



**SERMON NOTES FOR CHURCH LEADERS
FOR USE DURING LENT 2016**

40ACTS 2016

WEDNESDAY 10 FEBRUARY TO SATURDAY 26 MARCH 2016

40ACTS THEME 2016: JESUS AT OUR TABLE

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WELCOME TO 40ACTS

What is 40acts?

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice. Traditionally we mark Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent were a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

40acts is a generosity challenge which encourages people to approach Lent differently.

During the 40 days of Lent, 40acts participants are invited to take part in 40 simple acts of generosity which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2016. The acts are wide-ranging but are all designed to explore what it means to be generous in a practical way.

The key is that small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big change to our communities, to our churches and, ultimately, to our world. A movement of generosity.

How to use these notes

These seven sermon outlines are designed to help your church explore generosity by sharing ideas and biblical principles that underpin the Easter message. We've chosen not to provide fully scripted sermons, but instead have provided the key ingredients, allowing you to add the anecdotes and the detours that will work best for your congregation

Complementary materials

Lent is a period when people can be especially sensitive to spiritual values. It's an opportunity for people to meditate on Christ's generosity; reflect on the meaning of daily being with Jesus and on the significance of the cross; and celebrate his resurrection. These 'Jesus at our table' sermon notes can be used alongside the 40acts Together small group resources (sign up at

www.40acts.org.uk). In a small group setting, people can examine a specific meal with Jesus, from the temptation in the desert to the Last Supper. The small group study questions aim to build into one essential question: what does sitting at a table with Jesus mean? The studies help us to examine this question by looking at Pharisees and seekers; outcasts and outsiders; his followers and, ultimately, ourselves.

These materials are a gift from Stewardship. Be blessed.

All biblical quotes are taken from NIV unless otherwise stated.

An introduction to 40acts theme 2016: Jesus at our table

Sitting at table to eat in Jesus' time was a sign not just of possible friendship but of acceptance into a totally new, restored relationship. Today, sharing food still signifies the same underlying principle: generosity in relationships. This is the focus of this seven-week Lenten study.

Jesus ate with sinners and with church leaders; he ate with thousands and with a child. He invited everyone in and accepted all invitations. Table fellowship meant friendship, peace, acceptance and unconditional love: community. The gospel message reverberates with this theme: from the preparation of a table in Psalm 23: 5 *'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows'* to the provision of our daily bread (Matthew 6:11), to Jesus eating with Peter on a beach after the resurrection (John 21).

In the present-day celebration of Communion, we still eat with Jesus. Table and meal fellowship with Jesus isn't just fast food. It was and still is soul food. These meal times were and are today an expression of Jesus' mission. As he states during a meal in the home of the chief tax collector Zacchaeus, *'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost'* (Luke 19:10).

And he did this in so in many ways and places, but especially at tables.

WEEK ONE: COMMUNITY

→ Key idea:

Jesus wants us to be in community with him

→ Key Bible feature:

The most detailed account of Jesus' desert temptation is found in Matthew 4:1-11.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Why start a series called 'Jesus at our Table' by looking at a time in Jesus' life when there was a complete absence of food? Jesus came so we can eat in fellowship with him, but his ministry on earth both begins and ends without food. After his baptism he immediately faces 40 days without food and his ministry on earth is completed on the cross, parched for water and offered sour wine vinegar by Roman soldiers. His ministry is framed by food's absence;

the lack of fellowship he bore for us so we may have eternal peace with him, the Father and the Spirit.

The perfect community of the dove (the sign for the Spirit), the Father's words and the Son during the baptism is followed by its apparent absence in the desert. Alone in the desert Jesus can only have community with the Father through the word. The word becomes his community. He quotes it for an answer to all three temptations and Satan is forced to leave. What happens next?

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matthew 4:11)

The arrival of a heavenly community on earth whose purpose is to attend to the tested Jesus. Angels come and give community, and then Jesus begins to preach. His kingdom has begun on earth and he is once again in community.

The test Jesus faced in the wilderness had one purpose: to tempt him to worship something or someone else besides God the Father. Its purpose was to break the community of God the Father, Son and Spirit. This close relationship centres on each loving and adoring the other. They infinitely seek one another's glory and so each is unmeasurably happy.

'I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.' (John 17: 4-5)

Jesus left the beauty of heaven to enter the wildernesses of earth. He left so we could have fellowship with him; a generous relationship where we serve him and the people around us because that is what we have been created for: to *'worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness'* (Matthew 4:10 MSG).

So when Satan tempts Jesus to turn away from glorifying God, Jesus faces this test the only way possible: by quoting scripture to each of Satan's three temptations. Jesus is so in tune with God he uses the one weapon he knows will defeat the evil one: the word of God.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Satan's weapon is hunger. Everyone is hungry in one way or another and it is that hunger that can lead us to be tempted.

Satan's three temptations are not unlike the tests we face today. From placing our own needs above others to the desire to assert our status in society or accumulate worldly power, we are all tempted to worship something besides God. These tests show us how and what we worship. Anything other than God as the source of our worship is an idol. The Hebrew word for idol is gullulim, which literally means 'dungy idols'. It appears in Leviticus 26:30 and Ezekiel uses the word 38 times, beginning at 6:4. When people create idols they ultimately worship their own excrement. Idol worship is the ultimate self-centeredness.

So how can we stop our hearts creating idols? Jesus shows us: by feeding on the word of God.

Jesus answered, *'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."* (Matthew 4:4)

What cleanses and renews our hearts is the word. Jesus meditated on and loved the word and used it throughout his life and teaching on earth.

Paul makes this point time and again from his quotes of Old Testament scriptures to his insight on how the word transforms our mind and hearts, our internal community. Romans 12 begins:

'Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.'

The Greek word for mind here is nous. It means the whole of our minds and hearts. Our complete self. That is Jesus' focus: us. He wants us to be in community with him. And we do this through the word of God. This is the bread of life which takes away our hunger.

Application

What this could mean for us...

