

DIOCESE OF ST ALBANS

Living God's Love

LENT COURSE 2017



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Introduction

Dear Friends

In 2011, the parishes, schools and chaplaincies of the Diocese of St Albans set off on a shared journey of *Living God's Love*. From the outset, we believed that it was important for our journey to be undergirded by prayer, so we have been encouraging people across the diocese to join together in our *Living God's Love* prayer:

Living God,
Draw us deeper into your love;
Jesus our Lord,
send us to care and serve;
Holy Spirit,
make us heralds of good news.
Stir us, strengthen us,
teach and inspire us
to live your love
with generosity and joy,
imagination and courage;
for the sake of your world
and in the name of Jesus,
Amen.

As we pray these words, we ask that the Holy Spirit would inspire us – both as individuals and as God's Church in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire – with generosity, joy, imagination and courage. But what does that look like? How might our lives demonstrate these qualities? And how do these qualities reflect Christian Scripture and tradition?

This accessible course considers these questions. It can be used either by individuals or small groups, during Lent or at any time of year. I warmly commend it to you, and pray that God will use it to help us become more fruitful in our *Living God's Love* journey.

Format

This course is divided into five sessions which may be studied over the five weeks of Lent. However, the course is not intended solely for Lent and would be suitable for use at other time in the Church's year. Each of the first four session takes one of the qualities mentioned in the *Living God's Love prayer*: generosity, joy, imagination and courage. The final session looks at the context in which these qualities are set: "to live your love ... for the sake of the world".

There is probably too much material in each session to consider it all. It is intended that different people and groups will choose to focus on those aspects that help them most. With that in mind, each session is divided into a number of sections:

1. An **opening story** sets the scene and helps to put the theme into context. Some of these are the personal experiences of the contributors, while others are the accounts of famous people from history.
2. Some **comments and observations** give some definition to the quality being described and draw out some initial points.
3. A sections entitled **Christian belief** shows how the particular quality fits with the doctrines that underpin our faith.
4. Some suggestions for **Bible study** show where these ideas are explored and expanded in the Scriptures. Three Bible passages are suggested for each session, but it may be wise not to attempt a detailed analysis of them all if time is limited.
5. A **response** section gives some ideas for prayer or practical action as a result of the session.
6. Throughout each study a number of **questions** are given to guide your thinking. Again, not every question will be equally relevant to each individual or group.

Contributors

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To live your love with Generosity

Opening Story

This is from an account told by a British soldier who have been taken captive by the Japanese during the Second World War.

Further on, we were shunted on to a railway siding for a lengthy stay. We found ourselves on the same track with several carloads of Japanese wounded. They were on their own and without medical care. No longer fit for action, they had been packed into railway trucks which were being returned to Bangkok.

They were in a shocking state; I have never seen men filthier. Their uniforms were encrusted with mud, blood and dirt. Their wounds, sorely inflamed and full of pus, crawled with maggots. We could understand now why the Japanese were so cruel to their prisoners. If they didn't even care for their own, why should they care for us?

The wounded men looked at us forlornly as they sat with their heads resting against the carriages waiting for death. They had no one to care for them. These were the enemy, more cowed and defeated than we had ever been. Without a word, most of the officers in my section unbuckled their packs, took out part of their food rations and a rag or two, and, with water canteens in their hands went over to the Japanese train to help them.

Our guards tried to prevent us, shouting at us. But we ignored them and knelt by the side of the enemy to give them food and water, to clean and bind up their wounds, to smile and say a kind word. Grateful cries of 'Aragatto!' ('Thank you!') followed us when we left. An Allied officer from another section of the train had been taking it all in. 'What fools you all are!' he said to me. 'Don't you realize that those are the enemy?'

(Extract from Ernest Gordon; *Bridge on the River Kwai*)

Questions

1. What is your reaction to this story?
2. Have you experienced remarkable generosity?
3. What effect does generosity have on those who give and on those who receive?

Comments and Observations

Ernest Gordon's account raises an important question, not least to people brought up with a belief in the 'survival of the fittest'. Why should I be bothered to help anyone in need, especially if they are my enemy? The obvious thing is to leave them to die. Yet examples of generosity and compassion are admired when we hear about them.

