

CALLED TO LIFE...

Over the past year many of us have questioned what 'life to the full' means. The international Covid pandemic has brought to the fore how we live together well in community, who we serve, what we fear, and the reality of death.

God breathed life into the dust. God's first gift to us is life. We are unique, made in the image of God.

Jesus spoke: 'I have come that you may have life to the full'. God's second gift to us is 'him'self. God gave us Jesus Christ in order that we may know fullness of life.

In our creeds, we affirm that, 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.'

This Lent and Eastertide, we can explore what life to the full looks like for each one of us – how we re-align our lives with the life of Jesus Christ and respond to God's call to love, to life, to forgive, to glory, to face loss, to die, to know new beginnings and to witness.

Each section of this booklet has an introduction to the theme, 6 days of Bible readings and reflective questions or activities aimed to help us learn again what it means to be called to the Christian life in all its fullness. There is a formal prayer that can be used daily, as well as your own prayers.

This booklet is a gift to you, written by Revd Becky Roberts, Revd Michael Camp, Revd Penny Joyce, Katy Carter LLM, Pam Pointer and Joanna Woodd. We hope it encourages you in your Christian life over the next 8 weeks and beyond. We pray that you may know the Spirit's guidance and God's gifts of a fuller life as you read, reflect and live.

Revd Becky 2021

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

WEEK 1: Called to LOVE

Introduction:

How can you describe what God is like? The Bible tells us how generation after generation have interpreted how God acts as compassionate and gracious, overflowing with loyal love and faithfulness. Exodus 34.

The Hebrew concept of 'hessed' is translated into 169 different words in English and describes God's character as loyal loving commitment. The New Testament often uses 'agape' to describe love which creates communion expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our individualistic Western culture portrays love as quick and free. God's love strips the ego, is rooted in community and is in it for the long haul. As we reflect this week, why not ask God: 'Would you show me what love is?'

1. A journey into love

Hosea 11 v 1-4

God loves us and wants our love in return as the purpose in our lives. God often works gently and gradually to teach us to love. In Hosea we hear God calling a people, a nation, to love. They are not forced to love in return, but enticed.

Like the love of a mother for a child, God stoops down to pick us up and lead us with kindness. Our lives are a journey into love that 'our love may abound more and more' (Philippians 1 v 9). We can love God more each day till the end of life. (St. Frances de Salles.)

You may like to reflect on your own life by drawing a timeline and on it place the times when you have known the love of others and of God.

2. Loyal Love

Ruth 1

Loyal love is epitomised by Ruth who proclaims to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, 'I will go where you go.' Ruth's 'hessed' love is the same love God revealed to Moses – a loyal love; a sustained, generous, loyal loving commitment; loving kind care. It is not based on Naomi's worth but her own loyal generosity. God's love for us is not based on us. It is God's will to love regardless of how we respond.

Who has shown you loyalty in their loving kindness to you in the good and difficult times in life – friends, friends, family, partner or spouse? Thank God for them. Who have you shown God's loyal love to? Take time to reflect on how you did/do so.

3. Longing love

Psalm 42

God's love is described as a longing thirst – 'as the deer pants for the water' – and a love song that can comfort us in times of distress 'as deep calls to deep' his 'song is with me.' (see also Psalm 63) Mechtild of Magdeburg writes: God: I desired you before the world began. I desire you now as you desire me. And where the desires of two come together, the love is perfected.

My soul: Lord, you are my lover, my longing, My flowing stream, my sun, And I am your reflection. God: It is my nature that makes me love you often, For I am love itself. It is my longing that makes me love you intensely, For I yearn to be loved from the heart. It is my eternity that makes me love you long, For I have no end.

What do you thirst for? Tell God about your longings... You can be honest because God loves you. You may like to pray the words of Psalm 63 v 1.

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

4. The rule of love

Luke 10 v 27

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.

AGAPE love – the golden rule. Jesus adds, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' to a daily Jewish prayer – the Schema: 'Love the Lord your God with all of your heart' (Deuteronomy 6 v 5). Love for God and neighbour are two sides of the same coin, illustrated well in the parables Jesus teaches: Seek others' well-being without expecting anything in return, even people who cannot repay you. Give away your possessions to the poor. Forgive others. Your love for God will be expressed by your love for people and they are inseparable.

A Rule of Life is an intentional commitment to a set of practices that provide guidance, rhythm and inspiration for living a beautiful, meaningful and holy life. As we place these practices at the heart of our daily lives and join with companions who share the commitment, we grow more and more in the unselfish, hope-filled Way of Love that Jesus embodied in the world. (Episcopal Church USA)

Take time to reflect on habitual rules in your lifestyle. Plan some intentional rules that can show Jesus' love. What do you need to adapt? Ask God to help you.

