

The Anglican Diocese of Ballarat

Take up your Cross



A STUDY GUIDE FOR LENT

YEAR C

Welcome to Lent!

This is the season when Christians around the world, as they have done from the very beginnings of the Church's life, pause to meditate on the coming Passion of Jesus Christ. It is the figure of the cross that hangs over the season and which gives Lent its shape and its themes.

There are two texts that apply to our understanding of what we are to be doing in this season:

1. Repent and believe the Good News.

Of course, these are the words with which Jesus opened up his ministry in Galilee and he is doing nothing more than picking up themes that are to be found in the whole of the Bible, New Testament and Old Testament. We are a people who are in need of repentance - an amendment of life, an acknowledgement of sin, a heading off in a new direction under God. All of these are to be found in that powerful word *repent*. Importantly, those words in the Greek mean that repentance is not a once in a lifetime act. It is a way of life. There is not a day that goes past that does not give us the opportunity to repent, to acknowledge our failures and our limitations and to seek God's forgiveness.

2. Take up your cross and follow me:

This is to be the key focus of the studies that are to be found here. We are seeking our cross. Remembering that the cross for Jesus was his vocation, it was the way he was able to obediently serve God, his destiny as a son. It was also an instrument of suffering, pain and ultimately death but the real significance of the cross is to be found in its link to his humble submission to the will of his Father.

These Lenten studies are written to assist us in discovering what God's will for us might be and to explore, through the scriptures, what his Cross might be. It is thus action focused, asking us to pause and examine our lives and to explore ways of both hearing God speak to us and of responding to his will. Our task is to repent and that can only be done by prayer, through pausing to allow God to speak to us and by putting into our lives the things discipleship demands.

Anglicans across the diocese are encouraged to share these studies with others. They can be done as personal studies or as a part of a parish or community study group. They follow through the Sunday readings for Lent and so tie us into the worshipping communities around the whole world. If we commit this season to God in prayer and faithfully work on exploring his ways, our Lent will bring us many and varied blessings.

WEEK I

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

The Book of Deuteronomy:

The book is the fifth book of the Bible and the last of the books of the Pentateuch (the name given to the collection that is the first five books of the Bible). It is what the Hebrew Bible refers to as the Torah, a word that we translate as *law* but which is probably better translated as *teaching* or *instruction*. The story of the Pentateuch follows the story of the Chosen People from the Creation through until the death of Moses and contains stories of history as well as records of the civil and religious legislation of Israel. There is much repetition in these writings and a seemingly endless array of odd laws. One thing that is very clear throughout these readings is that if you want to be a faithful Hebrew, then it must impact on every part of your life, even the most mundane and obscure. God has a place in every human activity, though, word and deed.

DEUTERONOMY 26:1-11

Here we have a record of an important ceremony that was to be celebrated by the people who have been given the land by their God. The first fruits of the harvest were offered at the Feast of Weeks (see 16:9-12; Numbers 28:26) and was a celebration of their taking possession of the land of Canaan. This land taking itself was seen as the fulfillment of the covenant promises of Yahweh himself.

Before entering Canaan, the Hebrews were not an agricultural people and had no harvest festivals. These were common among the people of the land and linked their farming and hunting to the life of the gods. Baal, for example, was a key god in the pantheon of the Canaanites. He was a fertility god with a direct involvement in the cycle of nature. In the temples and holy sites of Baal, sacred prostitutes would carry out their religious activities, human actions which were thought to mimic the actions of the gods which would secure the fertility of their crops and the hunt. If Baal was kept happy, there would be a good harvest. If Baal was not pleased, the people would go hungry.

The Hebrews knew Yahweh as a god who had chosen and called them, who had led them into the land and had made a covenant with them. But in the land they looked at the ways of the people and must have wondered just how much their god knew about farming. There was no tradition of this and the Canaanites, with their attractive religious rites, seemed to have an advantage over them. They had their link between farming and religion.

This week's reading is therefore of great significance for it is the start of the belief that Yahweh is a God of all things in creation. He is not just a powerful God who created them and called them, he is also the God of the cycles of the year, of the rain and the sun, of the seasons and times. This is why the first fruits are his.

26:5 *My father was a wandering Aramaean....* This refers to Jacob who went down into Egypt with his sons. There he *lived as an alien*.

All this stands in stark contrast to the situation with the man who is

making this declaration who now has a land of his own and has brought the first fruits of the land as an offering to God. They were *small in number* but have now become a people, a nation. How do we explain the great transformation that has taken place? The answer is *Yahweh*.

Yahweh is the one they called upon when they were persecuted slaves in Egypt (26:7). It was Yahweh who heard their cries (26:7). It was Yahweh who brought them out of the land (26:8) and so it was to Yahweh their first fruits should be offered. This is important. It is an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God over their lives. Over all of their lives. If God is King, then what is their response? That is the key to understanding this whole section indeed, of the whole of the book. If we are children of God then what does it mean for the way we live out our daily lives? There must be evidence, signs that we are living in a particular way.

The Hebrews believed that God had provided them with a set of commandments which should govern their lives. It was the mark of their covenant. What are some of the signs that may be in evidence that someone believes in a God? What would you expect faith in a god means for daily living? Do Christians have a way of life that they should follow? Is this as strong as a set of Laws? What would you say are some of the things that might be set down in those laws?

LUKE 4:1-13

The Temptation in the Desert

This is the last of the preparation stories before Jesus begins his public ministry and there are some key theological themes that are put in place before we see Jesus in action in the Gospel proper. We read a similar account in Matthew's Gospel, though there are some significant differences in our present account. It is important because it answers some important questions for the early Christian community: Why did Jesus not fit in with the contemporary ideas of what a messiah would do? Why did Jesus not perform miracles in his own name? From where did the authority of Jesus come?

The three temptations help to put the ministry of Jesus into a clear context. His life was a life of conflict both internal and from outside forces and opposition. He had to confront these throughout his life and in the end, these opponents put him to death. The opposition was such that he must have been tempted to use his powers for his own protection and benefit. The temptations help to explain why he didn't. The Jesus we see here is a Son who is obedient to his Father—in all things. They are linked by quotations from Deuteronomy that refer to occasions when the Hebrews were put to the test (during the Exodus) and failed. Jesus is being compared to them. Where Israel of old failed, Jesus succeeded.

Temptation one: *Deut 8:3.... Man does not live on bread alone....* Jesus is tempted to use his power to feed himself. He is hungry and should go about easing his suffering. What he is called to be doing is to go about his Father's business and rely on the Father to provide the food he needs. Deuteronomy 8 is where we see the Hebrews murmuring against Moses and Aaron after seeing the "fleshpots" and bread of Egypt (Ex 16; Numbers 11:7-8). They wanted the bread of Egypt but were fed with manna and quails from God. Israel was found wanting and so was humbled. Not so with Jesus. He rejects the challenge of the devil and makes it clear that he will rely on God to provide him with the "manna" he may need to preach the Kingdom.