One of the hallmarks of the first Christian communities was the practice of generosity with one another. We see an example of this in the behaviour of Jesus' disciples following the Day of Pentecost:

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Questions

4. Suppose your church decided to live like this. What would be the benefits? What would make it difficult?

The American scholar, Rodney Stark, has studied altruism and generosity in the first few centuries of the church. Having reviewed masses of ancient sources, he wrote:

The power of Christianity [in the first few centuries] lay not in its promise of other-worldly compensations for suffering in this life, as has so often been proposed [but rather, it initiated a] rapidly spreading awareness of a faith that delivered potent antidotes to life's miseries here and now! The truly revolutionary aspect of Christianity lay in moral imperatives such as 'Love one's neighbour as oneself', 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you', 'It is more blessed to give than to receive', and 'when you did it to the least of my brethren, you did it unto me'. These were not just slogans. Members did nurse the sick, even during epidemics; they did support orphans, widows, the elderly, and the poor; they did concern themselves with the lot of slave. In short, Christians created, 'a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services'.

Stark, R; *Cities of God*; San Francisco; Harper; 2006; p. 30-31

Throughout history Christians have been at the forefront of founding hospitals and schools, not just in this country but across the world. In recent decades Christians have played a major role in the foundation of hospices for the care of the terminally ill and dying. Allied to this are the numerous charities such as food banks, credit unions, youth and children's groups, lunch clubs and Street Pastors which are to be found in most areas of our diocese today. In addition a great deal of money is given away by our churches to charities – over £2.2m last year alone.

Questions

5. Would people in your community describe your church as generous? What would make them give this answer?

Christian Belief

This commitment to generous service is rooted in the Christian doctrine of creation. Theologians down through the ages have taught that God the Holy Trinity is perfect and complete in himself (Acts 17:25). They've sometimes used a rather odd word to describe this: *aseity*. This means that God doesn't need anything at all, not even human beings.

Now we know that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16) and love needs something to be loved. So God (because he is complete) *doesn't* need humans, and yet God (who is love) *does* need something to love. Isn't there a contradiction here? Well there would be if God were *one* – a single individual person. But God is a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and within the Trinity there is a perfect giving, receiving and sharing of love. So why, then, did God create the world and humankind? He did so out of his very nature of loving generosity. He desires to have a world on which to lavish his love.

So even though God is sufficient in himself, out of sheer love and generosity He chose to create the world. This same love and generosity is seen most clearly in the life, teaching, suffering death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate example of God's generosity – 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3. 16).

Questions

6. Which aspects of creation do you find the most inspiring, amazing or astonishing?
7. When you look at the created world where do you most clearly see God's generosity?
8. Where do you see generosity in the life of Jesus?

Bible Study

The Bible contains many stories about generosity, among these are:

The anointing at Bethany

Luke 14.2-9

The labourers in the vineyard

Matthew 20.1-16

Encouragement to generous giving

2 Corinthians 9. 6-15

Questions

9. What do these passages tell us about attitudes to generosity?
10. How can we learn from them?

Response

Basil the Great (330–379 AD) wrote the following:

Are you poor? There is someone much poorer than you are. You have enough bread for ten days; another has enough for one. As a good and kind hearted person, make your surplus equal by distributing it to the needy. Do not shrink from giving of the little you have; do not treat your own calamity as if it is worse than the common suffering. Even if you possess only one loaf of bread, and the beggar stands at the door, bring one loaf out of the storeroom and, presenting it to the hands lifted up towards heaven, offer [your] merciful and considered prayer.

Questions

11. What is your prayer when confronted by the needs of others?
12. What practical acts of generosity could you perform as a church and as an individual?

Conclude by praying the *Living God's Love* prayer, thinking especially of generosity.

To live your love with Joy

Opening Story

We had sat through an evening of truly excruciating Christian poetry. The convenor of our local Churches Together group levered herself to her feet to close the evening in prayer. 'We thank you O Lord that tonight in the poetry that has lifted our hearts, we have truly experienced a foretaste of the joy of the heavenly banquet that will be laid out for all people.' A loud voice next to me (it happened to be my vicar's) said: 'If heaven's like that, I'm not blooming well going!'