When we feed on the word, we not only renew our own minds but we become good news for our communities. This week, let's use the start of Lent to feed on God's word and pray for our communities – our church, our families, our workplace, our schools, our neighbours. Use the 'soul food' God has provided to overcome the divisions or distractions that might exist in our communities – the

things that pull us away from community with God and with each other.

Allow our prayers to lead us into generous actions to bless others, build community and build his Kingdom.

Additional resources

1. Video clip: 'Building Community'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NjOjLsYab4

This suggested video clip (without words) gently illustrates the idea of building community, e.g. the importance of welcome, inclusion and communication. If you want to show just a small section, e.g. to stop the clip after around 1 or 2 minutes, there are suitable break points to facilitate this.

2. Focus poem or psalm

Psalm 119:89: *Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.*

Use Psalm 119 as a basis for worship. The psalm is designed to sing of and about God's word. It underlines that the only thing we can take to heaven besides our relationship is the word of God. It is eternal and firm.

3. Hymns and songs

'O Word of God incarnate' by William Walsham How (1823–97)

'Seek ye first' by Karen Lafferty (1972)

'Behold the Lamb who bears our sins away' (The Communion Song) by Keith and Kristyn Getty and Stuart Townend (2007)

'Hungry (Falling on my knees)' by Kathryn Scott (1999)

'You say to us, "Seek my face"' ('One thirst and hunger') by Jeremy Riddle (2011)

'Everlasting God' ('Yesterday, today and forever') by Vicky Beeching (2002)

'In the name of the Father' ('Our God saves') by Paul Baloche and Brenton Brown (2007)

'Speak, O Lord' by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend (2005)

4. Prayers and liturgy

(Written by Marie Birkinshaw)

Prayer of approach

God, our hope, as we gather now to worship you, fill us with anticipation and prepare us by your Spirit. Be the

first thought in our hearts and help us to be conscious
of your direction.
Strengthen us for service,
Nourish us with the bread of life,
Transform us for mission.
In the name of Christ we ask this.
Amen.

God's Word in the wilderness

When our route is confused and we look for
clarification

Your Word is a lamp to our feet

When our vision is impaired and we seek a way
forward

Your Word is a light to our path

When we experience temptation and trust in the
mirage

Your Word is a lamp to our feet

When we gaze into the darkness and wonder where to
place the next step

Your Word is a light to our path

When we need to take our bearings and the compass
is unsteady

Your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path

Jesus: the Living Bread

Living Father God, who sent your Son to the world to
be the bread of heaven and to raise us to life on the
last day, feed and revitalise us with this bread; nourish
us with all goodness and sustain us that we might
always serve you. By the grace of our Lord and Saviour
Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you in the
unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

WEEK TWO: PRAYING AND SHARING

→ Key idea

Jesus shows us how to feed others

→ Key Bible feature: feeding of the five thousand *John 6:1–13*

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing those who were ill. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, 'It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!'

Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, 'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?'

Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, 'Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.' So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

A hungry throng of people and a small boy's lunch. No wonder Andrew was worried... *'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?'* (John 6:9). Philip had already expressed his doubts: *'It would take more than half a*

year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!' (John 6:7). Earlier the twelve came as a group to Jesus and asked him to send the crowd (around 5000) away. All they see are the impossibilities: a remote place; a large and hungry crowd; the lack of bread; the need for a half year's wages. They see massive disappointment coming.

But then a small boy comes forward with his two small fish and five small barley loaves and offers them to Jesus. He is nameless, and probably from a poor family. We can assume this because barley is the poorest of breads – those who could afford no other grain ate bread made of barley.

After having the crowd sit on the grass (5000 men, women and children), looking up, Jesus prays, he gives thanks. Then the food all goes out. Everyone is fed; the people have their fill; leftovers are gathered and nothing is wasted from the small boy's generous act.

The boy's generosity works with Jesus' power to create more than enough. He empties out his basket and Jesus multiplies it without limit.

How far can a small act go? Further than we can dream or imagine. That is the answer to Andrew's question: become like a child, and act in faith and hope with whatever you have in your hands.

Questions are important in this passage. Jesus asks Philip the first question: 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' Jesus never asked a question without knowing the answer. John tells us that Jesus knew what he was going to do and that he was testing Andrew and other disciples. What was he testing? Their faith; their ability to see the miracle in every little act. The boy offers all he has in hope and expectation that Jesus will use it, while all Andrew has to offer is his lack of faith.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

We see this view of hope clearly stated by the Apostle Paul in Romans 4:18–21. Abraham has been promised that he will have a child in his extreme old age. Here is hope defined:

'Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old

– and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.’

Abraham is at once like the disciples and our little boy. He sees the impossibility of his situation, like the disciples, and yet ‘he did not waver through unbelief’. He was certain that God would fulfil his promise. He is like the boy, rich in faith and hope. The word ‘hope’ in the Greek means not what we think of hope being today – a possibility. In the Greek the word originally means the certainty of what will happen: not might, but will.

Our boy was filled with imaginative faith in what his Saviour would do for him and others around him, and he wasn’t disappointed. Jesus fills everyone in the feeding of the 5000 men, countless women and children: ‘all ate and were satisfied’ (Luke 9:17). In the multiple leftovers, twelve baskets of broken bread, there is the promise of more to come. The boy empties his basket into Jesus’ hands; however emptiness is not a static deadness in this context but the possibility of multiple, overflowing, riches.

Application

What this could mean for us...

In order to receive this gift of faithful hope, we must first empty ourselves of doubt. Like Abraham, we need to hold in balance the reality of the situation alongside the absolute certain hope of an eternally loving God.

The boy empties his basket; gives all his food to Jesus. He represents what we should all be: empty of ourselves, childlike in faith and obedience, a servant of the master. This is what Jesus desires us to do: to give what we have to others in need and he will faithfully fill us to overflowing, again and again.

By giving all away, our boy is filled: expectations fill him; wonder fills him; hope – biblical hope – fills him. When we give what we have away, dynamite happens. And this is dynamite that builds, feeds and multiples.