How might we be tempted in this way today? If we were a people who trusted in God to lead us through the difficulties and challenges of discipleship, how might we be living? In Church terms, when and where are we tempted to give up on God and shape things in ways that we want and which suit our needs? What might a modern first temptation look like?

Temptation two: *Deut 6:13.... You shall worship the Lord your God and him alone.....* Jesus is tempted to acknowledge someone other than God as having dominion and lordship over his life. Who is able to order his life and who/what looms as the most significant influence in all that he does? Also important is the temptation to see someone other than God as the lord of history and the world around them. His answer quotes Moses from an incident recorded in Deuteronomy 6:10-15. The Hebrews, wandering in the desert were tempted to take on the gods of the Canaanite cults (Deut 12:30-31). They were warned by Moses not to chase other gods and not to court foreign powers (Exodus 23:23-33). This proved to be an ongoing problem for the people once they settled in the land. In the end they fell apart because their loyalties were divided and could not subject themselves to Yahweh alone. Jesus, in contrast, rejected the temptation to have someone other than Yahweh as Lord of his life. He served no one but God his Father and it is for this reason that his ministry would succeed.

What does this mean for us today? What competes with God for importance in our lives (eg; time, money, resources, passion, etc)? What are the ways in which we are tempted to wonder whether or not God is indeed Lord of the world in which we live? When can we be tempted to see human beings and human powers and human strengths to be the ultimate authority. What comforts can we take from this story of the victory of Jesus over the temptations of Satan.

Temptation three: *Deut 6:16..... You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.....* Here, Jesus is tempted to reveal his power with a brilliant display so that his contemporaries could marvel at just how wonderful he was and would be caught up in the display and so believe in him. There were many so

called messiahs around claiming to have divine authority for their actions. They wandered around performing actions that were supposed to be proofs that God was with them. But Jesus is not going to function in this style. His answer is from Moses's confrontation with the people during the temptations at Massah and Meribah (Exodus 17:1-7). They insisted that Yahweh *give us water to drink*. Yahweh replied by having Moses strike the rock and making the waters flow. They simply could not believe that having brought them into the desert, God would look after them. He would not abandon them to a terrible death in the wilderness and so they put Yahweh to the test. Jesus's response was very different and claimed no miracle to prop up his ministry. In doing this he rejected any idea that he (or anyone else) could simply call upon God to perform a miracle on demand. God did not have to prove himself to be God by a show of power. It would have been quite a crowd convincing miracle if Jesus had thrown himself off the edge of the enormous drop and angels had flown down and saved him before he hit the ground. But he refused.

Do we have some expectations of God on which our faith lives depend? Are there things we expect God to do and if they do not happen our faith is shaken? In the world we often hear: I cannot believe in a God who would let that happen! How would we respond to that? Things like earthquakes, drought, tidal waves, tragic deaths and the like, test people's faith in a loving and merciful God. How would we as disciples of Christ deal with these? Given the enormous task we face of renewing our Church and preaching the Gospel to an incredulous world, what do we expect God to do to make it easier for us?

Concluding thoughts:

In each of these scenes, Jesus is shown as being victorious over Satan by using quotations from scripture. This is important for Luke as it shows that he was a conqueror because he is armed with the Word of God. The devil uses scripture for his own purposes (using psalm 91:11-12 in Luke 4:10-11) but is not victorious over Jesus. He is not the most powerful one (cf Lk 3:16; 11:22). This is of great importance for the Gospel that is to unfold for the reader. We see a Jesus who is more powerful than Satan, who has taken on responsibility for the Father's plan for creation and who subjects himself in obedience to the will of his Father. It thus sets out for the disciples, the way to victory.

It is **not** through using their own powers and gifts for their own benefit.
It is **not** by placing their trust in "gods" who cannot deliver any lasting victory.
It is **not** by bribing God into action: do this for me God and I will serve you!

There is also a warning put into the end of the story. There we see the devil went away from him *for a while*. This refers to the passion when the Evil One will come back to make one final attack on the Son. Not that his ministry will be Satan free. It is more that the testing goes on and when the believer sees Jesus nailed to the cross, they should think back to this initial victory and not simply rely on the so called evidence of their own senses. The cross will make it seem like the devil has won. But they should not be deceived. Nor should they think that the devil has no power. He is there. He is real....but in Christ he can be defeated and overcome.

For some, this story is a new presentation of the story of the original fall of Adam. He was tempted and he fell into sin. As a consequence the whole of creation suffered and human beings were forever marked by sin. In Jesus we have a new Adam who remains faithful and as a consequence all men and women are set free from the consequences of that first sin. This is the story of the Kingdom: there is an opportunity for a new beginning and this new beginning is to be found in Christ and depends on a willingness to build one's life on the demands of his Kingdom.

What comforts and reassurances can we take from the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus that we find in the Gospels? How do we understand Satan in the world in which we live? Is he real? Does evil have human face? How is evil experienced and spread throughout the land? How do we overcome evil? Can you think of some examples? What are the things that Jesus has to offer us that can be found in no other place and in no other person? How do we get them?

WEEK 2

Readings: Genesis 15:5-18; Luke 9:28b-36

GENESIS 15:5-18

The authors of this section are setting out to explain the origins of the promises they believe were given to the patriarchs. There are two specific promises: that of the possession of the land and secondly the presence of a people. Scholars tell us that our present text was placed into the Abraham stories to address the needs of the people when they were faced with challenges that threatened their very survival and their possession of the land. What we find here is a very reassuring message. That God had chosen Abraham and had made a covenant with him. In that covenant, God pledges to Abraham a long line after him (as many as the stars). He also makes it clear that his ancestors will inherit a land which has been given to him for his own possession. The guarantee of this is not the strength of arms that Abraham can muster. The pledge of the land and the long line of successors is the covenant that is made by God.

The authors are thus saying to the people that they should not panic. It does not matter how terrible the situation in which they find themselves may appear. In times of hardship and struggle they should go back to this divine moment. God can be trusted. If God makes a promise then he can be relied upon and trusted.

Of course, the covenant engages with Abraham and in entering into the covenant he pledges himself and his ancestors to a life of faithful and obedient service to God. It is not all about sitting back and passively accepting all God has to offer.

5:5-6 Abraham is shown as a man who struggles to believe in God. He is childless and so he cannot see how God's promise to him (Gen 12:1-2) could possibly be fulfilled. It is in response to this faith crisis that the following story unfolds.