The idea of joy is a two edged sword for Christians. Joy is great when we really experience it. But the idea of joy can also lead some to feel pressured to appear happy when we're not, to be smiling in circumstances when that's the last thing we want to do. We can end up being 'smiling depressives' – hardly the stuff of life in all its fullness. What can we do about this?

Questions

1. When do you experience real joy?

Comments and Observations

There is, of course, quite a contrast between joy and happiness. Both of these are great when we experience them but if we stop and think about it, they are rather different animals. Happiness is perhaps an emotion that passes –how we feel at the time when we're pleased about something. It tends to be shorter term and the stuff of adverts: 'Buy this and you'll be happy'. The advertisers suggest that their product will meet our immediate needs, make life more convenient and help us to forget the challenges and difficulties we face.

In contrast joy is something rather more substantive – a deep, overflowing state of being. Joy is life-affirming and can be life-changing. It's improbably serious and not the stuff of adverts. Advertisers don't tend to say 'buy this and you will experience deep and lasting *joy*'.

Some people say that happiness and joy are all too readily confused. That happiness can't be sought of itself, it's a by-product of deciding to live not for ourselves but for others and the world around us. Joy, in contrast is what we experience when we live out values and convictions that are deep and solid and strong.

Questions

2. What makes you happy? What makes you joyful?
3. Are these the same things or different things?
4. Do you think there's a difference between happiness and joy? If so, what?

Christian Belief

The Bible makes some surprising statements about joy. Perhaps the most remarkable is found in the letter to the Hebrews which speaks of Jesus:

who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. [Hebrews 12:2](#)

This would seem an extraordinary statement to make – that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him. What could this joy be that made that terrible experience worthwhile, bearable?

The joy was that of Jesus living out his values and self to their truest end – an end that saw fallen human beings brought back into relationship with God. Our isolation from God was reversed, and our communion with God was re-established. We see this set out in various writings of the New Testament. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes of us being reconciled to God.

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. [Romans 5.10](#)

We find the same idea expressed slightly differently in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

[...] In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. [2 Corinthians 5.19](#)

In his first letter, Peter expresses the idea in terms of us having been brought close to God.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. [1 Peter 3.18](#)

Over the centuries, Christians have called this re-establishment of relationship, achieved through the cross as 'atonement' – literally 'at-one-ment'. Quite how the cross enables us to be 'at-one' with God has been a source of considerable debate.

1. For some Christian thinkers, the central aspect of the cross is that, in his death, Jesus is bearing the punishment for our sins. When Jesus died for us, he was in fact dying *instead* of us so that we could be forgiven by God.
2. Another strand of thought sees Jesus dying in solidarity with the innocent *victims* of the world, rather than in place of the sinful *villains* of the world. Jesus absorbed human violence in much the same way that a black hole absorbs light.
3. According to other theologians, on the cross Christ engages in battle with all the forces of evil, and in the resurrection he celebrates victory over them.
4. Others understand Christ's death as a demonstration of God's love for humanity – an example which we should now be inspired to follow in our own lives.

However we understand what is happening as Jesus dies, the central point is that Jesus Christ died *for us* (Romans 5.8). All this is for our benefit.

Questions

5. Christian faith is sometimes referred to as “good news”. Why is the atonement good news?
6. How would you explain to a friend what it means to be “at one” with God?

Bible Study

The Bible has a lot to say about joy. Examples include:

The lost coin, sheep and son

Luke 15

The disciples' sorrow will be turned to joy

John 16.16-24

Rejoice always

1 Thessalonians 5.16-21

Questions

7. Where does joy come from in these Bible passages?
8. Do the same things bring us joy?
9. Would people in your community describe your church as joyful? What would make them give this answer?

Response

If there is one place in the Bible where we discover the most about joy, it is in the Psalms. The following are just a few of the many references to ‘joy’ and ‘rejoicing’.

You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

Psalm 16.11

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

Psalm 30.11

Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.

Psalm 47.1

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Psalm 95.1

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118.24

Questions

10. The Psalmist wasn't afraid of expressing joy. How might you express joy? Perhaps you might try writing a psalm of your own.
11. What practical steps could you take to make your church a more joyful place?