5. Love your enemy

Matthew 5 v 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Romans 5 v 6-10 **Romans 8 v 38-39** **Ephesians 3 v 17-19**

God's love is all about reconciliation. Jesus taught that the plumb-line for authentic love is how well we treat the person that we cannot stand. Romans explains that God loved humanity who were powerless to save themselves; too 'weak' and 'sick,' 'the enemy' of God. I do not agree with the terminology, yet if God loves us when we are so far away, we should love others when they are 'far off.' 'Love your enemy!' was a deliberate choice of Jesus. We too are reconcilers. It is costly.

Sometimes the enemy is close by, as we unconsciously project onto those around us the destructive parts of ourselves we cannot face. We can courageously look at ourselves in the light of God's love – even the parts of ourselves that we do not love.

Will you love the 'you' you hide If I but call your name? Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around, through my sight and touch and sound, in you and you in me?

6. Communal Love

1 Corinthians 13 and 14 v 1

The church community in Corinth was struggling to act out love in a meaningful way. They favoured people of their own status, excluding others. The reading emphasises the attitude and actions we should have to live well in community. The reason it was written highlights the limitations of human love. We need both to face our own limitations and to respond in love to those with other limitations in order to grow, and for true community to emerge among us. 'It is not so much in our neighbour's interest that we love him/ her, but ours.' (Bishop Wilson) 'To thy neighbour thou owest thine heart, thyself and all that thou hast and can do.' (William Tyndale)

Prayer for the week:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen.

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

WEEK 2: Called to LIFE (The I AM sayings)

Introduction:

Jesus Christ is said to be the most fully alive person who has ever lived. Alive to God, to the Holy Spirit to all humanity and creation. To be alive is to be alert, aware and responsive.

1. 'I AM'

Exodus 3 v 13 -14

'What is God's name?' a young child asked the vicar. Thousands of years earlier Moses had asked of God the same question. The vicar pointed to the sacred Jewish name YHWH, 'I am who I am'. God said to Moses, 'Tell the people that I AM has sent you'. God shares his name, and in so doing the relationship is changed and deepened. God chose Moses, an unlikely choice, as he was on the run, having killed an Egyptian – and certainly was no orator. God worked together, being with Moses, speaking with Pharaoh, and then later together leading the Israelites out of the hardship of slavery to live as free people in a Promised Land. Just as with Moses, God promises to be with us in the past present and future- what does this mean to you?

2. Jesus said, 'I AM the bread of Life'

John 6 v 30 -35.

Primo Levi, an anti-fascist resistant chemist deported to Auschwitz discovered, 'the distribution of bread... bread of the holy grey slab which seemed gigantic in your neighbour's hand and in your own so small as to make you cry.... Bread is also our only money'. Primo Levi: *'If this is a Man.'* Once free and back in Italy there is the possibility to offer hospitality and share sacred meals. His poem *Passover*: 'Light the lamps, open the door wide, So the pilgrim can come in. . . Let him enter and sit down with us, let him listen, drink, sing and celebrate Passover. . . You too, stranger. Who do you enjoy sharing the basics of life with? How can you share your daily bread with others?

3. Jesus said, 'I AM the light of the world'

John 8 v 12 John 9 v 5

We are called to be lights in the darkness, lights for one another. Etty Hillesum certainly brought light to the people in Westerbork deportation camp: 'The misery here is quite terrible, and yet. . . You have made me so rich, O God, please let me share out your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You O God, one great dialogue. I love people so terribly, because in every human I love something of You.' Etty Hillesum: *An interrupted life* With whom do you share the light of love? Whose love brings you light in your life?

4. Jesus said, 'I AM the good shepherd'

John 10 v 7-12

In Palestine shepherds walk in front of their sheep and goats, leading them to green pastures and fresh water, and the shepherd has to go in and out through the same door to the sheepfold. We are both the sheep and the shepherds today. A Company Director asked one of his Industrial Chaplains to explain how he could 'love' everyone in his employment. After some thought the chaplain said, 'You care for them, know their names and listen to them.' Read again Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd.

5. Jesus said, 'I AM the way'

John 14 v 2-6

We cannot really be fully alive and follow The Way with Jesus, unless we become involved in his life, and that only comes about if we are willing to be involved more deeply in our world. This means

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

seeing and hearing the sufferings of the abused, the hungry, the oppressed, the powerless, the voiceless, the homeless, the impact of the pandemic, our impact on the environment; so seeing and hearing all the agonies and griefs of the human race and created world. In what way can you be involved in the world at the moment.. perhaps through supporting charities? Praying? Listening? Campaigning?

6. Jesus said, 'I AM he'

John 4 v 6-25

Jesus is tired, weary, and shares his need for water with a Samaritan woman, who can satisfy his thirst. He was open to listen to the story of her life at a deep level. Through sharing his needs, a conversation and relationship develops.

The Samaritan woman was open to Jesus insight and words. In this conversation she understood that she was known.