Note that God takes the initiative by leading Abraham outside to see the night sky. It is Abraham who is faced with powerlessness and it is God who seeks to reassure him.

Abraham is taken out to see the stars by the God who created them. If God can put stars into the sky, then enabling Sarah to have a baby is not going to be a great challenge! What he is doing is taking Abraham's eyes from the horizon of the human (we are old and cannot have children) to the plane of heaven where the unlimited power of God is clearly on display...*look up to the stars...* says God. That is the answer to his initial problem of childlessness. It is a challenge: can you believe in the faithfulness of God and his willingness to use his power to bring about what he has promised? The alternative is to say that life is in such a mess that there is no hope.

This, of course, is the fundamental message that will be played out over and over throughout the whole of the Old Testament.

Can you think of situations in the life of our faith community where we allow the limits of the human horizon to limit our thinking and acting, where we feel overwhelmed by the problems and difficulties that face us and so shrink back into inactivity? Where and how does God take us by the hand and lead us to "look beyond the limits of our human horizon"?

15:7-18 This whole section begins with the promise of God to give Abraham the land of Canaan as *your own possession*. It ends with the solemn confirmation of this promise (v.18). What is striking here is not so much that God gives them the land but rather the solemn oath undertaken by God to reassure them of his commitment to caring and providing for his people.

15:9-10 The question of Abraham asking for some kind of sign is not so much an expression of doubt on the part of Abraham as much as an opportunity for the author to bring in the covenant making ceremony that follows.

Splitting the animals in half is a ritual that involves the person making the oath passing between the two halves. He is thus saying, *if I break this oath let what has happened to these animals happen to me!* This is quite a statement about God's commitment to his people. It is God's free choice to commit himself to this people.

15:12-16 Having Abraham fall into a trance is another literary device that makes it clear that all initiative comes from God. The historical outline that follows is clearly an account that is looking back at experiences the people have had and are putting them into the context of the promises of God. They were slaves in Egypt and God did bring them out into freedom. God did drive out the people of Canaan using mighty signs and wonders and gave the land over to his people. All of this is seen as unfolding according to the promise of God as given to his chosen one Abraham. A major part of this story is how God destroys the enemies of Israel, that there is nothing or no one so powerful that God cannot destroy.

With all of this power, why would Abraham panic or doubt? History is shown as being a part of the plan of God and obedient to God.

Why would God choose this man and this people to make his own? Isn't God here guilty of a little bit of favouritism. Why would God choose one people and then dispossess the others of their land? *Hint: the answer can be found in the call of Abraham in 12:2-3.* Of course, if these stories were to be written today, they would have a different shape and content. How would you put together a modern story of the call of Abraham to bring out the message of God having a plan and God having the power to make sure his plan is carried out?

LUKE 9:28-36 - The Transfiguration

This is a story common to all of the synoptic Gospels and is thus a significant part of our Christian tradition. It follows on from the discussion on discipleship and in it Jesus is shown from a heavenly perspective and stands in contrast to two key Old Testament figures. The basic message is clear: those who seek to be disciples of the Kingdom must listen to Jesus alone for he is God's Son and Chosen One.

When buying a house the purchaser is reminded of the importance of *location, location*. In reading the bible one must always keep an eye on *context, context* and here the setting of the story is vital to an interpretation of the text. A part of this context is the question that was raised by Herod in 9:9...*who is this I hear so many reports about?* The answer is now given: *This is my Son, my Chosen One*. It could not be clearer than that!

This is an important question we all have to answer: Who is Jesus? This is not about who Jesus is for me but who Jesus is for the world of all times and all places. How would we answer that? What does it mean for our daily lives? And what would be the signs we could look for to see that this is more than a pious thought but is a reality? How should our answer change the way we live?

What happens here at the Transfiguration is important for what is to be stated in 9:51...*he (Jesus) turned and resolutely set his face towards Jerusalem...* He is going to Jerusalem where, like the prophets before him, he will be put to death. If there is to be more significance in his death than in the deaths of the prophets, then the significance is to be found here. If Jesus is Son and Chosen One, then death will not be the end. That is the message of hope the readers are to take with them to Golgotha. Their eyes and their senses may see hopelessness but they are buoyed up by the knowledge that this is God's Son and God is a faithful and loving Father and so there is always hope.

The Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected... to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day.

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself take up his cross every day and follow me.

The transfiguration follows on from Jesus' announcement of the passion and his sayings about discipleship. He is to be a suffering and dying messiah. But, the predictions of the death are also followed by a promise of a resurrection on the third day. In Luke's story of the transfiguration we are told that the disciples caught a glimpse of his "glory" (9:32). This word glory is used to speak of the risen Lord (24:26) and so we have Luke putting into the story of the passion the hope of the resurrection.

Jesus corrected Peter's false understanding of his role as messiah by speaking of his suffering and death. In our present story we find not so much a confirmation of the death of Jesus but a reassurance of the hope of glory.

In Luke's transfiguration Moses and Elijah are speaking with Jesus about his exodus (going to Jerusalem and dying). In the Exodus story what is on display is the glory of Yahweh. They experienced God faithfulness and covenant love in their journey (under his care and protection, from slavery to freedom in Canaan). The disciples are reassured that the Exodus of Jesus will have a similarly joyful ending.

You need to read the whole of Chapter 9 as it provides an insight into what Luke is trying to tell his readers in the story of the transfiguration.

9:18-22 Everyone in the district was stirred up by the miracle of the loaves and saw in Jesus a wonderfully powerful messiah. Presumably Peter does as well. Peter answers Herod's initial question with what appears to be a profound faith statement. But Jesus sees something else in the answer and adds his own particular interpretation of his ministry.

The Messiah is to (a) suffer greatly and (b) will be rejected by the religious leaders and so (c) he will be put to death but (d) will rise on the third day.

That is not the scenario that either the crowds or Peter and the disciples would have had in mind.

How often does God fail me measure up to my expectations? Why is that? What do I do when God does not do as I want him to do? Is this a reasons why so many in the world cannot believe that God 's agenda differs from theirs?

9:20-26 Now Jesus goes further and says that what applies to him as Messiah will also apply to those who want to follow him and be his disciples. It is not just a model life that is on offer. It is Jesus going first and expecting others to follow. Notice that there are no options offered here except compliance or not being a disciple. The life of a disciple is defined in terms of the cross. No cross. No discipleship. To ram this home, the cross is defined in terms of losing one's life for the sake of Jesus. This has a range of understandings, each of which is probably relevant.

What is the cross in our lives today? For Jesus it was not just he physical wood on which he died. It was also his destiny, his path of obedience, his willingness to lay aside his own self for the sake of others and obedience to the will of his Father. How might we see those things in our lives today? What are some of the signs that we might look for in our own lives that will speak of us being faithful disciples? How do we go about working out just what discipleship entails? Our diocese is defined as a community of disciples. What does this mean for us?