Conclude by praying the Living God's Love prayer, thinking especially of joy.

To live your love with Imagination

Opening Story

Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech is widely recognised as the greatest and most memorable of all time. On 23rd August 1963, King stood in front of over 250,000 civil rights supporters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., while millions more watched on television. King had prepared carefully for this occasion. But as he was standing at the podium, the soul singer Mahalia Jackson called out to him to abandon his script and to tell the people about his dream. What was he to do? Stick with his pre-planned words, or speak from his imagination – addressing the imagination of the crowd – reusing a metaphor he'd employed earlier at a rally in Detroit? With great nerve, King discarded his text and spoke unrehearsed and off-the-cuff, drawing only on his experience as a southern Baptist preacher:

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a *dream* today!

Martin Luther King

Questions

1. Why do you think this speech is rated so highly?
2. Martin Luther King was a Baptist preacher. In what ways does today's preaching imagine a better world? What would that world be like?

Comments and Observations

It may seem odd to pray for the gift of imagination, since in many older Bible translations the word 'imagination' was used to mean bad things like 'pride' or 'craftiness' or 'evil scheming'. The best example of this is in the *Magnificat*, where it says 'God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts'. But in modern English 'imagination' is usually a good thing, a gift which helps us to come near to God. We shall explore some of the positive aspects of imagination in this study.

Imagination and Creativity

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

Psalm 136.16

Genesis says God made everything 'ex nihilo' – out of nothing – but it was in his mind's eye before it became a reality – and the Psalmist says God knew all about us before we were even born. The Greek philosopher, Plato, argued that God had 'ideas' or 'archetypes' in his own mind which are the blueprints of everything in the world.

We humans are creative in the same way. We too can imagine new ideas 'out of nothing', which we can then translate into reality, so being imaginative and creative usually go together. Sometimes new ideas they come out of our imagination in a dream. James Watson, the pioneer of genetics, realised what the structure of the DNA molecule must be after he had had a dream in which he saw a double spiral staircase. Coleridge wrote his poem *Kubla Khan* from a dream, and it remained unfinished because an annoying person woke him up!

The process of creating something new always comes from imagining it in advance. This is true both in creating things and, as we saw in Martin Luther King's famous speech, in imagining a better world.

We often use the word 'inspiration' to mean this kind of imagination – and the word itself suggests that it is an aspect of God's own creative Spirit working in us – the creativity he gave us when he made us in his own image.

Questions

3. We can be creative in many different ways: cooking, gardening, photography, to name just three. In what ways are you creative?
4. How can human imagination draw us closer to God?

Imagination and Compassion

God has so arranged the body that all the members should have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.

I Corinthians 12.25f

Compassion means ‘suffering with’ – sharing the pain that inflicts others. When people show pity and care for others we say they are ‘humane’; when they fail to show any feeling for the suffering others we call them and ‘inhuman’. Compassion is another important part what makes us human – another aspect of God’s image in us. But compassion depends on the imagination, because only imagination enables us to put ourselves in the place of another, to share their experience. As the native American proverb puts it, ‘never judge anyone until you have walked two moons in their moccasins’.

Pathological murderers and torturers have a total inability to empathise or imagine the pain they inflict. But we all can fall into this inhumanity in less dramatic ways. Sometimes it is because we are simply overwhelmed by the amount of suffering in the world and persuade ourselves we can do nothing to help it. Sometimes it is because group or social pressures override our imagination and forbid compassion. A famous experiment by Stanley Milgram in 1963, in which people were ordered to give electric shocks to others, showed just how ready most of us are to suppress our compassion and obey.

Compassion all too easily fades under pressure, but that is exactly when Christians are especially called to keep their imagination and compassion alive; and many of the greatest saints – including Alban – were willing to suffer and die themselves in order to save others.

Anyone who has entered the darkness of another’s pain, loss or bewilderment, and who has done so without the defence of a detached professionalism, will know the feeling of wanting to escape, of wishing they had not become involved. Caring is costly, unsettling, even distasteful at times. The valley of deep shadows in another person’s life frightens us too, and we lack the courage and the constancy to enter it.