'When we learn to hold that inner reality of ourselves open to what is wholly other and beyond, as we do when listening to great music, we may begin to hear, resounding everywhere, the divine self-announcement, 'I AM,' and with it, small and clear, more like an echo than another voice, our own 'I am.' That is the essence of prayer. That is what we are made for.' John V Taylor, Sermon: 'The Nature of God'

St Augustine of Hippo Confessions Book X xxxvii prays:

'Late have I loved thee, thou who art Beauty itself, ancient of days yet ever new. Too late have I loved thee! When I shall hold thee fast with my whole self, I shall nowhere have sorrow or stress, and my life shall be wholly alive, being wholly filled with thee.'

Prayer for the week:

Living God, we are only partly alive, hardly hoping and not really caring. Make us, we pray fully alive. Give us the vitality, the awareness and commitment that we see in your Son Jesus Christ. This we ask in his name. Amen.

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

WEEK 3: Called to FORGIVE

Introduction:

Forgiveness is fundamental to the character of God and was at the centre of Jesus' life and death. Love and forgiveness were at the heart of Jesus' relationships with others.

Forgiving those who have hurt us is not always easy, nor is it easy to seek forgiveness for ourselves.

To quote C.S.Lewis *'Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.'*

Yet to forgive and to be forgiven can be a truly liberating and transforming experience. Is there someone you need to forgive? Perhaps you need God's help to be able to forgive?

1. If you forgive others, your heavenly Father will forgive you

Matthew 6 v 14-15

It's not always easy to admit that we need God's forgiveness, that we are guilty of wronging God by our words, our thoughts, our attitudes or our actions. Unless we can admit that we are in need of forgiveness, that we are all flawed human beings, how can we accept the forgiveness that God offers us? Each time we wrong others or cause them hurt we are damaging our relationship with them and with God, but that relationship can be healed by God's forgiveness. Think of a time when you have been forgiven. How did it make you feel?

2. How often should I forgive?

Matthew 18 v 21-22

These verses immediately precede the parable of the unforgiving servant and it seems that Peter is specifically talking about someone close to him who has sinned – and another member of the church (or his 'brother'.) In the parable Jesus emphasises that, like God's forgiveness, our own forgiveness of others should be total, unconditional and infinite. It should also begin with forgiveness of those small things that hurt us – things which can cause us offence, annoyance, frustration. Those small things can grow out of all proportion if left unforgiven.

3. Forgive one another

Ephesians 4 v 31-32

In his letter to the new Christians in Ephesus Paul points out to them that as Christ's followers they (and we too) are called to follow in Christ's footsteps, to emulate his character and nature. We are called to be kind, to love and to forgive. We are called to accept God's forgiveness and to recognise God's love for us so that we may learn to forgive ourselves. As we accept and understand that Christ died so that our sins could be forgiven, we are called to forgive others for things they have done against us. We are called to reflect God's forgiveness by forgiving others.

4. The Lord's Prayer

Luke 11 v 2-4

These verses are Luke's version of the Lord's prayer. Those words, 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,' are ones we know well and pray frequently, but they may be difficult to say with true honesty.

Think of a time when you have been hurt by someone. How did you deal with it? Were you able to forgive? Forgiving someone doesn't deny the hurt or pain we have been caused. It requires a conscious and determined decision to let go of the negative feelings towards the other person and in so doing to liberate both ourselves and them.

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

5. Our sins are forgiven

1 John 2 v 1-2, 12

John 1 v 29

'I think the 20th century saw such a level of atrocity that it has focused our minds very, very hard on the dangers of forgiving too easily ... because if forgiveness is easy it is as if the suffering doesn't really matter.' Rowan Williams

From time to time we hear amazing and inspiring stories of forgiveness. We read accounts of victims and their relatives who have been able to forgive abusers, murderers or war criminals. What is your reaction to these stories?

6. Repentance and forgiveness

Luke 17 v 3-4

'The person who asks forgiveness is a person who has renounced the privilege of being right or safe, he has acknowledged that he is hungry for healing, for the bread of acceptance, and restoration to relationship. But equally the person who forgives has renounced the safety of being locked into the position of the offended victim; he has decided to take the risk of creating a fresh relationship known to be dangerous, known to be capable of causing hurt. Both the giver and the receiver of forgiveness have moved out of the safety zone; they have begun to ask how to receive their humanity as a gift.'
Rowan Williams in 'Being Disciples'

Prayer for the week:

Jesus you suffered death, the horrific death of crucifixion, that we might be forgiven.

Forgive me for the things I have done and not done.

Forgive me for the things I have said and not said.

Forgive me for the life I have lived and not lived.

Enable me to follow in your footsteps,

and as you forgave those who put you to death,

help me to forgive those who have hurt me;

that I might reflect your image

in thought, word and deed,

and in discovering my true self

draw others into your light. Amen.