Then we have the Transfiguration itself:

Eight days after this...

I keep coming back to the question: what were they doing for those eight days? This is the only place I can find in the New Testament where such a long passage of time is given between events that are linked. Normally they are notes like: immediately, then, after this and so on. The fact that it is eight long days suggests that there was a little bit of discontent among the disciples over the way Jesus understood his own ministry as messiah and how he sells discipleship to them.

What are some of the false understandings of the messiah mighty they have had of Jesus? What are some of the false expectations that people might have today about Jesus and his place in our lives? What do we expect of our messiah? Is that what we find here in chapter 9?

It is of great importance for Luke that Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus on the mountain. When the voice of God is heard it is telling Peter, James and John to *Listen to him (Jesus)*. It would seem that there was a choice here. They could follow the words of these great heroes of the Hebrew religion or they could listen to the words of the One sent by God to proclaim the Kingdom of God. It is clear here: Listen to Jesus. The time of the former prophets is over and a new age has dawned. And the contrast could not be greater. The disciples of this new era will be men and women of the cross.

The cross is central to this story. What does it mean for you? How can the message of the Cross change our lives; our understanding of ourselves, of others and how we can look forward in hope? If I were to sit down and meditate before the Cross and contemplate what it might mean for me, what three things could I write down that could help me be a more faithful disciple?

One of the great parts of the Transfiguration is that the story does not end there. Peter may well have wanted to make some shelters and remain at the top of the mountain but Jesus had other ideas. They had to come down. In this we see one of the long time tensions for Church communities, the temptation to lock ourselves away on our mountain tops, worshipping God, rejoicing in one another's company and caught up in the traditions of the past. This is not the way of Christ. Without saying anything negative about these activities and without even suggesting that they are not a part of the life of disciples, Jesus takes them back down to the valley. Back to the places where the struggling communities live, with their fears and anxieties, their sickness and their death, with their anger and violence and with all of the joys and sorrows of living in human communities. The task given to the disciples was to bring that transfiguration experience to daily lives of the people of God. They were to help people Christ transfigured in all of the activities of their lives. If the only place it is possible to find Jesus revealed in the fullness of his power and his being is the mountain top, then we are doomed to live in darkness. Jesus is in our kitchens and workplaces, lounge rooms and recreation centres just as much as he is in our church buildings. What we need to be able to do is allow our eyes to be opened so that we can indeed encounter him there.

What stops people (believers and those who have little or perhaps no faith) from encountering God in all the events of a day? How do we "take God" out of our churches and worship gatherings into the wider world so that people can have a genuine experience of his love and his mercy? Share on what the feast of the Transfiguration says to you about our lives as a disciple (remembering too the context of the story).

WEEK 3

Readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Luke 13:1-9

The story so far: *(It would be helpful to read Acts 7:17-36)*

Moses began his life with the hand of God clearly upon him. The Pharaoh had issued an edict that all male babies born to the Hebrews should be thrown into the Nile to drown. However, Moses was put into a reed basked and set adrift in the Nile. He was then saved from the water by the daughter of Pharaoh and grew up as a child of the court. In St Stephens account of the early years of Moses (Acts 7:22) he notes that Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. That wisdom was a highly sought after commodity and even the Greeks would send their students and scholars to the palaces of the Pharaoh to soak up what was on offer. So Moses would have grown as a man of great confidence and ability, sure of himself as master of his own destiny, and as we shall see, the destiny of his people.

Moses is clearly a man with a strong sense of justice and wants his people to be united in their quest for freedom. So one day he decides to go and visit his kinsmen. Again, the story in Acts helps put it into a good context:

He thought his brothers would realize that through him God would liberate them, but they did not.
Moses had a very clear idea of what his true des-

tiny among God's people was to be. He was to be the one bringing them to freedom and a new life. He was wise, he was strong (*Stephen describes him as a man powerful both in speech and in action 7:22*) and why wouldn't the people follow him?

"But they did not". Beautiful. Simple. And Moses' world came crashing down. To make matters world, they not only rejected him but also humiliated him and drove him out into the desert where he lived for forty years.

Acts 7:29 adds a fascinating note: *and he fathered two sons there*. Presuming that Luke has not added meaningless details, we should read that as meaning Moses had given up on having any role among his people. He was out of the palace and thrown out by his people. He as a failure. A reject a thing of derision. Going to a foreign land as a foreigner was about as low as you could go in those days.

We should also note that he went to the desert and not to a city where his education could have given him a good job and an income. He chose instead the wilderness.

Now to our story!

[Exodus] 3:1-6 It is an important moment when Moses discovers God in the bush. The idea of discovery is significant in the bible. Remember the parable of the treasure in the field (Matt 13:44-46)? The treasure was there all the time waiting to be found. The same with the pearl of great price. Many merchants had passed over it, presumably because they were all looking for something else. Finally, it was discovered. This is the sense of Moses and God's presence in the burning bush. The truly great thing about it was the discovery that God was in the desert all the time. But Moses never found him. **Here is a question:** *why do you think Moses took 40 years to find God? Was it that God was not speaking to him or were there more human reasons?* But now we find God speaking clearly to his servant Moses.

Luke says that Moses was in the wilderness for 40 years. Why do you think he might have added that note? What do you think Moses might have been thinking and doing during that time (in the light of what has already gone on)?

Exodus 3:3; And Moses said, I must go across and see this strange sight and why the bush is not being burnt up.

The Hebrew word for “go across” (sur) does not mean to simply wander over and have a look. It means to make an excursion or to take a long journey. This is not surprising given the terrain, where the landscape was terraced and you would often have to walk for miles simply to get up onto the next ridge. The point here is that Moses had to make a choice: was it worth the effort to investigate? His response is great for a man, who according to Luke in Acts was already eighty. How good it would be to be eighty and still filled with a sense of adventure and be willing to take up a fresh challenge. There were new possibilities here and he was going to investigate them.

Come no further. Take off your sandals for this is holy ground!

In his earlier life as the rich child of the Pharaoh’s court, he was in charge of his own destiny. He had made the decision that he was to be the “messiah” of the Hebrews and his world fell apart. Now, God was setting out some clear parameters.

Take off your sandals: This is not so much about being pure in a sacred place as much as it is about the discomfort that would come from walking over rocky ground in bare feet. His ministry in the future was going to be very much about him feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable. If it was to succeed it was going to need the powerful grace of God. One simply cannot walk triumphantly into the presence of God as though we were equals. Moses had to learn this or he would again fail.