A.V. Campbell: Rediscovering Pastoral Care

Questions

5. How easy do you find it to imagine what it’s like to be someone else? When have you imagined yourself in someone else’s shoes?
6. What makes it difficult to keep imaginative compassion alive? What might you do to stop yourself falling into “inhumanity”?

Christian Belief

God's limitless imagination can know and include the experience of every human being that ever lived. All through his life Jesus showed the ability to imagine what it was like to be the people who were shut out of his own society. He shocked the religious people by associating with 'unclean', untouchable people who were supposed to be hated even by God – people like the blind, deaf, disabled, lepers, Gentiles, Samaritans, prostitutes. Jesus said that on the contrary, God loved and cared for them especially, and wanted them in his kingdom. Jesus literally put himself in their place, and risked condemnation for doing so.

But even more than that, by being born for us Jesus put himself in place of us all. Paul says he 'emptied himself' of his divine life in order first to be born as one of us. Then he took that sharing to the very end, by sharing also our suffering and death. As St Irenaeus says, 'He became in all things as we are, so that we may come to be as he is'.

Many people say they can't believe in God because of all the suffering in the world. But God doesn't just sit on a big throne in the sky calmly surveying all that happens below. The birth, life and death of Jesus mean that God has shared all human experience, and still shares it – but also promises ultimately to bring us through it to victory and resurrection.

Questions

7. Why does it matter that Jesus shared our human experience?
8. How does this affect your Christian faith?

Bible Study

Although the Bible does not say much about 'imagination' it does speak of creativity, of compassion and of Jesus putting himself in the place of human beings. Here are examples of each of these:

Bezalel and Oholiab are skilled in their crafts

[Exodus 35.30-35](#)

Jesus shows compassion to a widow

[Luke 7:12-16](#)

Jesus sympathises with our weakness

[Hebrews 4.14-16](#)

Questions

9. What do these Bible passages teach us about imagination?
10. Would people in your community describe your church as imaginative? What would make them give this answer?

Response

We are all called to pray for others and to bring their needs and cares before God. To do this effectively we need to put ourselves imaginatively in their place, to understand and feel what they are going through, and to ask God into that situation and experience. This is a way of turning our instinctively selfish concern away from ourselves to God and others.

Some forms of meditative prayer also rely strongly on imagination. Ignatius of Loyola recommended his followers to read scripture prayerfully by imagining themselves in the scene being described, and asking Jesus to speak to them through it. Many find this and similar methods of contemplative prayer very enriching, and a valuable source of guidance in daily living.

Questions

11. What is the role of imagination in your prayer life?
12. Imagine what your church might be like twenty years from now. What steps would you need to take *now* to make the vision a reality?

Conclude by praying the *Living God's Love* prayer, thinking especially of imagination.

To live your love with Courage

Opening Story

Some years ago I was driving Bishop John Austin, formerly Bishop of Aston and then Assistant Bishop of Leicester, to a staff meeting and couldn't but notice his persistent cough. Not long afterwards it was no surprise when he was diagnosed with cancer. I know he was afraid, not least as he contemplated the future and the impact on his family. In particular, the hoped for years of retirement began to recede rapidly. And yet what John displayed to the world was an amazing courage rooted in his profound trust in God. Praying each day the prayer of Charles de Foucauld that begins:

Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all...

John displayed that Christian courage that transfigures fear with hope and trust; a courage seen in the lives of so many as they overcome fear to live with confidence.

It is the same courage that sustains Christians across the world in the face of persecution and conflict. To live, for instance, in Iraq is for many Christians a frightening experience. Many have fled this ancient homeland of Christianity which contains many of the major Old Testament sites. Less than a fifth of the 1.5 million Christians who were there a few years ago remain. The threat of violence and death is real, and yet in the face of that there is the courage to continue to be present and to be faithful.

Léonie Duquet was born in France in 1906 and grew up as a Roman Catholic. Taking her vows as a nun she served in international mission and in the 1970's she worked in poor neighbourhoods, in and around Buenos Aires, in Argentina. Along with her sister nun, Alice Damon, she experienced the start of the repression of opposition that arrived with the military junta who took power in 1976. This repression was marked by the 'disappearance' of dissidents, either to prison, torture, or the grave. To speak out against this was equally dangerous and initially there was silence. This silence was broken by a group of mothers searching for their missing children. Gathering in the Plaza de Mayo their numbers grew and in October 1977 237 mothers added their names to a newspaper letter asking for the truth about their children. Léonie Duquet and Alice Damon courageously associated with this group, offering both personal and spiritual support. In December, along with others, they were abducted, tortured and murdered by the regime. However, it was their courage, along with all the other 'Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo', which would eventually bring the regime down.

