her water jar and goes into the town to tell others; this woman who had come to draw water in the middle of the day, possibly to avoid meeting



anyone, was now boldly testifying about Jesus. We are told that many people believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony; even more remarkable in a society where a woman's testimony was legally worthless and coming from someone whose reputation may have been dubious.

Questions

What was it about the way that Jesus interacted with the Samaritan woman that might have helped events to unfold as they did?

What stands out to you about the woman's interaction with Jesus that might have helped deepen their encounter?

Theme Commentary

Let's return to the passage from St. John's Gospel and the encounter between Jesus and the woman of Samaria. Did you notice how both Jesus and the Samaritan woman interact with each other? There is a willing acceptance from both to move beyond the differences that have separated their peoples for generations; both demonstrate enormous courage as they seek to cross boundaries and to break the established 'norms' of their societies. The starting point is that they were prepared to talk to one another, to try to understand each other more; this requires that they are also prepared to listen to each other in a way which shows a willingness to engage openly and honestly.

This encounter demonstrates to us how interaction between individuals can lead not only to a greater personal understanding and acceptance but also to a community-wide change of understanding. The story demonstrates that because of this encounter the Samaritan woman was able to become a bridge to her community and how centuries of prejudice, misunderstanding and hostility were able to be overcome and healing could become possible.

The Bible is the record of God's dealings with humankind and as such consists of many narratives through which we can begin to discern God's nature and purposes. The Bible isn't always specific on matters of equality and diversity and it contains a number of stories which reveal discrimination, enslavement, sexual violence and the equating of disability with sin. But as the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman demonstrates it also reveals a series of broader themes that emerge to challenge these stories and long held beliefs.

The Bible reveals that human beings are created in the image of God and that each of us is unique, valued and loved by God. We see Jesus being revealed as the image of God, the one who shared our human experiences, who was rejected, betrayed and put to death on the cross but then to rise from the dead to bring new life.



The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are God's ultimate statement of grace and supreme act of inclusion. We see how, throughout his ministry, Jesus was to demonstrate God's love through his openness and inclusion of those who had become marginalised by the society of his day. We see how Jesus calls for a new community in which old boundaries and divisions are to be challenged and people relate to each other in new ways.

These principles demonstrate a diverse kingdom which can be identified by *Creation, Redemption, Adoption and Revelation*: (i) Each one of us is created in the image of God which reveals the diversity of God's creation and kingdom (ii) As human beings we all fall short of what God wants of us, but through God's saving grace revealed to us in Jesus we are all able to receive forgiveness and redemption and commissioned by Jesus to 'go and make disciple of all nations' (iii) As Christians we are all adopted as the much loved children of God, part of His family, a family that is colourful and diverse (iv) The Bible gives us a revelation of God's Kingdom where diverse people, nations, tribes and tongues will be united in their worship of God; a kingdom which is diverse and where all are equally loved and respected..

Questions

Can you think of people you know who are very different from you that bring diversity and richness to your life? What do you appreciate about those differences?

Who's missing or excluded from your worshipping community and why might that be?

Challenge

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who spent much of his life campaigning for greater equality and celebrating diversity in its many forms, once wrote:-

"We must embrace our differences, even celebrate our diversity. We must glory in the fact that God created each of us as unique human beings. God created us different, but God did not create us for separation. God created us different that we might recognize our need for one another. We must reverence our uniqueness, and reverence everything that makes us what we are."

What might it mean for us to 'reverence' one another and to become a church that truly demonstrates equality and diversity?



For this week

Perhaps this week you might find time to use this 'Examen'* prayer to help you reflect on developing diversity and equality:-

GIVE THANKS

For the things that make you different and the things that unite you with others.

ASK FOR HELP

For the times we are judged and need to respond in confidence and love.

REFLECT

On how our words might divide people, destroy trust or downplay discomfort..

SAY SORRY

For the times we judge others and make assumptions that hurt.

DECIDE

How you might see God's image in everyone you meet.

"May God grant us the grace to forgive others as He forgives us for the things we find hard. Amen."

(The Diocese of Guildford)

**Examen - St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen is an opportunity for peaceful daily reflective prayer. It invites us to find where God is in all the people and events of our day.*

Closing Prayer

Holy God, Your Word reveals to us that in Your kingdom there is an immeasurable amount of people from every nation, from all tribes and people; and from all languages. This diverse multitude are all worshipers of You who stand before the throne and before the lamb clothed in white robes crying out that salvation belongs to You. In heaven, there is diversity and inclusion, so let this be my mind-set here on earth too. **AMEN.**



Environment

– Caring for God’s Creation

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord God, within our Diocese of Monmouth, we see constantly signs of the beauty and power of creation. Help us to be more aware of your presence day by day all around us and help us to treasure the gift of creation. We recognise how we and so many have failed in looking after this incredible gift but as we move forward, help us to be people who **caring** for it with wisdom and love and with a desire to act now for the good of this and future generations. This we ask through our Saviour Jesus Christ.
AMEN.