Do you have faith that Jesus will work wonders through the smallest of acts? This week why not share food with a friend who may need someone to listen to them, with a homeless person or with a work colleague? Share a story of generosity with someone, maybe share this story and pray in hope that Jesus will multiply it.

Additional resources

1. Video clip: ‘What is 24:7 prayer?’

www.24-7prayer.com/videos/animation

Scroll down this link to find the third video, ‘What is 24:7 prayer?’ This suggested clip provides an example of shared prayer. It uses someone’s idea of how to explain 24:7 prayer using pens, paints and stop-motion photography. There is a suitable break point after 2 minutes if you prefer to use a shorter clip.

2. Focus poem or psalm

Psalm 96:8: *Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.*

Use Psalm 96 as a basis for worship. This is a song of God’s salvation, of his greatness and his glory – a song of universal joy when he comes to rule in justice. It is a true and total offering of praise.

3. Hymns and songs

‘Jesus the Lord said, I am the bread’ (Anonymous)

‘Come, sinners, to the gospel feast’ by Charles Wesley (1707p;–88)

‘Jesus, stand among us at the meeting of our lives’ by Graham Kendrick (1977)

‘Bind us together’ by Bob Gillman (1977)

‘He brought me to his banqueting table’ (‘His banner over me’) by Kevin Prosch (1991)

‘My hope is built on nothing less’ (‘Cornerstone’) by Jonas Myrin et al. (2011)

‘Everyone needs compassion’ (‘Mighty to save’) by Reuben Morgan and Ben Fielding (2006)

‘Hear the call of the kingdom’ by Stuart Townend and Keith and Kristyn Getty (2006)

‘All I have and all I am’ (‘Build this house’) by Nathan and Lou Fellingham and Mike Busbee (2005)

4. Prayers and liturgy

(Written by Marie Birkinshaw)

Prayer of approach

We meet as the family of God – brothers and sisters joining with one purpose to love and worship the Lord. We meet as the family of God – adopted children of Abba, our Father.

We meet as the family of God – with Jesus as the centre, our Lord and Saviour, Christ.

We meet as the family of God – united as one by the power of the Spirit.

In love and praise we gather together today – we meet as the family of God.

Prayer of confession

Gracious God,
Where we have failed to realise that we are part of your salvation plan,
Forgive us and renew us with your hope.
Where we have omitted to pass on your life-giving love to others,
Forgive us and renew us with your hope.
Where we have not handled your word of truth correctly,
Forgive us and renew us with your hope.
Restore us now with your peace, O God.
Forgive us and renew us with your hope.
Amen.

Choosing to serve

This day, may we hear the word of the Lord,
This day, may we stop doing wrong and learn to do right,
This day, may we seek justice and help the oppressed,
This day, may we defend the cause and plead for those in need,
This day, may we choose to serve the Living Lord.
Amen.

WEEK THREE: LOVING GENEROUSLY

→ Key idea

Those who are forgiven much love much

Loving generously is costly, so how can we love in a way which overlooks hurts and our own needs to meet those of others? In this third week of 40acts we turn to the source of generous love to find the answer.

→ Key Bible feature: Jesus anointed by a sinful woman

Luke 7:36–50

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.'

Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.'

'Tell me, teacher,' he said.

'Two people owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.'

'You have judged correctly,' Jesus said.

Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great

love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.'

Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

The other guests began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Jesus eats with everyone – no one is excluded – and this is nowhere more evident than in Luke 7:36-50. Simon the Pharisee has invited Jesus into his house to share a meal but things don't quite go to plan. A sinful woman follows Jesus into the house, approaches him and anoints him with her tears and perfume. This perfume was pricey and probably represented her life savings. She would have needed this to live after men no longer found her desirable. She entered Simon's home uninvited and would not have been made welcome – except by Jesus.

Simon and his guests are very interested to meet and talk with Jesus. They must have heard stories of his teachings and miracles; his wisdom and love. They had to be asking themselves – as they do at the end of this narrative – 'Who is this who even forgives sins?'

These men would have known of this woman. Some may have even visited her. As a sinner she would have been viewed as untouchable and socially unacceptable. She would certainly never have been invited into Simon's home. But Jesus' love draws her in and she enters.

Probably, in shock and surprise at her actions, no one speaks to her. No one but Jesus. And his opening words are directed not to her but to the Pharisee whom he gently calls by name. This appears to be a way of inviting Simon into a story of love and forgiveness.

Generous love produces more love. Jesus uses a story to help Simon see beyond the surface to the source of this woman's extravagant generosity. Jesus' story is about two men who owe a debt. One owes ten times what the other owes. He puts this question to Simon: 'Two people owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?'

Jesus' question goes to the heart of the matter: that acknowledging our debts have been repaid produces love and gratitude. Simon knows where this is going and responds with 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.' The suppose is Simon's hedging: he can't yet bring himself to the point of saying surely.

Jesus picks up on this and goes on to contrast the welcome he received on entering Simon's house with the way in which the woman responded to him. No doubt this comparison would have been very uncomfortable for Simon.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Jesus says two things directly to this woman. Firstly, he says:

'Your sins are forgiven.'

In this setting Jesus' message to everyone at the table is clear: he is claiming oneness with God the Father. As shocking as this woman's behaviour would have been, this statement had to be more shocking. They had come to find out who Jesus was. They were now in no doubt about his claim: Sonship with God the Father.

Secondly, he says:

'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

He tells the woman, and us, it is all about faith. This woman, a prostitute, is so healed by her faith that before Jesus pronounces forgiveness she uses her body, her tears and hair that used to be used sinfully, to offer him worship. She demonstrates how faith saves and heals. loves and cleanses.

Application

What this could mean for us...

Those who are forgiven much love much. This passage shows us how loving generously is a gift. Love that is able to absorb hurt and overcome barriers comes not through one's own power but with Jesus' spirit. It is not, and it never should be, just you but Jesus in you (Colossians 1:27: '*...which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*') when we lovingly forgive those who have hurt us or reach out to those who are in need. This week, think about ways you can express to others something of the love and acceptance you've received from Jesus.