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

Week 4: Called to GLORY

Introduction

In 1961 Tottenham Hotspur performed the unprecedented feat of winning both the First Division and the FA Cup in the same season; the so-called “Double”. So began a very successful period which fans called, “The Glory Days” (sadly now long since departed!) The Captain, Danny Blanchflower famously said, “The game is not about winning; the game is about glory.” What he meant was that it wasn’t enough to win, you had to win with style and panache. What matters is not the winning, but the way you win. A few weeks after the “Double” victory, a new Archbishop was enthroned in Canterbury. He was Michael Ramsey and one of the major themes in his theological writing was..... “Glory”. Ramsey believed that Jesus revealed the glory of God; and that the Church was to reveal the glory of God; and that the world revealed the glory of God. Next week we shall enter Passiontide and for a couple of weeks, culminating on Good Friday, we shall fix our eyes firmly on the death of Christ on the cross. This week we reflect on some biblical ideas about God’s glory, and we pray that this glimpse might prepare us for the journey of the Passion; sustain us through it, and also open our eyes to see where glory might be found in the Cross itself. God’s victory is not just about winning, it shows us how to win.

1. Seeing glory

Luke 9 v 28-36

The Transfiguration is one of the richest and most puzzling of the Gospel stories. It is surreal and mysterious, but also deeply human; the disciples’ drowsiness and misunderstanding are familiar, we all get like that sometimes don’t we? But, like the disciples, if we open our eyes, we shall see his glory. We who read this know (though the characters don’t) that the hardest of times lay ahead, so we can see this glimpse of Glory as an encouragement for the disciples as they plunge into darkness. What glimpses of His glory has God given you in these dark times?

2. Glory and the truth of God

Philippians 2 v 5-11

In the experience of Transfiguration, Jesus’ disciples saw the glory of God, but that was a profound spiritual vision. What does glory look like in day-to-day reality? Michael Ramsey’s answer is that it is seen where we see the true nature of God. The true nature of God is about self-emptying; selflessness; empowering others, and humility, even to the point of giving up life itself. Jesus IS that true nature of God. In all he does, and says, and is, Jesus reveals the glory of God because he is the real truth of God’s character. Glory, we might say, is truth.

3. Touching glory

John 2 v 1-11

John’s Gospel is all about glory and this familiar story is, for John, the first sign of Jesus’ glory. It is a miracle story so it’s mysterious but it’s also rooted in a real and recognisable human event, a wedding. Here we see Jesus serving his community; bringing joy to all; showing himself to be the new and fresh and definitive revelation of God, and giving his followers a physical, sacramental way of keeping in touch with him. When we share in that sacrament, we are glimpsing his glory (and some day soon we shall do so again!)

4. Feeling glory

John 13:1-15, 34

If ever there was a simple and straightforward way of displaying the glory of God in terms of humble and self-denying service, this is it. Our Lord washes our feet and so reveals the true nature – the glory – of God. In the following verses he will promise further acts of loving service: he will go to

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

prepare a place; he will not leave us orphans; he will give the Spirit, and ultimately, he will lay down his life. Thanks be to God for NHS staff and others who have washed our feet during the Covid pandemic and so shown us the glory of God.

5. Ultimate glory

John 19 v 17-20, 25-30

For John, it is the death of Jesus that most clearly shows his glory. John tells the story in such a way that Jesus is seen to be directing everything. Here he is proclaimed as King by Pilate (it's intended ironically but speaks a deeper truth;) he creates a new family by giving Mary and John into each other's care, and finally Jesus himself proclaims that all is complete and bows his head. For John the Cross is a throne, and it is at this moment that the true self-giving nature of God is most fully displayed.

6. We are called to Glory

1 Peter 1 v 3-9

Today's passage speaks of salvation and hope, and of a joy that is indescribable. All are called to this eternal glory, and we learn that our new heavenly life is modelled on the new resurrection life of Jesus. Our future glory, then, is intimately linked with the glory that we have seen revealed in Jesus. That means that the heavenly glory to which we are called, and which we shall celebrate for eternity, is the glory of humble self-giving that is true to the very nature of God. Heaven is no self-indulgent paradise. The reward for a life of giving is an eternity of joyful, glorious and total giving.

Prayer for the week: Glorious Lord (early middle Welsh 16)

Hail to you, glorious Lord!
May church and chancel praise you,
May chancel and church praise you,
May plain and hillside praise you,
May the three springs praise you,
Two higher than the wind and one above the earth,
May darkness and light praise you,
May the cedar and sweet fruit tree praise you,
Abraham praised you, the founder of faith,
May life everlasting praise you,
May the birds and the bees praise you,
May the stubble and grass praise you,
Aaron and Moses praised you,
May male and female praise you,
May the seven days and the stars praise you,
May the lower and upper air praise you,
May books and letters praise you,
May the fish in the river praise you,
May thought and action praise you,
May the sand and the earth praise you,
May all the good things created praise you,
And I too shall praise you, Lord of glory,
Hail to you, glorious Lord!

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

Week 5: Called to LOSS

Introduction:

The call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ is not an easy one. Life brings its own losses, especially in lockdown. Our losses have perhaps highlighted what is important to us either because we miss something or someone. Losses can also be gains because in the letting go we see that there are more important things now. So what did Jesus mean when he said we should take up our cross? As Christians are we called to loss?