This is holy ground: Here we have another wonderful spiritual insight. Moses must have chosen the desert because it was the place of demons, of darkness, the home of bandits and wild animals, it was a place where life was cheap and few would venture. So it must have come as a shock to hear God say that it was holy ground”.

I am the God of your ancestors, of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. We could have been forgiven to think that this was a new God and that what was happening to Moses was a whole new revelation. It was not. God is saying: *I am not new. I am the God who is dealing with you in exactly the same way I have always dealt with my people. What I did with your forebears I am doing with you and in you.* God is the God of those who feel abandoned, who feel they have messed up their lives and who feel thrown on the scrap heap by the world. He is a God of the sinners and the failures and he is not going to be put off because someone is so puffed up with pride and self righteousness that they ignore him. This is a vital message for Moses as he faces the task ahead of him. He is going to have to trust the faithfulness of God.

I have seen...I have heard... I know of their sufferings....I have come down to rescue them....I will bring them out.....So I am sending you... There is ministry in a nutshell. It is not Moses who is the key player here. It is God. The frequent use of the first person makes that abundantly clear. The truly exciting thing is the way God is going to carry out his plan - through the rejected, abandoned failure Moses. The man hiding in the desert, unable to cope with his past. The man who for forty years has been purifying himself for this moment. God calls Moses. God sends Moses. That says it all.

Look at each of the headings in bold print above and share together on what they tell us about (a) Moses, (b) ourselves and (c) God.

Has there been a time in our lives when we have unexpectedly found God lurking in places where we had least expected him? How can we go about finding what at times seems to be an absent God? Moses life story may help us answer this question.

How well do we relate to the last paragraph, on the primacy of God? Can we change the word Moses and put in our own names? What does that mean for the future of our Church?

How does it help our lives as disciples (and our Church) to know that the God who is calling us today is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Jesus?

LUKE 13:1 - 9

Luke 13:1-5

If we remember our guidelines to interpreting texts of scripture: *what is repeated is of some importance to the author* then we should begin by noting verse 3 and 5:

Unless you repent you will all perish.

Jesus hears of the fate of the Galileans but instead of condemning Pilate, he uses the event to offer a teaching to the crowd. He makes it clear that the death of the Galileans was not a consequence of sin. However, their sudden death should draw our own minds to our own death - which could come just as quickly and unexpectedly.

A good response to this would be to repent, which in Luke's language means to accept in faith the word of God that is Jesus and which Jesus is proclaiming. If the Galileans could die like that, so could we.

Luke 13:6-9

The parable drives home this observation. A final chance (period of grace) is given to the fig tree. If it does not respond to the efforts of the gardener, it will be burnt. Jesus teaches that we stand in that short final period of grace before God comes in judgment.

The fig tree stands for the man or woman of faith who remains unproductive. The tough theme behind this parable raises the question as to why a person who has been given so much by God, continue to reject their purpose in life and not produce the fruit God wants. If such a person procrastinates and refuses to respond to the calls to repent and the many graces that are on offer, they should be ready to face the fate of the fig tree. Jesus allows no middle ground in this tough parable.

There is an ominous side to this parable that can easily make us uncomfortable. Those Galileans who died, were killed by evil intent by another human being and the people of Jerusalem were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. They died by accident. But they died. Whatever of the cause they were thrust into judgment with little or no warning. Were they ready to make an account of their lives before God.

The situation of the fig tree is very different. It is under threat because of wrongdoing on its own part. It is unproductive and lazy, taking the food from the soil and soaking up all of the care and attention that it can manage to get but it produces no fruit in return. This tree deserves to be cut down and to be thrown into the fire. Yet. It is given a chance. One last reprieve.

For Luke, both of these groups are offered the gift of eternal life but it all hinges on their willingness to repent. They need to see that *the hour has come* and that in Jesus all men and women will be judged. The key message is **REPENT**. We have the chance to change it all. The great and merciful God offers us the opportunity of beginning again (and again and again and again if we need it) and that opportunity is given in Christ. It is in him that there is the possibility of a new beginning.

Do we ever consider the idea of a divine judgment? What were we taught as we grew up? Do we still believe that today? What were the good things about that teaching? What were some of the less helpful things about it? How would we explain God's judgment that we all have to face?

"Repent", a familiar bible word. But what does it meant? How do we go about it? If it is such a crucial part of life in the Kingdom of God, we really need to understand what it involves and how we might go about being involved in it.

How might you tie in the life of Moses (especially as interpreted by Luke in Acts 7) with this story of the teaching of Jesus? How might we go about repenting in our parish today?

WEEK 4

Readings: Joshua 5:1-12; Luke 15:1-32

An introductory note: Although the lectionary has the reading begin in verse 2, the first verse of the chapter is worth reading: *And when all the kings of the Amorites west of the Jordan and all the kings of the Canaanites along the seacoast heard how the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the Israelites until they had crossed over, their hearts sank and there was no longer any spirit in them to face the Israelites.* This is the background theology to the whole of the Book. God is King. God is all powerful. God will bring his plans to fruition, whatever of the opposition.

Circumcision

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between Abraham and Yahweh. It was God who demanded it of Abraham and his line and anyone wanting to join the Hebrew line. In this covenant, Yahweh undertook to be Abraham's God and the God of his sons and daughters after him. They were to belong only to Yahweh and they were to serve, obey and worship him. In effect, the rite admitted a person into the covenant community and secured for the person a share in the promises God made to the nation as a whole. Circumcision was there as a sign to remind the Israelites of the covenant and of their responsibilities. The prophets reminded the people that circumcision was an outward rite and to have any power it had to be accompanied by an inner commitment a *circumcision of the heart* (Ezek 44:7; Lev 26:41; Deut 30:6).

Texts: Deut 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 6:10; Jeremiah 9:24-26.

JOSHUA CHAPTER 5

This rather brutal and painful ceremony takes place because of the stubbornness and sinfulness of the people of Israel in the desert (Numbers 14:28-32). As a consequence of sin, those who had left Egypt, died in the desert. It was a not a time when the people lived under the covenant with God (as given on Mt Sinai) and more than likely, as the covenant was being broken, they did not abide by the sign of the covenant.

There is a strong statement here:

God promised an oath to their fathers that he would give them a land flowing with milk and honey.

God declared on oath that he would not let them see the land that he was giving to them.

For the authors of Joshua, there is a strong sense of the conditional nature of the covenant. God freely offers it to his people but expects in return obedience to what he asks. They should not sit back thinking that they are safe because God will not go back on his word. He does not. However, in the not so fine print, they have been told that the gifts of the relationship with God demands a humble and obedient life.

What is happening in this story, is that God is fulfilling his covenant by giving to the children of the desert Hebrews the land that should have been inherited by their parents.