The woman gives away her best – the expensive perfume – as an expression of her gratitude. How can we give our best to those around us this week?

Or put yourself in Simon's shoes – you want to invite Jesus into your life but you're still very uncomfortable with what that might mean for you. Maybe it's being generous to someone you wouldn't normally think of being generous to; maybe it's overcoming the awkwardness of telling someone how much you appreciate them or are grateful to them for their help in the past. Whatever it may be, take the step from Simon's 'supposing' to the faith of the woman who knew her debts had been forgiven. Allow the love and acceptance to flow out to others.

Additional resources

1. Video clip: 'Life is like a cup of coffee'
www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3NgzQ9Pcsg

This suggested video clip is a three-and-a-half-minute inspirational word story to show that living simply and loving generously is often the best route to happiness. To convey the full point, it probably needs to be played in its entirety.

2. Focus poem or psalm

Just as long as I have breath, I must answer, 'Yes' to life;
Though with pain I made my way, still with hope I meet each day.
If they ask what I did well, tell them I said, 'Yes' to life.
Just as long as vision lasts, I must answer, 'Yes' to truth;
In my dream and in my dark, always: that elusive spark.
If they ask what I did well, tell them I said, 'Yes' to truth.
Just as long as my heart beats, I must answer, 'Yes' to love;
Disappointment pierced me through, still I kept on loving you.
If they ask what I did best, tell them I said, 'Yes' to love.
Alicia S. Carpenter (1930–90)

3. Hymns and songs

'Amazing grace! How sweet the sound' by John Newton (1725–1807)
'Fill Thou my life, O Lord my God' by Horatius Bonar (1808–89)

'You are my King' ('I'm forgiven') by Billy James Foote (1998)

'God in my living' ('Everything') by Tim Hughes (2005)

'The way is open' by Graham Kendrick (2006)

'This we shall do' by John L. Bell (2005)

'Christ's is the world' ('A touching place') by John L. Bell (1989)

'O taste and see' ('Taste and see') by Dave Bilbrough (1999)

4. Prayers and liturgy (Written by Marie Birkinshaw)

Prayer of approach

Jesus Christ, you are the fountain of life and the source of generous love.

As we meet in worship may we offer to you now the best that we can bring.

May we be open to your healing, saving and cleansing Spirit,

May we know your forgiveness, full and free, so

That we might set aside our hurts and selfish desires

And become channels of your peace and joy.

Prayer of confession

You speak to us in the language of love,

Forgive us where we have taken that love for granted.

You speak to us in the language of redemption,

Forgive us where we have ignored your sacrifice.

You speak to us in the language of renewal,

Forgive us where we have preferred our old ways.

You speak to us in the language of truth,

Forgive us where we have been deceitful.

You speak to us in the language of faithfulness,

Forgive us where we have been disbelieving.

Let us hear your Word afresh today,

And help us learn to speak your language. Amen.

Love is made complete

In believing the Word in Jesus Christ,

Love is made complete among us.

In living our lives for Jesus Christ,

Love is made complete among us.

In being baptised in Jesus Christ,

Love is made complete among us.

In rising to new life in Christ Jesus,

Love is made complete among us.

WEEK FOUR: LIVING GENEROUSLY

→ Key idea

Generosity has to be practised daily

→ Key Bible feature – Daily bread

Luke 11:1–4

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.'

He said to them, 'When you pray, say:

*"Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation."*

John 6:30–35

So they asked him, 'What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

'Sir,' they said, 'always give us this bread.'

Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Jesus lived a generous life on earth. He healed and taught; he asked and listened; he mentored and coached. He allowed people to fail: to fail at tasks, to fail themselves and finally to fail him. And then, in his last miracle on earth, he forgave those that were torturing him.

Jesus lived generously and he shows us how to 'follow in his steps' (1 Peter 2:21) in Luke 11:1-4. Here he responds to his disciples' request about learning how to pray.

In a busy life, when things are moving fast and sometimes too fast, when we are spent from the daily grind of living, slowing things down so we can live life fully and generously is essential. That is what the disciples wanted and this is how Jesus taught them. He taught them the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is daily bread.

Prayer empowers and enriches lives because when we say Jesus' words in prayer we are acknowledging the power of the Father's name and his kingdom (your name, your kingdom come), we are asking for what we need to live fully (our daily bread ... Forgive us our sins...) and then we are accepting our place in a wider community (Give us ... Forgive us for we also forgive ... lead us not into temptation).

This is what we need to do daily; it is our daily bread: acknowledge; ask; accept.

40acts operates within this principle of a daily discipline: we acknowledge God's goodness to us, we ask for and receive our daily bread, and we share this with those around us – our community. Through a daily act of generosity we offer others a little bit of Jesus.

Generosity is a discipline in both receiving and giving. It has to be seen, practised and lived out on a daily basis. We see this principle both in the Lord's Prayer and in the Old and New Testaments. In Exodus 16 God fed his people in the desert daily with manna from heaven. The people ate daily and could not hoard the food past a day, as a physical reminder that we are to depend on and communicate with God daily. In John 6:30–35 Jesus speaks of the manna in the wilderness but points out that it is God who provides the true bread and that he – Jesus – is that bread.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Luke frames the Lord's Prayer narrative with two direct teachings by Jesus. One is in the house of Mary and Martha and the other is with the disciples. The core message of both teachings is need or necessity. Luke 10 ends (vv. 38–42) with Jesus eating at the sisters' home:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's

feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'

'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'

Martha probably had a full house and wanted, as was the custom of the time, to ensure all her guests were well fed and cared for. She approaches Jesus asking him to get Mary to help her. Jesus cares more at this moment for Martha than he cares for Martha's food. In rebuking her gently, he points out that Mary has judged correctly what's more important. Her refreshment comes from sitting at the Master's feet and listening. This is her daily bread: listening, hearing, absorbing the word. It is the one meal needed.

Immediately after this, in Luke 11:5–10, Jesus tells them a story of someone who is in need of bread for an unexpected visitor. It is late at night and the neighbour will not come to the door and share bread. Jesus closes the story with this directive:

'I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. So I say to you: ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.'