1. The disciples leave behind their old selves and to take up their cross.

Luke 9 v 21-27

Jesus tells the disciples that they should deny themselves: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me...' Note the AND follow me. We often forget this part and just focus on denial. In Jesus' dealings with people who sought him he brings life in his words and actions; to follow Jesus means to be brought to life.

Take a piece of paper and divide it into two. On one side write down 'events which deaden me'. On the other write 'events which bring me life'. What parts of your life do you need to let go of? You may like to use this week to ponder more and add to these lists.

'Holiness is not measured by the amount of time we endure suffering. Holiness is about renouncing the things in our lives which deaden us to ourselves and God so we may live more fully, without self pre-occupation.' Gerard W Hughes 'A journey for bruised Pilgrims'

2. Letting go is painful and helpful

Matthew 19 v 16-30 Jesus challenges the rich young ruler to let go of possessions.

Philippians 3 v 7 Paul looks at the life of status he has lost and counts this loss as a gain.

'Much of the losses in life are not to do with the cross of Christ but the pain of our own bruised egos when our own kingdom is threatened by criticism, loss of status, financial loss, but if we let God into the pain, show it to him and acknowledge its origin in ourselves, and pray to be delivered from our own false securities, then the pain can become curative, leading us to freedom and away from false attachments...' Gerard W Hughes 'A journey for bruised Pilgrims'

3. We are called to admit we are lost

Luke 15 v 11-31 The prodigal son returns. His brother resents this.

Matthew 21 v 45 When the Pharisees hear the parables of Jesus they realise the stories are about them and they begin to plot against Jesus.

We are called to admit we are lost. One small example of this is when we are resent-full.

Resentment can take many forms – jealousy, bitterness, anger. Just like the older son, who is 'good' and hard-working we too can resent others. Some of the Pharisees know the parables Jesus used were about them. Perhaps they knew that they were lost but did not want to admit it. Admittance meant losing some of the things they were holding onto – to protect their own inner egos; for example status, or fear of the unknown.

Talking about our own weaknesses and how we struggle with others can be the start of admitting that we too can be lost. Talking to God about it is also the start of God's grace, our own journey to God's embrace and a more fully loving life.

Add your own attitudes or feelings to the list you began this week – those that deaden you and those that bring you life.

4. Jesus weeps

Luke 19 v 41-44

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Jesus weeps over the death of Lazarus. He weeps over Jerusalem. Jesus weeps as a man and as God. Perhaps here he is weeping over his own death, the oppression of Jerusalem and the need for peace, or the inability of the people of Jerusalem to see who he really is.

There has been much to weep about in these past twelve months – those who have died, those who have lost loved ones, the division in our world, to name a few. We may also have experienced a real sense of grief and cried at the loss of our own ‘liberties’ – to gather with family and friends, to worship together in physical reality, to receive communion. Certainly, I have cried over the deterioration I have seen in some people’s mental and physical well-being, and struggled with the inability to give you communion.

Just as Mary cried and wiped her tears on the feet of Christ’s body as a symbol of her love, so we as the community of the body of Christ, can cry for each other because we love each other. Tears can be part of our response in prayer to the brokenness and loss in our world or our own lives.

‘There is a sacredness in tears. They are not a mark of weakness but of power. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.’ Washington Irving

5. Carrying others’ loss

Luke 23 v 26-27 Simon carries Jesus’ cross

Galatians 3 v 1-10 Burdens are shared and the church community works for the good of all.

In the Stations of the Cross that are often used to help our prayers and devotion in Holy Week, Jesus is pictured falling not once but three times and Simon of Cyrene carries the cross for him. On Easter day the Light of Christ stops three times, marking resurrection where there was desolation. I suppose in some ways the imagery of the fall of Christ can show us more fully how much God loves us. Jesus falls to the ground (indeed in some images and icons Jesus is shown falling through to hell) and enters fully into the experiences of loss that humans do.

As Christians, we are called to see those who are usually lost from our sight, metaphorically at ‘the bottom of the pile.’ Those who can only be seen if we lie down; if we fall. Those who are humiliated; tortured; dominated; buckled under the weight of life; trapped in ‘sin’. Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for Jesus Christ. We too are asked to bear one another’s burdens, not just in prayer but in gritty reality. We are called to challenge and help change those structures which bring people low.

‘If we want to mourn for Jesus, we have to mourn the suffering of humanity that Jesus came to heal.’ Henri Nouwen

6. Physical reactions to loss

Luke 22 v 39-46 Jesus sweats blood over his own loss

Some losses can be shown in the physical reactions we have. When a loved one dies, we often do not sleep or feel like eating. The disciples are described as sleeping because of grief. Jesus bears the burden of his trial and execution before God in prayers of words and his body. His sweat became like great droplets of blood falling to the ground. Like any human, he asks to be relieved of his trials.