Questions

1. Think of a Christian who you have known who has shown courage. What was it about their courage that connected with you? What can we learn from them?
2. What do you fear?
3. Can you share with the group a time when God has given you the courage to overcome your fear?

Comments and Observations

The fourth value of our *Living God's Love* prayer, courage, is at heart about the over-coming of fear through choosing to act; to endure; or to speak out. All too often it is confused with bravery which is the ability to confront pain, danger or intimidation without fear; although courage can result in bravery. To have courage is to discover with the cowardly lion in the *Wizard of Oz* who believes that his fear makes him inadequate, that courage means acting in the face of fear, which he does frequently.

As Christians in this country and in our Diocese the challenges are often more modest. Yet we all live with our fears, not least in relation to how we live our faith and witness to Jesus Christ with our friends and in our neighbourhoods. It is the fear of standing out from the crowd; the fear of doing what is right when others demur; the fear of giving of ourselves in service; the fear that our faith won't be strong enough to answer the questions of others; and so much more. We are like Moses when called by God from the burning bush to lead the people of Israel who says:

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? ... What if the Egyptians do not believe me or listen to me.

Exodus 3.10 and 4:1

The fears are real but so also is the promise of God to Moses and all his people that He is with us; that He will equip us with the words and the resources that are needed. As a result we have the courage to overcome our fear and to fulfil God's call. It is the same strength that comes to us through prayer and discipleship that enables us to have the courage to face illness and dark times when they come to us.

The church today is called to be courageous. This is not bravado, not even bravery, just the confident living out of our following of Jesus that comes from placing our trust in the God of love, whose love drives out all fear.

Questions

4. What would a courageous church be like?
5. Would you describe your church as courageous? Why would you give this answer?

Christian Belief

The Biblical understanding of courage is always about the over-coming of fear. Often there is no word for courage used but rather the exhortation not to be afraid. Where it is in the new Testament it is the Greek *tharreo* with its meaning of being confident or courageous. It is what Jesus says to the disciples when he comes to them walking on the water. The disciples are fearful, thinking that it is a ghost but Jesus says to them: *Take courage! it is I. Don't be afraid* (Matt 14:27). It is also what the Lord says to Paul after he is threatened by the crowd in Jerusalem: *Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.* (Acts 23:11).

In the Old Testament there is the use of the Hebrew word *chazaq* with its meaning of 'to strengthen, prevail, be strong, courageous'. It is a courage whose origin is always from God. Once again it is about courage in the midst of fears and dangers. It is the encouragement not to give up. God is in the chaos and storms of life, generously giving each seeker the courage, strength, stamina, endurance, perseverance, and fortitude needed for every situation. For instance Psalm 27 has a whole list of oppressors and threats, but concludes: *Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart (have courage) and wait for the Lord.*

Again and again, however, in Scripture the focus on courage comes through the command not to be afraid; not to have fear. More often than not this is followed by the reason not to be afraid which is God himself. Once again Psalm 27 sums this up in its opening verse: *The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?* In Isaiah 41:10 the prophet gives God's words of comfort to the Israelites in exile in Babylon: *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God.* In other words, whatever the challenges and whatever the fears, we can have courage because God is with us. It is the same invitation to courage that the angel Gabriel offers to Mary: *But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favour with God'.* It is the knowledge that God is with us that equips the disciples to proclaim Jesus to the world; that enables Paul to speak in market place and public square.

At the heart of the Christian understanding of courage is the witness of Jesus and the courage he displays in His obedience to the Father. In particular, as we see him agonising in the Garden of Gethsemane, he is strengthened by an angel from heaven:

'Father, if you are willing take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done. An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.'

[Luke 22:42f](#)

Just as Jesus had the courage to be faithful unto death, so we too are equipped to have the courage to take up our cross and follow him (Matt. 16:24).