Our daily bread is what we and those around us need every day. We are to ask and keep asking; we are to both receive and give. And we are to sit prayerfully at Jesus' feet in community with him and his people.

Application

What this could mean for us...

We need to be Marys in a world crying for us to be Marthas. How do we do this? By acknowledging in prayer that God is a good Father; by asking for and receiving his daily bread – what we need in our lives – and by accepting that God designed us to be in community with him and others.

Sometimes the daily can become the mundane in our eyes. However, if we start to look with fresh eyes on the

people we meet and the places we're put in every day, amazing opportunities open up before us, both to give and to receive. One of the challenges this week is to somehow connect with a person you see daily. It may be a colleague or a barista; a shop assistant or a bus driver. Find a way to encourage them – with a smile, a sincere thank you for what they do – or find a way to bless them. Acknowledge them as being part of your community and offer them some daily bread.

Additional resources

1. Video clip: 'The Gift of Generosity'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhmmeFuzGRk

This suggested video clip is a word story that looks at generosity and giving as blessings of life. It is feasible to break the clip part way through (around 1:20) for a shorter illustration.

2. Focus poem or psalm

Psalm 23:5: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

Use Psalm 23 as a basis for worship. This psalm is one of the best-known and best-loved pictures of God as our daily provider and sustainer. It also shows God as the perfect host. In the Old Testament to eat and drink at someone's table created a bond of loyalty and deep friendship. God is our host, day by day by day, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

3. Hymns and songs

'Help us to help each other, Lord' by Charles Wesley (1707–88)

'Dear Lord and Father of mankind' by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–92)

'O Jesus, I have promised' by J.E. Bode (1816–74)

'Let us break bread together, we are one' arranged by Stuart Townend (1991)

'Now may the peace of the Lord' ('The Peace') by Graham Kendrick (2010)

'Your grace is enough' ('This is our God') by Reuben Morgan (2008)

'For every song' ('You are') by Ben Cantelon (2007)

'We are a shining light' ('Do something beautiful') by Graham Kendrick (2002)

'All I am, Lord' ('All of me') by Tre Sheppard (2004)

4. Prayers and liturgy

(Written and selected by Marie Birkinshaw)

Prayer of approach

Jesus is the bread of heaven for eternal life.
In this time of worship, may we find his sustenance and strength, and by the leading of the Holy Spirit, may we come ready to receive from Father God. Let our hearts and minds resolve to offer him thanks and praise.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The example of Jesus

Day by day, Jesus taught and enlightened,
Day by day, Jesus healed and enabled,
Day by day, Jesus asked and listened,
Day by day, Jesus mentored and disciplined,
Day by day, Jesus forgave and Jesus freed.
Day by day, help us, Lord, like you to be ready to serve those who are in need.

On the cross, Jesus gave his life as an offering,
On the cross, Jesus offered forgiveness to all,
On the cross, Jesus bore all our suffering,
On the cross, Jesus paid the price of all our sin,
On the cross, Jesus overcame selfishness and greed.
Help us, Lord, to take up our cross, and by the power of your resurrection, to offer life to those who are in need.

Prayer by Richard of Chichester

Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
For all the benefits Thou hast given me,
For all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me.
O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,
May I know Thee more clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly.

WEEK FIVE: THE BEST, NOT THE SCRAPS

→ Key idea

Generosity saves us from ourselves

→ Key Bible feature: The rich man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19–31

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

'The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

'But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony..."

'He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

'Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

'He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Key sermon framework

Now we've reached the fifth week of 40acts you might be experiencing '40acts fatigue'. Maybe you are behind in the daily challenges or have missed some completely; perhaps you are thinking, 'I've done enough'. Here's a story from last year's 40acts campaign which might encourage you.

The second act of 2015 was Chinwag, which was all about getting to know your neighbours. A man who hadn't spoken with his neighbour for ten years felt he should knock on her door and try to reconnect with her. But he put it off. Then a few days later he resolved to carry out the challenge anyway and so knocked on her door but there was no answer. He noticed that the post was stacking up; he knocked again but there was still no answer. Worried, he called emergency services. They came and it turned out she had had a stroke and was unable to move. His timely intervention meant she was rushed to hospital and cared for.

Although this man was running late in carrying out the challenge, he still did his best and God used it for good. Romans 8:28 (NRSV) tells us that '*all things work together for good for those who love God*'. All things. So, even if you have missed a few days of 40acts, no matter. Trust that God will work through what you do as long as you try to do your best with and for him. That is this week's theme: the best, not the scraps.

Introduction

Generosity is the antidote to selfishness and self-centeredness but in the story of the rich man and Lazarus we see a table where Jesus isn't present; where there's no generosity; where not even the scraps are shared.

Luke 16:19–31 opens by setting the scene: a nameless rich man who lives in luxury and a beggar called Lazarus who lies at the rich man's gate, sleeping rough, covered in sores. The rich man must have seen him every day. Any visitors, including the rich man's family, would have seen Lazarus too, maybe even stepped over him as they entered the mansion. They lived in luxury every day, yet they did nothing to help the man in need at their gate. In not doing anything, they were breaking the Mosaic Law, because God loves the poor.

Proverbs 19:17 says, '*Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.*'

The Hebrew word for 'poor' here is dal. It does not just mean financially poor but includes those who are poor or thin in resources, like time, energy, friends or monies. This is who God wants us to give to. God desires us to recognise those around us who are dal. They share our table. Just like Lazarus, they may only appear to ask for our scraps, but we should go beyond scraps and give our best.

The phrase send Lazarus is said twice by the rich man after he is placed in torment. This unnamed man still sees Lazarus as someone less deserving, someone to be ordered to serve. The rich man's torment derives in part from his refusal to see Lazarus as a man rather than a sore-ridden beggar, a thing, at the gate of his home. Self-centred, he can see nothing but his own needs and desires. Only generosity could have freed him from himself.