Even Jesus needed ministering to. Angels minister to him.

Angels are messengers from God. How do you stand alongside others in their times of trial?

Prayer for the week:

Jesus – you wept. Jesus – you taught that those who mourn shall be comforted. Grant me the grace of your presence. Send your Holy Spirit to direct my life. Enable me to be aware of false guilt, resentment or regret. Help me to trust you with what I need to let go of in order to take hold of your promise of new life. Grant me the passion to pray and work to raise up the fallen and to surrender to your love. Amen.

CALLED TO LIFE A Lent and Easter resource 2021

Week 6: Called to DIE

Introduction:

Our world has been called to face death this past year in a way that rarely happens outside wartime. Two million people have died from Covid-19, over 110,000 in the UK. We think of this as unusual but, in fact, for the poor, death is a constant companion and a permanent possibility. For previous generations too, even in our own country, life has been similarly precarious. It is only this current generation living in the prosperous west that has been able to push death back and this has led us to think of ourselves as immortal, and of death as an affront. It's not though; it is normal. We all die, so it does us no good at all to pretend; this year in particular we really can't avoid it. This is Holy Week and Christians journey through this Week with faith in the arrival of Easter. In the events of this week, we face death in the light of resurrection, knowing that God's will is new life. In that context then let us, in this Holy Week, reflect on God's call to death.

This is not easy to deal with. It can be upsetting and you may find some of these reflections tough going. Please do talk about that and don't feel you have to keep it to yourself. The Clergy will be available for you, and also others of your friends at Church. We're in this together.

1. Jesus answers the call to death

Mark 12 v 1-12

Yesterday we celebrated Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This parable follows soon after Mark's account of that event and it is a commentary on it. Henry Hart Milman's words in the famous Palm Sunday hymn encapsulate it thus: "Ride on, ride on in majesty; in lowly pomp ride on to die." In that donkey ride, Jesus answered the call to die. He first answered that call by being born and embracing a human life; that life which, inevitably, ends in death. He will hear it again, and answer it again in the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday.

2. Why is it so hard for us?

John 16 v 4-6, 12-15, 20-22

Death is so hard because it is intimately bound up with loss. We grieve the loss of those whom we love, but we also mourn for our own death, and rage against the loss of our own selfhood (though we usually don't acknowledge this.) Loss is terribly important and our pain is of infinite value to God who loves us. Mourning rituals are essential because they acknowledge all this and allow us to express it honestly. We are not alone; pain and unease in the face of death are common experiences. How can we be honest about our feelings around death? Who can we be honest with?

3. Preparing to answer the call

Galatians 6 v 8-10

As the funeral service reminds us: "In the midst of life we are in death;" and we do need to be reminded. Like Jesus, from the moment we were born we were called to die, so death really is a constant. A former colleague, when she retired, asked her friends to recommend a book to read to help her prepare for death. This was a startling request but it was absolutely right. Over the centuries, many spiritual writers have encouraged us to meditate on our own death as a way of focusing our minds and preparing ourselves. Our mortal life is a preparation for eternity, and eternal life is a life of deepening love and self-giving; so how do we best "sow to the Spirit" and prepare ourselves for that?

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4. Answering the call ourselves

1 Corinthians 11 v 23-26

For Christians, the Eucharist is the very heart of our life and Paul tells us that it proclaims the death of Christ. "Proclaims!" Isn't it strange to think of death as something to proclaim? When we participate in the Eucharist Sunday by Sunday (and we shall again soon!) we are, among other things, aligning our own souls and bodies with the death of Christ. In a very physical way, by taking his body into our body, we are setting our own destinies alongside his; sharing his call, and responding with faith and commitment. How does the Eucharist help you to prepare for death?

5. Called to let go

Mark 15 v 4-37

Death is the end; completely and utterly. Jesus let go of life and gave himself to death without any assurances about the future. It is the same for us. We approach death with faith, not with knowledge; trusting God but not knowing. Life is God's creation, and we have lived trusting in his love for us. We die trusting that his love is eternal and that therefore he will do something new for us and with us and in us. We trust. As we approach death, faith in God is our only hope because he alone has the possibilities in his hands. How might we best express that faith in worship; in prayer and in daily life?

6. Called to rest

Luke 23:50-56

Jesus' female disciples join the community in the Sabbath rest, and the body of Jesus also rests in a sealed tomb. All is at rest in patient hope, and we rest today too. In the Ten Commandments God calls us to an earthly sabbath rest and, throughout our own lives, he calls us to the eternal sabbath rest. We evoke that when someone dies and we pray that they may, "rest in peace." Patient waiting can be hard but, as it is for Jesus, so it will be for us. On this Holy Saturday let us rest; in God's good time let us REST IN PEACE AND RISE IN GLORY! AMEN!