Questions

6. When you think of Jesus, do you think of him as being “courageous”? What difference does it make to follow a courageous Messiah?
7. How does your faith in God give you hope and confidence??

Bible Study

The following Bible passages all have things to say about courage:

Joshua is urged to be strong and courageous

Joshua 1.6-9

We are more than conquerors

Romans 8.35-39

Jesus calls Peter to step out of the boat

Matthew 14:25-31

Questions

8. What do these Bible passages teach us about courage?
9. Where does our courage come from?
10. How might you discover greater courage?

Response

One of the things that seems to cause Christians to be most fearful is sharing their faith with others. We are afraid that people will rebuff us; that we won't know what to say and how to say it; that it will damage our relationship with family and friends. Perhaps, however, we need the greatest courage in our calling to make new disciples.

Jesus sending out the twelve disciples knows they won't find it easy; that there will be opposition; and that the early church will experience persecution. However, He promises them that even at the hardest times they don't need to fear because the words will be given to them.

At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your father speaking through you.

Matthew 10:19-20

The same call to courage is at the heart of the great commission (Matthew 28:19-20). We are to make disciples of all nations; to have the courage to witness to Christ by word and deed; a courage that is possible because of Christ's promise that he is with us 'always, to the very end of the age'.

Questions

11. Why do many of us fear 'making new disciples'? What would our Christian witness be like if we were not afraid?
12. What practical steps could your church take towards making new disciples?

Conclude by praying the *Living God's Love* prayer, thinking especially of courage.

To live your love with For the Sake of the World

Opening Story

Back in the late 1980s, I lived as part of the Lee Abbey community. Lee Abbey is a Christian holiday and conference centre on the north Devon coast ‘where Exmoor meets the sea’. Each week around a hundred guests would come and stay for a holiday, retreat or a chance to get back in touch with God. Lee Abbey is unusual in that it is not run by a paid staff, but by a resident community of Christians who commit a year or more of their lives to work, worship and live together.

During my time there, each summer we would put on a musical show based on a Christian theme. We would rehearse before supper and in the evening put on the performance. It seemed important that the rehearsal should be done privately, behind closed doors and away from the eyes of the guests, so that in the evening, it would be fresh and exciting.

But on one occasion, four people slipped in at the back to watch the rehearsal and nobody thought to ask them to leave. The surprising thing about these people was that they were non-practising members of another faith. Why they had come to visit a *Christian* conference centre, I never found out. Anyway, they sat there quietly and watched us practice. By the end of the rehearsal, three of the four had come to faith in Jesus.

So what had brought about this sudden conversion? Well, it turned out that it wasn’t the *content* of the musical, despite its Christian teaching. Rather they had come to faith simply by watching and seeing the joy, the care and the love that we shared with one another.

I was reminded of the writing of the Roman historian Tertullian. He reported that the Romans, on seeing the lives of the first Christians, would exclaim: ‘See how they love one another!’

The story finishes at breakfast the next day. One of the women who had come to faith came down to breakfast. She had no Bible knowledge and really didn’t know the Christian jargon. Despite that she spoke enthusiastically about her new faith, describing it as “just like being born again”.

Questions

1. When visitors come to your church, what qualities would they see? Think about the evidence for your answer.
2. Most people claim that their church is welcoming. But what would a *loving* church be like? How is love given and received in your church?

Comments and Observations

In his letter, the Apostle James writes:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

[James 2.14-17](#)

As it is with faith, so it is with love. We are called to be loving not simply because it feels nice to be surrounded by affection and warm feelings. Rather, our love should make a difference to those around us, meeting practical needs. As we say in our *Living God's Love* prayer: "for the sake of the world".

Throughout history the Church has been at its best when it has sought to address human need. We think of men and women – motivated by their faith – who have worked to eradicate slavery, reform prisons, found schools, oppose apartheid and liberate those who are trapped by poverty, addiction or abuse.

Sometimes this 'social Gospel' of 'good works' has been set in opposition to the vital task of evangelism and bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ: or as *Living God's Love* describes it, 'making new disciples'. But the dichotomy is a false one. Jesus both *preached* 'good news' and *brought* 'good news' to the people he met. He did this through healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, feeding the hungry, forgiving the sinful and offering eternal life to the penitent thief hanging alongside him on the cross.