The rich man calls on Abraham to have pity on his torment but it's too late to undo his life's work (or lack of it), as Abraham reminds him. This echoes the words of John the Baptist in Luke 3:8: *'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.'*

He goes on to remind the crowd what is expected: *'Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same'* (Luke 3:11).

Exploration

Further links we can make...

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus shows us where a total lack of generosity leaves us, but what does giving your best look like?

A teacher was once asked, 'I am trying my best but I am so tired I am not 100%. Am I doing my best?' The teacher's response: 'My friend, I don't know what 100% looks like. I know that you are doing your best with what you have.'

In Romans 12:9–21 (MSG) Paul describes the best:

'Love from the centre of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

...Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. ...Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink.

Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.'

This is a tall order but it gives us a framework for how to operate. The passage closes by describing generosity as getting 'the best of evil by doing good'. By giving our best we not only avoid the trap of self-centredness; we allow God to release the hardness of our hearts and minds.

Application

What this could mean for us...

In week three we thought about giving our best as a response to God's love and forgiveness. This week is about discipleship – giving our best as followers of Jesus: rethinking the way we see those around us and recognising who God wants us to give to.

Jesus uses the parable to warn what happens when we don't 'see' others and are blinded by our own self-centredness.

Are we prepared to share the food at our table – our resources, time, skills, money – with others in need?

The daily discipline of the 40acts challenges encourages us to grow in generosity. But as each daily act builds toward Easter, when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, we are reminded that he rose so that we would rise with him. In Ephesians 2:5-7 (NASB) the apostle Paul tells the church that *'even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.'*

Our transgressions were our death; Jesus is our life and we are raised up with him today, right now. That is why we act with kindness towards others: not because of anything we can do for ourselves but because he has done it for us. Released from our dead, blinding self-centeredness, we now see. Follow his lead and see a Lazarus today. Be Jesus' best.

Additional resources

1. Video clip: 'Offering time'
www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzUNnlwkEGE

Although primarily aimed at youth groups, this one-minute song and printed word animation challenges

the viewer to offer their time to others, to build bridges rather than burning them down.

'You are a refuge' ('Arms') by Ben Atkins (2012)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EziG28YKYA

A song with words and line sketches to illustrate God's welcome to all.

2. Focus poem or psalm

May we speak each day according to Thy justice,
Each day may we show Thy chastening, O God;
May we speak each day according to Thy wisdom,
Each day and night may we be at peace with Thee.

Each day may we count the causes of Thy mercy,
May we each day give heed to Thy laws;
Each day may we compose to Thee a song,
May we harp each day Thy praise, O God.

May we each day give love to Thee, Jesu,
Each night may we do the same;
Each day and night, dark and light,
May we laud Thy goodness to us, O God.

(A variant of a prayer from the Carmina Gadelica).

3. Hymns and songs

'Take my life and let it be' by Frances Ridley Havergal (1836–79)

'Be Thou my vision' – Ancient Irish melody

'May my life' ('Sacrificial love') by Dave Bilbrough (1990)

'You are a refuge' ('Arms') by Ben Atkins (2012) [see video clip above]

'Give me a heart of love' ('Lend me your heart') by Claire Hamilton (2010)

'Who, O Lord, could save themselves' ('You alone can rescue') by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin (2009)

'When I call on your name' ('Love came down') by Ben Cantelon (2006)

'Hear the call of the Kingdom' by Keith and Kristyn Getty and Stuart Townend (2006)

4. Prayers and liturgy

(Written by Marie Birkinshaw)

Prayer for approach

Gracious Spirit, as we draw near in worship, we ask that you will fill us afresh and release us from all hardness of heart and mind; that as we share at the Lord's table today we will offer up afresh our resources, skills, time, money and energy – giving, through you,

Most Holy Spirit, the very best that we can bring to God. Free us from all self-centredness and help us to reach out in love to those that you would have us serve. Amen.

Living Lord Jesus,

You call us to be a shining light – a city standing on a hill.

Let your fire burn in us for justice, peace and joy.

You call us to be the salt of the earth – to purify and add flavour.

Let your cleansing power stir us into action.

You call us to wash one another's feet – in humility and service.

Let your example show us how to stand alongside the weak and the broken.

You call us to proclaim your Kingdom – God's salvation here with us.

Let your Holy Spirit give us the best words for each moment.

You call us to a life of costly service – and to carry our cross daily.

Let your patient love sustain us in times of challenge and difficulty.

You call us to be a holy nation – a royal priesthood.

Let us, your people, walk in your light and dwell in your love.

Amen.

Sacrifice of Praise

Gracious God,

Through your Son,

You showed us how much you love the poor and the broken,

You showed us how much you reach out to the outcast.

Gracious God,

Through your Son,

You showed us that generosity is the antidote to selfishness,

You showed us that perfect love casts out all fear.

Gracious God,

Through your Son,

Help us to be the hands, hearts and feet that work to do your will.

Help us to give our lives to you as our sacrifice of praise.

WEEK SIX: OPEN INVITATION

→ Key idea

Everyone is invited to Jesus' table

→ Key Bible feature: Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1–10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'

Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Zacchaeus' story is a long-standing favourite of Sunday school teachers. It makes a good story, doesn't it? The small man who climbs a tree to see Jesus. But, of course, there's more to this than meets the eye.

Zacchaeus was a wealthy man and a chief tax collector in Jericho, a city at the base of a long steep road leading up to Jerusalem. Its location would have made it a place of business and commerce. Great wealth passed through these streets. Zacchaeus would have had a hand in taxing the people who lived in and went through this city. The Romans probably protected his practice, allowing him to keep a percentage of what he collected. So he must have

been greatly despised by those around him for working for the Romans and for taking a cut for himself. Most people probably viewed Zacchaeus as a thief.

More than that, it was generally accepted that tax collectors valued money more than people, their culture or their nation, even putting money above their relationship with God. So Zacchaeus was a leader within this group which operated 'outside' the norms of acceptable society.