Prayer for the week:

Eternal Lord God, you hold all souls in life:

shed forth, we pray, upon your whole Church in paradise and on earth

the bright beams of your light and heavenly comfort;

and grant that we, following the good example of those who have loved and served you here and are now at rest, may at the last enter with them into the fullness of your eternal joy;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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WEEK 7: Called to NEW BEGINNINGS

Introduction:

Think of new beginnings you've had through your life: a new job, moving house, going to college, having a baby, learning a new craft. Any new beginning has its challenges, a sense of anticipation, possible fear or excitement or a mixture of both. Jesus Christ offers us a new beginning, in fact a new life! His sacrificial death for us – taking the punishment for sin in our place – means that our sins can be forgiven. And because Jesus lives, we can live too. That's the joyous message of Easter. Paul put it like this, "I have been put to death with Christ on his cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. This life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me." Galatians 2 v 19b-20

1. Peter: called to new beginnings

Luke 5 v 1-11 Jesus calls the first disciples, including Simon Peter

John 21 v 1-19 A second chance and another new beginning for Peter

1 Peter 1 v 3-5 Peter's letter as a leader of the church

Simon Peter was called by Jesus to leave his day job. For three years Peter was by Jesus' side and his life changed forever. Peter started well. He declared Jesus to be the Messiah, but fell asleep when Jesus asked for prayer in Gethsemane. And then Peter denied he knew Jesus. After the resurrection Jesus gave Peter a fresh start. Jesus died for each one of us. Let's not allow his sacrificial death to be in vain. Are you a follower of Jesus? If so, keep moving forward with him; if not, why not start today. If he came to Harnham today would you welcome him and follow him?

2. One unnamed woman: called to new beginnings

Luke 13 v 10-17 An unnamed woman meets Jesus

Romans 6 v 5-10 New life in Christ

Ephesians 1 v 18-23 Seeing the light of Christ and receiving blessings

Jesus, teaching in the synagogue, spots this unnamed lady, calls her, and gives her a new beginning. As she straightens up, the first thing she sees is his face. Do you know what it is to see Jesus? This lady's life was changed as she was called *by* the Saviour *to* the Saviour. Jesus knows your name and calls you. He knows the trials and dis-ease you may have. He came to save you and offer you new life – a life of joy as this lady demonstrated when she praised God. We can live with the risen Lord. Lord, you come to me; you touch me; you wipe away my tears; you smile at me; embrace me; you iron out my fears. Thank you. (Joyce Huggett)

3. A son has two new beginnings

Luke 15 v 11-24 Jesus tells a story about a father and son

John 3 v 16-17 Jesus explains how he came to offer new life

1 John 5 v 11-12 John defines 'life'

A son wanted to live independently and asked his father for his inheritance. Off he went on his new beginning, only for it to go pear-shaped. In remorse and with some trepidation, he set off for home. His father had been on the lookout, ran to meet his son and welcomed him home. The boy had a second new beginning. In this third story of 'lostness' in Luke 15, Jesus makes it clear that God the Father welcomes those who turn to him. He offers a new life of forgiveness, reconciliation and joy.

4. A rich man rejects a new beginning

Luke 18 v 18-30 Too much to lose?

Matthew 6 v 33 Priorities

Hebrews 2 v 3 We're urged to pay attention to the offer of a new life

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This Jewish leader came to Jesus and asked about receiving eternal life. Fair question. Is it one you've asked? The man was religious; he'd kept the commandments and thought he was doing OK. Sadly he wasn't prepared to give up what he had to follow Jesus, and he went away sad. Are you committed 100% to a new life with Jesus? Our security is ultimately with God. The events of this last year indicate that we can't rely on wealth, health or education or anything else; we need the one who came to give true and lasting life: a new beginning.

5. Zacchaeus: called to a new beginning

Luke 19 v 1-10 Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus' home

Romans 10 v 9 What it means to be saved

Philippians 2 v 5-11 An attitude for living

Tax collectors were hated. They worked for the occupying Romans and often cheated their fellow-countrymen. Zacchaeus had lots of money but few friends. We're not privy to the conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus; what we do know is that Zacchaeus' life changed as a result of meeting Jesus. What might Jesus say to you if he came to your home? Do you live as someone for whom he died? Would he say, in your home, "Salvation has come to this house today." Is he your risen Saviour? Do you share the difference he's making in your life with your neighbours? Lord, these three things I pray: to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly, day by day.

6. Mary: a new beginning after her son died

Luke 2 v 33-35 Simeon warns Mary of heartbreak

John 19 v 25-27 Mary is called to a new beginning with John

Acts 1 v 14 Mary at prayer with other believers

Mary the mother of Jesus was faithful to her son and Saviour throughout his life. Imagine her emotions at the cross. Jesus, even in his agony, thinks of her and entrusts her into the care of his friend John. And John would find a mother-figure in Mary. After a couple of days, John and Mary would live in the knowledge and joy of Jesus' resurrection. They received a new beginning and went on in faith to live for their risen Saviour. May we live in the light and joy of knowing Jesus the Saviour who lived, died and rose again to give us new life.