Today I have rolled away the shame of Egypt from you (5:9)

This is where we reach the Lenten message. Shame does not go on forever. God does not hold the sins of a person against them forever. There is a time of letting go and a time for new beginnings. We have it here. The people sinned in the desert. They were punished and now the new people of God move on.

The circumcision is a necessary precondition for celebrating the Passover (5:10-12). For one to enter back into the covenant (still on offer and not withdrawn by God because of the sins of the nation) there needs to be a commitment to faithfulness and a repentance (though the word is not used here). The sign of their willingness to change their lives and to move towards a more faithful way of living was their willingness to submit to the circumcision. Given that this was carried out using stone knives (5:3) it was quite a commitment to their faith.

From People of the Exodus to People of the land:

Their desert period is now over and in this pivotal passage, we see three important points being made:

- **The celebration of the Passover** - they were purified and again living under God.
- **Eating of Canaan's produce** - They had inherited the land promised to them.
- **The end of manna** - God would now lead them and feed them in new ways.

Of all of these, it was the last one that would create for them the greatest headache. They know Yahweh their God was a God of pilgrimage. He called them, fought against Pharaoh for them and led them through the desert (pillar of cloud and with fire). He was a God who made a covenant with them, who overcame the armies of the desert tribes and who gave them water from the rock and manna from heaven. In the exodus they knew who God was. Now they were in Canaan and had to find what it meant to be an agrarian people and a people who built towns and cities. How would their desert God fit into this new way of life? Would they be tempted to take on some of the *gods of the land* when they felt that their own God was not interested in some of their new ways. It was to be a difficult time of transition for their religion and religious practices and as we know from the Judges and the prophets, they sinned time and time again. It was always very tempting to take up the attractive gods on offer in the world. It also made life easier when they did not stand out too much!

The importance of Manna:

The feeding with manna is singled out in particular because it says much about the relationship that God had with his people and it makes clear what the right relationship is between men and women of faith and their God.

In exodus 16:4 the people complain because they are hungry and some of them want to return to Egypt where there was at least a little bit of food. God provides them with manna *raining down from heaven*. This is the whole story of the exodus (and every pilgrimage taken by men and women of faith down through the ages). It is the story of God providing. Having called he gives those called the grace they need to fulfill their vocations. But they have to have new manna every day. They cannot store it up. That means they have to go to bed at night believing that the next day God will still have loved them enough to feed them for the journey. That is the story of the exodus. There is no food in the desert. People should starve and die and have their dreams and hopes shattered. It was there that God fed them.

This story of Joshua and the people in the Land of Canaan begins in spectacular fashion:

- There is the commitment to a life of covenant faithfulness (1:6-9). They were to keep the law without deviating in any way. If they do they will prosper. So they should enter the land filled with boldness and without fear.
- There is a variety of ways in which the local tribes and individuals assist the Hebrews in moving into the land, the most notable of which is Rahab the prostitute (2:21).
- The crossing of the Jordan which is written up in such a way that it reflects the original crossing of the Red Sea at the beginning of the Exodus (3:14-17). This time it is the Ark of the Covenant which forces the waters back and allows the people to walk through and so begin a whole new way of life.
- The circumcision at Gilgal. This is the new commitment, the new beginning in the new land which God has given them.

See if you can work out what you think is the key spiritual insight that comes from this story of the entry of the Hebrews into the land of Canaan. What does it say about our life here in the parish and how we might approach our own call to renewal (that is to a Kingdom life that fills us with milk and honey).

We see in this story a sinful nation being redeemed through a covenant commitment. We do not hold on to circumcision today as the sign of the covenant, so how might we go about purifying ourselves and starting again today? What is the pledge that we might make?

LUKE 15:1-32 - The Parables of the Forgiving Father

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

These three parables have been called “the heart of the Third Gospel”. They are stories of the great love and mercy that God has for sinful human beings. It is also a part of the call of Jesus for sinners to repent and to believe in him. What is truly beautiful in these parables is the note of joy that is introduced—God is filled with joy when a sinner turns from his or her sins and comes back to his fatherly arms.

The point of the parable is clear. We are introduced to a shepherd who is willing to leave ninety-nine sheep in search of the one which has wandered. Then, when he finds the lost one, the shepherd rejoices. That is the way with God. In Jesus, God pursues those who are lost. He cannot allow one to wander away without the option of being called back.

The key thing to keep an eye on is the shepherd and what he does and not spend too much time with the sheep.

The Prodigal Son?

Most of us are probably familiar with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. That is the way we were taught it back in Sunday School. But scholars today rarely use that description because it puts the focus on the son rather than on the father. The parable is really all about the Father and the son is simply the way we learn about the kind of Father we have in heaven. For these studies I am not going to go into great detail about that parable, choosing instead, to follow Luke’s lead and to use the two parables of 15:1-10 as a commentary on the longer parable. We can then read it in the light of what we discover there.

15:1 Jesus begins by addressing the tax collectors and sinners who have gathered to hear words of healing and mercy. They are the outcasts, those who have abandoned any religious life and who in the eyes of the law would be immoral. They desperately want to hear what he is saying - in contrast to the Pharisees and the Scribes who grumble about what he is doing and saying. They point the finger at him and say: *that one welcomes sinners and eats with them (15:2)*. Such language is quite insulting and abusive and perhaps shows how serious a breach of tradition such behaviour was.

15:4 The parable speaks of a hundred sheep which is a good number as it stands in stark contrast with the one which strays. Having one hundred sheep marks him off as a moderately rich farmer (not like the poor widow in the next parable) but he is willing to risk the sheep he has for the one that is lost. The point of this is that it increases enormously the value of the lost sheep. It is now the focus of attention for the shepherd.

For how long does the search go on? *Until he has found it*. The notion here is of a very determined shepherd who will not be put off by the difficulty of the search and the stubbornness of the sheep. Matthew in contrast notes *if he finds it....* There are no ifs” in Luke. He will not give up. Then, when he does find the lost sheep he carries it on his shoulders. He carries the sheep and then when he gets home he throws a party for his family and friends. The reason for the party? *To celebrate with me...* I have so much joy in finding my lost sheep that I want others to rejoice with me (this idea of a party is in all three parables).

Then comes the great point that would have pleased the ears of the sinners but offended greatly the ears of the Pharisees: *There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents....*The whole of heaven (we presume the angels) joins in a joy filled party at the return of the repentant sinner. There is rejoicing on earth and in heaven as a consequence of the initiative of divine love.