But Jesus isn't put off by appearances. Early in his gospel account, Luke records that Jesus was despised by the religious elite for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners. They complain to his disciples in Luke 5:30: *'Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?'* Jesus replies, *'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'* Jesus looks for signs of change in people, for those who are willing to live differently. He invites himself to visit Zacchaeus' house. He doesn't wait to be asked because he knows Zacchaeus wouldn't expect to share a table with him. Instead, he says, *'I must stay at your house today'*, making it easy for Zacchaeus to say 'yes'.

Zacchaeus was 'lost' and Jesus found him and shares a table with him. The man who felt self-conscious about his height now gets up from the table no longer aware of his stature and speaks. He makes a public declaration of his new intentions and practically demonstrates, by redistributing his wealth to the poor, that Jesus has made a real difference to his life. He stands tall.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost''

Jesus' words here, 'because this man, too, is a son of Abraham', indicate not just transformation but restoration. Despised and rejected by his community because of his past, Zacchaeus is now restored to his culture and people and, above all, to God. Forgiveness is complete, restoration enjoyed, and in response Zacchaeus delights in expressing his gratitude through generosity – not just promising to repay what he's taken illegally but repaying it four times over and giving half his possessions to the poor – overflowing generosity...

In the previous chapter, Luke recounts the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. This tax collector stands in

humility apart from others in the temple, never looks up, and prays in verse 13 as he 'beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" The Greek word translated as 'mercy' in Luke 18:13 is *lilaskomai* in the Greek. This word *lilaskomai* means the total washing of sin and the total acceptance of the sinner before God. This prayer has become known as 'the beggar's prayer' and illustrates how we cannot do anything to earn God's love and grace. Then we meet the living, breathing example of this tax collector in the next chapter – Zacchaeus – ready to acknowledge his sin, he's desperate to encounter Jesus and then is transformed.

Application

What this could mean for us...

From Pharisees to tax collectors, from sinful women to little children, from disciples to Roman soldiers, Jesus invites everyone to eat with him. Despite having no literal table of his own, he creates his own community wherever he is present. As we eat with him, we are all being transformed. We – all of us – were lost, and if he had not sought us out, we would still be lost.

We have no 'right' to be invited to join him and in a sense we are all beggars crying out for mercy. So how might that affect how we see and respond to others? This week, think about the openness of Jesus' invitation – are there people you would not normally spend time with or include in an invitation for coffee, lunch or a trip somewhere? Might you look beyond your usual circles for opportunities to bless others?

Jesus teaches total forgiveness, and acceptance. This is the living generosity of God.

Additional resources

1. Video clip: 'The lost sheep'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyWZeOlaRo4

This short video clip retells the parable of the lost sheep without using words. It has been suggested as an alternative way of illustrating how Jesus seeks the lost and brings them salvation.

OR

'Doing life generously'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgKNIGWfKh4

A short clip on giving and tithing to get people thinking as a response to Christ's invitation to salvation.

'Generosity'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=r68oHmXoH6U

This longer clip explores why Christians give and what their giving leads to.

2. Focus poem or psalm

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
Love said, 'You shall be he.'

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee.'

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat.

'Love bade me welcome' by George Herbert (1592–1633)

3. Hymns and songs

'In Christ there is no east or west' by John Oxenham (1852–1941)

'Go forth and tell' by J.E. Seddon (1915–83)

'Brother, sister, let me serve you' by Richard Gallard (1977)

'Bring heaven to earth, Lord' ('We are blessed') by Andy Flanagan (2007)

'Who is my mother?' by Erena Murray (1992)

'You give rest' ('I will say') by Nathan and Lou Fellingham and Mike Busbee

'God of justice' ('We must go') by Tim Hughes (2004)

4. Prayers and liturgy

(Written by Marie Birkinshaw)

Prayer of approach

Jesus invites everyone who listens to come to share at his table. He does not judge us by our appearance or status. He comes to seek and save the lost. He offers mercy and acceptance. As we meet together and join

in worship, may the Lord's salvation come upon this house. Amen.

Love comes from God

Dear friends, let us reach out beyond our boundaries and by breaking down barriers.

Let us love one another for love comes from God.

Dear friends, let us reach out to welcome the unloved and 'unlovable'.

Let us love one another for love comes from God.

Dear friends, let us reach out as Jesus did, by sharing love with others.

Let us love one another for love comes from God.

Let us reach out to all with the love of God.

Transforming love

Where humility is in short supply, God grant us servant hearts,

As we seek to be followers of Christ.

Where many live in the darkness of injustice, God make us beacons of hope,

As we seek to bring the light of Christ.

Where we encounter barriers and stagnation, God make us channels of positive change,

As we seek to share your transforming love.

Where there is division and dissension, God make us communities of blessing,

As we seek to restore your harmony and peace.

WEEK SEVEN: COMMUNITY IN HARD PLACES

→ Key idea

Jesus thirsts for us

→ Key Bible feature: The crucifixion

Luke 23: 26, 32–43

As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus...

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.’

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, ‘If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.’

There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’

But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’

Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’

Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’

Key sermon framework

Introduction

We began this series with Jesus thirsty and tempted in the desert. We end it with Jesus once more thirsting as he suffers on the cross.

Two narratives of the crucifixion – one from the Gospel of Luke and the other from the Gospel of John – share a number of images and themes. Our focus will be on the theme of community and the image of thirst. Each trope is able to stand on its own, but together they point to why Jesus came from heaven to earth: he thirsts for us.

The criminals being crucified next to Jesus represent two approaches to community: one is totally self-centred and wants Jesus to serve his own purposes – to escape death. Only his internal world matters; he is a community of one. The other criminal sees Jesus for who he is: a saviour who invites all who believe into the kingdom. Jesus promises him a place at the kingdom’s table where they will be in community for ever.

In this hardest of places – on the cross – Jesus still intercedes on behalf of his persecutors and continues to offer forgiveness regardless of whether he is disregarded, mocked or accepted as saviour.

John’s Gospel does not mention the thieves, but does develop in detail the image of Jesus’ thirst.

Jesus, seeing that everything had been completed so that the Scripture record might also be complete, then said, ‘I’m thirsty.’