Opening Reflection

Caring for Creation is a sacred task which God has invited us to partner with him to do. In this study we will go back to the beginning in Genesis and see that God’s loving action in the world is central to our being. We live in a time where we have some clear decisions to make regarding how we participate in the world. We can choose the partner with God and seek the welfare of all creation or we can choose to go our own way. As Moses says in Deuteronomy 30:19 “Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your children might live!” I hope that this study will be one that fill us full of hope that our actions in partnering with God can determine a future were all creation will flourish.

Reading

Genesis 1. 26-28 (The Message)

God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature
So they can be responsible for the fish in the sea,
the birds in the air, the cattle,
And, yes, Earth itself,
and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.”
God created human beings; he created them godlike,



Reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female.

God blessed them:

"Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!

Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air,
for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth."

Commentary

These few verses in Genesis 1 have been among the most abused in Christian history. They have been used to justify our abuse and exploitation of the environment and other living creatures for our own selfish ends. After all God has given us "dominion" over the world.

The word which The Message translates here as "responsible for" is more commonly translated as 'dominion over' or 'rule over'. In Hebrew this word is 'yiredu' and most Christian scholars believe the root of this word to be 'radah' which does mean 'dominion' or 'to subdue'.

However, Hebrew is an imprecise language and many Jewish scholars have suggested that the actual root of 'yiredu' is 'yarad'. 'Yarad' means to lower oneself or come down. Understanding the passage this way seems more consistent with image and nature of God as revealed to us in Jesus.

Jesus tells his disciples, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10: 42-45 NRSV)

Or in St Paul's great hymn in Philippians 2: 5-8,
"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."



Questions

If instead of translating 'yiredu' as 'dominion over all creation', but as 'lowering oneself to care for creation', how does this alter your perception of what God is doing and saying in Genesis 1: 26-28? How does this change your relationship with the environment and other living creatures?

Which do you believe better reflects the image and nature of God - having 'dominion over' or 'lowering oneself' to care for creation?

Reading

Genesis 2:19-20 (NLT)

So, the Lord God formed from the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and the man chose a name for each one. He gave names to all the livestock, all the birds of the sky, and all the wild animals.

Theme Commentary

It is worth just taking time and really reading these few lines from Genesis chapter 2. Can you see it? Right from the beginning God was relinquishing control and working in partnership with humankind. God allowed us to name his creation and in Genesis chapter 1 we saw that he shares with us the responsibility to care for and nurture his creation.

Once we had named the creatures, this became their name. Just think of scientists today, we are still naming God's creation and discovering new species every year. Our cooperation with God has continued for thousands of years and will continue.

As strange as it may sound to many, God needs us to work with him, to fulfil his loving purpose in this world. We see this throughout the New Testament, read 1 Corinthians 3:9 and 2 Corinthians 6:1. It was also the great insight of Christian mystics like St Teresa of Avila expressed in her poem:

"Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours."



God loves each one of us and he loves us without forcing us to love him back. Taken a little further this means that God is unable (or perhaps unwilling is a better word) to act in this world without the co-operation and consent of creatures, like you and me. God journeys into the future with us, and in partnership with us, both God and us can create the future together.

This understanding has huge implications for what our actions can be in determining the future of our environment. We can work with God in loving his creation and securing a future where all creation can flourish, or we can work against God and pursue our own selfish short-term interests. We can go against the image we were originally created in. This gives us great agency and hope that our actions when aligned with God's loving action in this world can have real and tangible effects.

In many ways this theme ties up so many of our other themes. Stewardship is the obvious one as we are being trusted to care for the great gift of God's creation, for our generation and generations to come, but there are other themes that 'tie up' as well and it would be good to spend some time thinking about what these might be and how that impacts us.

Questions

Have you ever thought of yourself as God's partner or co-worker? How does this change the way you see your relationship with God and others?

Does understanding that God cannot act in this world without our consent and co-operation change the way you see your ability to make real change in the world?

What do you see the Church doing or not doing to work with God to shape a future where all of creation can flourish on this planet?

God seeks to work with us in loving his creation, what does that look like today, given the various environmental challenges we face to for with God in seeing his loving action outworked in our world?

What would it look like you and your local church to work with God in helping your local community tackle the issues of climate change and improve the environment?



Closing Prayer

Light a candle to signify that Christ the light of the world has been present and is present and that we too are called to be the Christ light in this world.

*Send some moments in silence allowing what has been discussed to sit within you.
Offering to any confessions, intercessions, and praise.*

When it seems right end with this commitment.

One person says: As the whole of creation looks with eager longing for the redemption of humankind, let us pledge ourselves anew to serve our Creator God, the Father who is the maker of all things, the Son through whom all things are made, and the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, who renews the face of the earth.

Let us stand to affirm our commitment to care actively for God's creation.

**Lord of life and giver of hope,
we pledge ourselves to care for creation,
to reduce our waste, to live sustainably,
and to value the rich diversity of life.
May your wisdom guide us,
that life in all its forms may flourish,
and may be faithful in voicing creation's praise.**

**May God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the source of all goodness,
pour his blessing upon all things created,
and upon us his children,
that we may use his gifts to his glory
and the welfare of all peoples. AMEN.**

Let us go in peace, and may the commitment we have made this day
be matched by our faithful living.

Thanks be to God. AMEN. AMEN. AMEN.