Of course Jesus Christ wasn't simply 'good news' to the people of the first century. He is still 'good news' today. So where might that 'good news' be seen? What are the places where Christian love needs to be put into practice for the sake of the world? Where might generosity, joy, imagination and courage make a real difference?

It could be in the life of the person with mental illness who feels isolated and unloved. It could be in the chaotic existence of the single parent constantly struggling with family demands. It could be in our communities that are divided along ethnic, religious and political lines. It could be in the global inequality that still leaves billions without clean water and sufficient food. It could be in the destruction of our planet's fragile ecosystem by a world that constantly demands more.

Addressing these issues may not immediately 'make new disciples'. But just as the Romans exclaimed at how the Christians loved one another, it would be a real testament to the church as 'good news' is people today exclaimed:

'I don't yet share your faith; but I'm pleased there are Christians in our world.'

Questions

3. Which people, places or issues to you have a special concern for?
4. Many individuals, churches and organisations are working to bring God's love to the world. You might like to list some examples. Which do find you inspiring and encouraging?
5. Are people in your community pleased that the church is there? What would make them give this answer?

Christian Belief

We all have within us a capacity, maybe even a need, to love. Most of us love certain, special people such as our families and friends. Some of us have a love for a special place. Maybe it's where we spent our childhood, a favourite holiday destination, or a garden in which we've toiled day season after season to make into a place of tranquillity and beauty. Other people love some possession which may be the latest electronic gizmo, a family heirloom, or an album of photographs that conjure up memories of happiness.

But what happens when the thing (or person) we love lets us down, or gets spoiled? How much harder it is to love then! It's much more difficult to love family and friends when they become old and unwell, and they demand constant care and attention. It's not nearly so easy to love that special place when we return one day to find it dirty and litter-strewn; not bathed in golden sunshine, but drenched by a miserable drizzle. It's much harder to love your treasured possession once it's become broken and tarnished, or when the pictures have fallen from the album and become dog-eared at the bottom of a dusty cupboard.

It's easy to love when everything's rosy, but is that really 'love'? Is it really 'love' if it's just an admiration for what's healthy or beautiful or precious or worthy? Anyone can claim to love the film star, the perfect garden or the painting by Michelangelo. But surely love is proved to be really love when it goes on cherishing the person even when they're losing their faculties, appreciating that place despite the dirt and drizzle, and treasuring the photographs even as they're deteriorating with age. When love does these things, it shows itself to be truly genuine.

That, of course, is what God's love is like. God's love embraces fallible, weak human beings like us. We might sometimes feel ignored and spurned, but we're never ignored or spurned by God. We might sometimes feel unthanked and unnoticed, but God always notices and appreciates. We might have messed up, failed and fallen short, but God never give up on us.

This is a fundamental truth that we find time and again in the Bible.

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

[1 John 4.10](#)

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

[Romans 5.8](#)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

[John 3.16-17](#)

Questions

6. How have you experienced God's love?
7. Does knowing that you are loved by God make a practical difference to the way you live? If so, in what ways?

Bible Study

In each of the following Bible passages we see love demonstrated in practical ways:

Ruth resolves to stay with Naomi

[Ruth 1.16-18](#)

A dead girl and a sick woman

[Mark 5.21-43](#)

Choosing seven deacons

[Acts 6.1-7](#)

Questions

8. What are some of the ways in which love is shown?
9. How are these Bible passages relevant to our lives today?

Response

Looking back over the whole of these studies we have seen how the *Living God's Love* prayer asks that God would make our lives – and His Church – attractive and relevant in our world today. However, as St Augustine said:

'Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you.'

So as well as praying our *Living God's Prayer*, we need to decide what it is we are going to do. Then, having decided, pray that God would give us the generosity, joy, imagination and courage to carry it out.

Questions

10. How has this course changed your view of God, yourself, the Church and the world?
11. In the light of this whole course, what *one* practical step will you take personally?
12. In the light of this whole course, what *one* practical step could your church take?

Conclude by praying the *Living God's Love* prayer, thinking especially of how God's love can make a difference to our world.