A jug of sour wine was standing by. Someone put a sponge soaked with the wine on a javelin and lifted it to his mouth. After he took the wine, Jesus said, ‘It’s done... complete.’ Bowing his head, he offered up his spirit. (John 19:28–30 MSG)

After being scourged and mocked, rejected and betrayed, Jesus is crucified. After hanging for about three hours, he is suffering severe dehydration and his broken body is at its end. He asks for a drink by whispering out ‘I’m thirsty.’

And here is the final blow. The Roman soldiers who are on crucifixion detail have a jar of sour wine – vinegar – standing by the cross because they know that the crucified always thirst. They know they will cry out for a drink and in the last taste of life they offer the cruellest joke of all: vinegar that can only increase thirst.

Masters of death, Romans soldiers were not just experts in killing the body. They also knew how to kill the spirit. They deliberately kept standing jars of sour or bad wine to serve the afflicted. Jesus' life ends with the bitter taste of hatred on Golgotha. But even at his death, Jesus comes to serve the finest of wine: he serves forgiveness to all. He knows the Romans and the Jewish priests are all spiritually thirsty. Jesus' last miracle is to forgive them all. He offers them all living water. Why?

Jesus loves the thirsty. He experienced deep want on the cross and speaks to those in despair. This is the mission of his life: to die for everyone so everyone could live.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

In one of his last teachings Jesus talks about what will happen to the sheep and the goats when he returns in glory. He invites the 'sheep' who cared for him to enter the Kingdom of heaven. They ask:

'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'
(Matthew 25:37–40 MSG)

The 'solemn truth' is that on this Good Friday, we must reflect on Jesus' thirst. We can see the sour wine jar; the hardened soldiers; the haters; the vinegar. But he wants us to look at things differently. He wants us to see him in the overlooked and ignored, this and every day. Jesus loves the lost; he thirsts for them.

Application

What this could mean for us...

The Gospel of John frames the beginning and the end of Jesus' ministry with the image of thirst. From the wilderness and desert surrounding Jericho to the cross outside the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus thirsts. This thirst can only be for one thing: us, his creation, his people; our salvation. He thirsts for communion with us and for us to be in community with him.

If we are to be in community with him, that will sometimes lead us into hard places. Places where we need to forgive even though forgiveness is difficult; perhaps places where we need to serve even though service may be costly to us. Over the last six weeks, the 40acts challenges may have

challenged you in different ways and some, no doubt, will have been easier than others. It may be worth asking yourself which ones you found more difficult and why. How have you seen God working through the challenges you've done? Has your understanding of generosity altered as a result? Do you now see things differently and has this changed the way you give to others in your day-to-day life?

Additional material for Communion

'Do this in remembrance of me.'

These words of Jesus, along with the Lord's Prayer, are probably the most repeated throughout history. They are not a prayer but a command. Jesus gave only two directives for churches: one was that churches should baptise and the other was that they should celebrate Communion.

In Communion we remember Christ and his last meal with his disciples before the crucifixion. We remember his words to them 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' Similarly, he asks them to share the wine, saying 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.' The bread of life and the true vine.

Much later, after the crucifixion, on the road to Emmaus two of his disciples speak with him but they do not recognise him until the moment they sit at a table and Jesus breaks bread with them. Then they see and they remember.

40acts is a daily act of remembrance. In the challenges we've done we've offered to others each day a generous action in remembrance of Jesus. We have acted during 40acts in generosity because of our relationship with him. He is the bread of life. Life comes from being at his table. Act and give; eat and live. And remember.

Additional resources

1. Video clip: 'Forgiveness'

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUcNd2XkPDA

This short inspirational clip offers some general word thoughts about what forgiveness is and what it involves. It is suggested by way of introduction.

2. Focus poem or psalm

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone

Is numb'd too much for hopes or fears;
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimm'd with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk:
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk;
My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see:
Yet rise it shall—the sap of Spring;
O Jesus, rise in me.

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul
Or cordial in the searching cold;
Cast in the fire the perish'd thing;
Melt and remould it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me.

'A better resurrection' by Christina Rosseti (1830–94)

3. Hymns and songs

- 'I heard the voice of Jesus say' by Horatius Bonar (1808–89)
'See, what a morning' (Resurrection hymn) by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend (2003)
'Once again' ('Jesus Christ, I think upon your sacrifice') by Matt Redman (1995)
'Here is love' arranged by Matt Redman (2004)
'God I look to you' by Jenn Johnson and Ian McIntosh (2010)
'Gentle Jesus, Risen Lord, we come to your table' (unknown)
'O the deep, deep love of Jesus' by Graham Kendrick (2012)
'You chose the cross' ('Lost in wonder') by Martyn Layzell (2002)
'The greatest day in history' ('Happy day') by Tim Hughes and Ben Cantelon (2006)
'All who are thirsty' by Brenton Brown and Glenn Robertson (1998)
'Is anyone thirsty?' by Graham Kendrick (1994)

4. Prayers and liturgy (Written by Marie Birkinshaw)

Prayer of approach

As we come together, Jesus thirsts for our salvation;
As we come together, Jesus thirsts for community with us, his people;
As we come together, Jesus thirsts and intercedes for us with the Father;
As we come together, Jesus thirsts to transform our whole selves by the power of the Spirit;
Today, may WE be thirsty for our Refreshing, Living Lord.

The revelation of God's love

Jesus, revealed to us in the Gospels and witnessed by the Early Church,
You show us God is love.
Jesus, revealed to us in broken bread and wine outpoured,
You show us God is love.
Jesus, revealed to us as the bringer of good news and peace,
You show us God is love.
Jesus, revealed in new life and transforming power,
You show us God is love.
Help us to live out God's love in all we think, speak and do. Amen.

The great commandments

Gracious and ever faithful God, who in Jesus repeated the great commandments to love you and to love our neighbour, help us to offer the Bread of Life and Living Water to a hungry, thirsty world. Keep us holy and renew our minds day by day. Enrich our hearts so that we may be brought to perfection through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Acknowledgements

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Additional resources

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