Prayer for the week:

Heavenly Father,

thank you that through Jesus Christ we may all have a new beginning.

Help us to see that when we admit our shortcomings, believe in Jesus as our Saviour and commit to him, we enter a new relationship with you.

Thank you that our old self has been put to death with Christ on the cross.

Thank you that we have been set free.

Help us to live for Christ because he died and lives for us.

We believe that we will also live with him.

For we know that Christ has been raised from death and will never die again.

Thank you. Amen.

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Week 8: Called to WITNESS

Introduction:

This period of Lent has been drawing us onwards towards Easter Day. Lent both reminds us of Jesus' period in the desert, it also helps us to have a desert experience: letting go of the things that fill our minds and our spirits in everyday life, and to challenge us to concentrate on becoming closer to God through reflection, fasting, and personal restraint. We need to be equipped to share in Jesus' death and final glorious resurrection. We have a very different perspective from those who were journeying with Jesus during that period in history. We journey with knowledge of what is to come, but the disciples do not know what the future will hold. Let us reflect on what it would have been like to witness that Easter weekend.

1. What does it mean to be a witness?

Acts 2 v 32

'The Jesus we speak of has been raised by God, as we can all bear witness.' The definition of being a witness is 'to see, hear, or know by personal presence and perception. To be present as a formal witness, spectator, bystander. To bear witness to; testify to; give or afford evidence of.'

Have you witnessed something that has challenged you to respond, but you have not been sure what to do? Are there things you have witnessed over the weeks of Lent which have brought joy, or perhaps sadness?

2. Witness to the miracles of Jesus

Matthew 8 v 23-27 Stilling of the storm

Mark 6 v 30-44 Feeding of the 5000

The disciples had witnessed many of the miracles of Jesus and had come to see that he was not just a man but the Son of God. It was obvious that he had been given power over earth, sea and sky by his Father God. Do you recognise Jesus as the Son of God? How do you explain this person Jesus to others? Where do you see Jesus active in society today? Perhaps you see him in the passion of those wanting to save our planet for future generations, or in trying to work for equality and peace. Are you part of this?

3. Witnesses to Jesus' death on the cross

John 19 v 24 At the foot of the cross

Imagine the pain of loss for Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother. What must they have felt as they knelt at the cross? Hopes lost, pain and sacrifice, lost opportunities. We need to remember and pray for those who have felt the pain of loss recently. What can we do, practically, to come alongside the bereaved? A card, a distanced walk, offering mutual empathy and understanding? What have you found helpful, and can you share this with others? On Friday all is literally dark... but Sunday is coming!

4. Witness to a miracle on Easter Sunday

Luke 24 v 1-8 Two women and two angels

John 20 v 1-18 Mary visits early in the morning

Jesus rose from the dead! An incredible prophecy was fulfilled. Mary comes to the tomb and is shocked to find the tomb empty and she runs to tell the disciples. When she gets back she is alone. Then a figure that she thinks is the gardener speaks, she recognises his voice and calls to him and he, Jesus, responds. If Jesus spoke to you, would you recognise his voice? Perhaps it is more that we sense his presence and need to use those well known words as Samuel did '...speak Lord for thy servant heareth...' Easter Day raises the hearts and spirits of those who know Jesus personally and who can see God's plan for the world outworked through Jesus' death and resurrection.

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5. Witnessing the doubt of Thomas

John 20 v 24-29 The belief of Thomas restored

Thomas was not present at the time when Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection. As a result, he did not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. It was only when he put his fingers in the wounds that he believed. What did Jesus say? '... because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not yet seen me, and yet believe.' Are we in danger of needing confirmation before belief? How do we speak into the unbelief of others?

6. Witness by actions and words

Romans 1 v 12 Encouragement

1 Corinthians 10 v 31 Lifestyle

2 Timothy 1 v 7-8 The Spirit gives us power

We desire that other people know the same peace, joy and love that comes from a relationship with Jesus, and sharing the gospel and our testimonies are what we are called to do. The act of sharing our faith isn't just for the benefit of non-believers, other Christians can also be encouraged by our testimony to God's presence through Jesus his Son. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to guide us – as we read in Timothy – and he will give us the words we need to speak to others of God's great love for us all.

Prayer for the week:

Gracious Father, reveal your Son to us at this time of Easter. Remind us of the debt he paid for us and the gospel imperative to share your good news with others. Amen.

Finally...

Every human being wants to be happy.

Everyone wants to feel full of life- loved and accepted.

Having life to the full means to have real joy, happiness; not all the time but underlying everything that happens.

Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing -sickness, failure, emotional distress, can take that love away.

Henri Nouwen.

Ephesians 1 v 3-10 and Romans 5 v 5

To God the Father who loved us and made us accepted in the Beloved;

To God the Son who loved us and loosed us from our sins by his own blood;

To God the Holy Spirit who spreads the love of God abroad in our hearts;

To one true God be all love and all glory for time and for eternity. Amen.