The parable ends up with a further powerful reflection point. There is less rejoicing in heaven over the ninety-nine people who do not need to repent (presumably those who are righteous and have no need of repentance) than over the sinner who finds his way back to God’s care. We can see now why this section is called “the Heart of the Third Gospel”. It is here that the love of God and the message of Jesus is so clearly and refreshingly proclaimed.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

Like the story of the lost sheep, this parable too is well known. A woman loses a coin and exhausts herself looking for it. This woman is clearly a poor lady and her ten silver coins would have represented her security and survival. Losing one of them would have been a disaster for her. It is therefore not a surprise to see that once she has found the lost coin, her friends and neighbours gather at the house to celebrate and rejoice with her.

The point is pretty much the same as the first parable though this time the person involved is a poor woman while the shepherd was a moderately rich man. Again, joy and harmony is returned when the coin is found and both heaven and earth celebrate with joy.

Both parables tell us that through the preaching of Jesus, God's initiative and grace flow to us in an abundance that is truly breathtaking. There is no message here of judgment, or condemnation or any kind of distancing by God from the sinful person. They have clearly offended God by their actions but the response of God is clear—reaching out in mercy. The point of the woman in the parable is to show just how much God loves the sinner and seeks his or her salvation. If a human being can spend so much time and put so much effort into searching for a lost coin, how much more will a loving and generous God spend in seeking out the lost soul? Thus we have a clear answer to the criticism of the Scribes and the Pharisees in 15:2 - *this man welcomes sinners and eats with them*. Of course he does - that is what his Father wants him to do!

How do we understand sin today? What makes something a sin? How do we go about working out what is sinful and what is not sinful? Who decides what is a sin and what is not a sin?

How does God come in pursuit of us when we sin. It is a truly beautiful image that is given to us by Jesus in this parable but how are we pursued by God? How does God find the sinner in the world today and how does he bring the sinner home to himself.

Why do you think the Scribes and Pharisees were so angry with the way Jesus mixed with the sinners and outcasts? What would they have expected a messiah to do?

Who are the sinners and outcasts that need to experience the compassion, love and mercy

The Prodigal Son: The Loving Father

Luke now gives us a third parable with the same theme. However, it is a complex parable with as many insights to offer as there are people to read and reflect upon it. It helps to see it as a single parable with two parts - - 12-24 and 25-32.

The loving father is here a symbol of God. He is ever ready to forgive unconditionally. This is why the Son was sent, to proclaim a Kingdom where this relationship with God is a reality. There is plenty of room in the Kingdom of God for the sinner who repents and turns to the Lord. It is in this vein that the voice of the younger son echoes out of the parable: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son*. This is the message of Jesus and why it is called the Good News.

This message is proclaimed even in the face of the criticism and opposition of those who have a magnified sense of their own righteousness and uprightness. They find no room in their hearts for the sinner who returns or even for sinners in general. The elder brother (who is in the same vein as the Scribes and Pharisees) is in this group for he has been every righteous and obedient. But now he is sulking because the Father has dared to forgive his brother who has sinned so heinously.

Here is how Luke sees it. God loves the sinner, even before he repents. It is this divine love that makes it possible for repentance to even take place as the Father waits expectantly for the son to return.

Some notes to help with the reflection:

- The younger son was only interested in what was “his own”. The Father though, was focused in on the real needs of the son he loved, despite the pain he caused.
- The depth of his despair is expressed by him becoming a herder of pigs.
- Then, significantly for Luke, he “comes to his senses” (repents) and turns to his Father.
- The Father, on the other hand, does not condemn his son or lose his temper with him. Nor does he simply wait until he decides to come home. He goes out to look for him and then runs to greet him when he appears on the horizon. He is other focused.
- The Father embraces his son, bestowing signs of great honour - sandals, ring, robe and a feast. He is eager to receive his son back as a son. Note the language that is being used - dying and rising.
- The elder son is a key figure for interpreting the parable. He too is alienated from his father, seeing himself as a slave (15:29). He has not broken any commandments but has never received the reward he thinks he deserves. And he bitterly resents the return of his brother and his father’s joy at that return.
- He refuses to go into his family home. He challenges the servant preparing for the feast and he angrily rejects his father’s attempts at explaining his love.
- He does not want his brother forgiven. For the elder son, there are sins that are so horrible that they do not deserve to be forgiven.
- What the elder brother does not understand is the nature of love. The Father loves the sinful son as well as the faithful son and he has benefited from that love all of his life and will continue to be blessed by his position in the family.
- The parable then says: the lost are found, the dead rise and sinners repent.

There are three main characters in this story: (a) the younger son (b) the Father and (c) the elder son. Share together on each of these to build up a picture of what you think Luke is trying to show us by putting together this parable of Jesus.

In what ways can we, as disciples, reflect the behaviour of the younger son both in his sin and in his repentance?

In what ways can we, as disciples, reflect the behaviour of the elder son?

How do we experience the love of the Father for us today? How can we show the rest of the world and in particular our own local communities God as shown in this parable? A God who never abandons those his Son has saved by his blood on the cross? The outcast, those who have failed, the sinners, the lost, the lonely, the addicted, etc, etc? If we believe this parable is a kind of allegory of God, how do we make it a reality for all who suffer and struggle?

Look at the characters of the Scribes and the Pharisees Luke mentions in 15:1-3. Is there any danger that the Church (and we as individual disciples) may find itself (ourselves) in this position, if not in reality, at least in the perception of the people of our communities?

In your own time, write a prayer that is based on this parable. It should be a prayer that picks up the despair of the younger son and the love of the Father. It may even have a cautionary note on avoiding the sins of the elder son.

WEEK 5

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; John 8:1-11

Deutero-Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah is made up of three different books, written at different times with different messages. These are chapters 1-39; 40-55 and 56-66. Our book, Second Isaiah, was written around 550. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, the people were in exile in Babylon and Cyrus of Persia had begun to show signs of threatening the armies of Babylon. The Book begins as it's theme continues : Comfort, comfort my people...a voice cries in the wilderness, prepare a way for the Lord...(40:1f). The prophet speaks of God's loving mercy, of His desire to forgive the sins of His people and to offer to them the hope and promise of a new life. In Him, the truly repentant can be born again to a new life of grace, hope and peace.

ISAIAH 43:16-21

The image we have here is of a new Exodus, this time from Babylon back home to Jerusalem.

43:16 Here we have two aspects of God on offer to the Hebrews enslaved in Babylon. We have the image of God the creator and God the redeemer. His name is Yahweh and so has a long history of great and powerful involvement with his people. He is thus a God on whom they can rely and for whom no challenge is too large.

He dealt with the problem of the Red Sea and also the problem of the Egyptian army. They should have this in mind as they contemplate their present situation.

43:18-19a But then he goes on to say that they should forget all of this. So great is what is about to happen, that they will not have to look back to the past for hope and comfort. They will soon find themselves in something that is far greater than the deliverance from Egypt.

I am doing something new, says Yahweh. And you are it!

The really exciting thing about this is the question he asks: *Look I am doing something new, now it emerges, can you see it?* This seems a bit odd, given that they are more than likely still in Babylon and Cyrus is little more than a rumour on the horizon. It is not possible to see this liberation with their eyes and experience in their lives but they can see it with the eyes of faith. Everyone else can see disaster continuing - except the men and women of faith.

43:19b-20. The new thing that God is doing is the thing they least expected to happen - to have lives filled with hope again and to have a future in which they could believe. The deeds are new but the God is the same. He is the deliverer and liberator of his chosen people. It is by means of a journey through the wilderness that they will be set free, just as were their forebears. The beauty of the prophecy can be seen in the transformation that takes place as they journey along in hope.

The person without faith will see a wasteland, a barren desert, but the child of God will see a road in the wilderness. There will be rivers flowing where dry creek beds were once common and the wild animals will line up to honour God as they pass through. All this comes at the hand of God for he gives water to those who thirst. He has saved them and shapes them.

Verse 20 is worth noting: *The people I have shaped for myself will broadcast my praises.* This is a truly "evangelistic" act by God. The people of Israel, having been freed from captivity, will tell of the glories of God to all and sundry. Having been set free, they are to go out and make sure that the pagan world around them knows of the greatness of God and come to believe in him.

The Hebrews were imprisoned in Babylon. That was their captivity. If we are to take this text and relate it to our own lives today, what would we make of the idea of a captivity? In what ways are people captivated and enslaved today? What might it mean for our own lives? And what kind of liberation do we (the world) need?

How can we proclaim to the world the true freedom that comes with being a son and daughter of God?

How do we find the path through the wilderness and what does that path look like?

The Text and the Gospel

Most scholars today would agree that this story was not originally a part of the Gospel of John. It was added at a later stage though its exact provenance cannot be established. There were traditional stories about adulteresses and it may well be that Jesus used one or more of these or that they were popular in the early Church. We simply do not know. What we can say for certain though, is that it has from the very early days of the Church, been accepted as a part of the canonical Gospel of John and there is no reason why it should be read any differently from the rest of that wonderful book.

JOHN 8:1-11

This is a beautiful story and the Jesus that is shown here is as loving and as compassionate as any of the accounts of his ministry among sinners. But there are some questions we might like to ask ourselves as we ponder its message.

We should ask ourselves why the authorities bring this woman to Jesus in the first place. If she had already been tried then she would have stood under condemnation and that sentence would not have been able to be changed by an itinerant preacher. But it may well be that this incident took place after the Romans had taken away the authority of the Jewish courts to sentence a person to death and so while she might have been found guilty, they could do nothing about it.

What is probably going on here is that they are trying to trap Jesus (8:5). If he declares the woman to be innocent he will stand accused of breaking the clear commandments of Moses and so will himself be accused of sin. If he says she is guilty and so should be stoned to death, he will be in breach of the laws of the Romans and so he could be reported to them and punished by them.

Then we have the problem of just what Jesus is saying. Is he saying that no one can pass judgment unless they themselves are sinless? This would be such a liberal interpretation and it would mean that no one could be judged.

I suspect that what Jesus is really doing is warning the people about becoming caught up in over zealous righteousness for the laws of God. They were all fired up about this sin and a bit like in the story of Phinehas (who was much admired in Judaism of this time. Cf. Numbers 25:6-18) they wanted to purge the community of sin that could destroy them. It may well be that there was a problem with an interpretation of the Law and they took the case to Jesus. Jesus deals with them as he would with overzealous defenders of the dignity of the law and not as men who have the sanctity of the Law at heart. They are not interested in whether or not she is repentant, whether there are any extenuating circumstances or the state of her soul. All they can see is the broken law and they want their version of justice. Jesus, with his comments in verse 7 (*let the one among you who is guiltless cast the first stone*) seems to be saying that those who stand condemning the woman ought to look at their own motives and make sure that these are driven by a love of God and a love of the sinner rather than by their own objectives. Jesus never says she is innocent. He simply offers her the possibility of repentance and the chance to begin again.

Some notes on the text:

- The woman would have been a married woman. Adultery in the Law was always concerned with the unfaithfulness of the wife and not with the affairs of a husband and his unmarried women.
- She was clearly guilty as the law demands that there must have been two witnesses apart from her husband. No mention is made of the man she was with. We know nothing of what kind of life she was having with her husband or any of the circumstances surrounding the action. All we have are the raw facts of the case. WE can, however, guess at how humiliating this must have been for the woman, especially once she was dragged through the town and the courts.
- Leviticus 20:10 decrees that the death penalty be given in cases of adultery while Deut 22:21 declares that they must be stoned to death. This would have been the normal sentence in the time of Jesus though the Pharisees also adopted strangulation.
- Verse 7 makes it clear that the writer of the story strongly suspects the motives of the Scribes who bring this woman to Jesus.
- We do not know what Jesus wrote on the ground. A tradition that goes back to St Jerome is that he wrote down the sins of the accusers. Others quote Jeremiah 27:13 *Those who turn away from you shall be written on the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.* The most likely thing is that he was doing what was common for the Jews. He was doodling in the dust. There are many examples in Semitic writings showing how men would sit around drawing lines and pictures in the dust when they were in earnest and heated conversation.
- Jesus asks whether or not they are free of sin. He is in reality asking (husband, lover, witnesses and possibly the judges) whether anyone involved has mixed motives in what they are doing with this woman.
- The whole scene ends with the departure of those who condemn the woman and the encouragement of Jesus to the woman: *neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*

In what ways can being overly zealous have a negative impact on our ability to preach the Gospel to the wider world. Can we think of any examples of this?

In recent decades, our understanding of sin has changed enormously and people seem to be less and less concerned about feelings of guilt. Can this story be seen as meaning that if a person does something that he or she does not believe to be a sin, it is not a sin? Does it mean that no one should be accused of being in sin?

The compassion and merciful love of Jesus is so powerfully in evidence in this story. Talk together about both of these gifts — compassion and mercy - and how they have the potential to change the lives of people. Look at how we might show compassion and mercy in our own lives and just how we might as a Church give people an experience of these gifts.

How does the way Jesus dealt with this woman offer us comfort and peace?

We have now come to the end of our Lenten exercises and are about to launch into Easter. What have we discovered throughout our studies? Are there things that with which we have been challenged that we hope to explore further in our own lives? Are there areas in which we would like to work for change, both in ourselves and in our faith communities? What are some of the things that we have discovered over the last five weeks that will help me move into the Easter celebrations with a renewed heart and with a true sense of humble repentance?