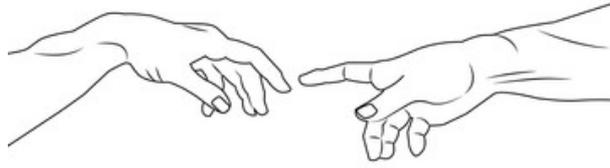


The Mystery of God – Lent course



Introduction

Our Lent course delves into the mystery of God, seeking to rediscover what it is that draws us so deeply in our search for God. We will follow Jesus through each week's Sunday Lenten readings, allowing Him to draw us, in love and wonder, into the mystery of God's plan of salvation.

In 2017, the Mission Theology Advisory Group (MTAG) of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), ran a mission project for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was called 'the 95 missional theses project' and every day for 95 days before the anniversary on 31st October 2017, the group issued a statement, based on the five marks of mission, about the sort of Church we might believe in.

The statement which, overwhelmingly, got the most attention, was:

"We believe in a Church that is more concerned with the mystery that is God than with its own success".

In this study, we start to explore the Mystery that is God.

Each week there are conversation starters and things to think about, prayer and engagement with Scripture and a section entitled "*Entering into the Mystery*".

Week 1 - The Mystery of Good and Evil

Readings

- Deuteronomy 26.1-11
- Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16
- Romans 10:8b-13
- Luke 4:1-13

Starting out - Why is there good and evil in the world?

When people say that they cannot believe in God and that the Christian faith makes no sense, it's often because they can't get their heads round the presence of undeniable evil in the world. Human beings are capable of such terrible things and good people often suffer at the hands of others who use their power to hurt and dominate. Why does God let the sun shine on good people and bad people alike? (Matthew 5.45) Why do the wicked people prosper at the expense of others? Why doesn't God do something to force the world to be more equitable and just?

These questions are not new and are part of an age-old reflection on why the world is as it is, what God has to do with the mystery of Good and Evil, and what our part is in all this.

When Jesus teaches his followers how to pray, he specifically includes the words:

*Lead us not into temptation (the time of trial),
But deliver us from evil.*

This makes the connection between a spiritual path of obedience to God's will which actively seeks out the good and learning to guard against choosing evil, because we all get tempted and tested. On this first stage of our Lenten journey, we need to think about our freedom to choose what kind of path we will take through our human life. What sort of obstacles lie in our way? As we begin Lent, we journey with Jesus into the struggle with these difficult questions.

Something to talk about – Good and Evil

- How would you start a conversation with someone who was worried about the evil in our world?
- What would a world full of goodness and mercy actually look like?

Something to think about – Temptation

The early Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria, wrote an extensive meditation on the Lord's Prayer. This is what he writes about the petition to keep us from temptation and evil:

Quote

“It is when a man succumbs in the moment of tempting, I take it, that he enters into temptation, being held in its nets. Into those nets the Saviour entered for the sake of those who had already been caught in them, and in the words of the Song of Songs, looking out through the meshwork makes answer to those who have been already caught by them and have entered into temptation, and says to those who form His bride: Arise, my dear one, my fair one, my dove. To bring home the fact that every time is one of temptation on earth, I will add that even he who meditates upon the law of God day and night and makes a practice of carrying out the saying, A righteous man's mouth shall meditate on wisdom, has no release from being tempted. How many in their devotion to the examination of the divine Scriptures have, through misunderstanding the messages contained in Law and Prophets, devoted themselves to godless and impious or to foolish and ridiculous opinions?”

Origen
On the Lord's Prayer

Origen imagines that when we give in to temptation to evil we are caught like a fish thrashing about in a net. We are trapped and struggling and our freedom to live abundantly is stopped. Jesus, though, can free us from the net. Origen also reminds us that being religious people does not stop us from being tempted and falling into evil ways, in fact, it might be our very piety that makes us arrogant and full of pride, taking the Scriptures and using them as if we owned them, using them to prop up what we want, and not listening to what Jesus tells us through the gospels.

Questions

- What temptations have you had to resist in your life?
- Where do you see people today being trapped by evil?
- How do you think people might use the Scriptures to hurt others?
- How would you explain to another person how Jesus releases us from the nets of temptation and evil?

Some scripture to ponder – God’s Protection

*Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.*

*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.*

*Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honour them.
With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.*

(Psalm 91. 9-16)

In Luke’s gospel, it is the Tempter who quotes this Scripture at Jesus. The temptation put before him is to test whether God’s promise is literally true. If Jesus puts himself in harm’s way, then God must come to save him or this Scripture is a lie. Jesus refuses, saying that God is not to be tested in this way. But Jesus has already said that we must live by God’s word. So why does he refuse to test God with Scripture? Or are we to understand that Scripture nourishes us differently and more deeply?

Questions

- What do you think this psalm tells us about God’s love for us?
- Why do you think Jesus said God was not to be tested? Why not?
- Are there times where you have really been aware of God’s protection?
- Are there times when you have experienced the presence of evil?

The Mystery of God – God became one of us

One of the most mysterious things about God is that God gives us free will to decide for ourselves how to live and even to reject God's love. Yet we are also given guidance about how to choose wisely and well.

God became a human being in Jesus, just as we are. In the story of Jesus' Temptation before he begins his public ministry, we see in dramatic fashion the life choices we all must make. No matter what our circumstances, we have the power to make some choices - whether to seek out what God wants for us and find out our vocation from God, or to turn away and forge our own paths through life.

This freedom to make a choice for God and to discover God's will in our complicated world is central to discovering the value, meaning and purpose of life. Without that freedom, we would not discover anything about who we truly are, or find what satisfies us or feels like a deep sense of rightness. But such freedom carries risk. We are free to make other choices, pursue other paths, seek out power and domination of others and ignore God's call to us.

The gospels tell us that Jesus examined those choices too. We are told of those huge, glittering temptations of power and glory in the world. Jesus knows these things are possible for him. Exhausted by his denial of self, Jesus can see that path, that easy life. Yet he rejects them all, not just for himself, but because he wants to know God's vision of the world, to pursue God's mission and God's justice.

Jesus' response to the temptations offered to him shows us the way. If we really want to know why evil exists in the world, then we must look deep inside ourselves. Human beings dominate the planet. Our choices affect the fates of all our neighbours. Jesus shows us how to make choices that open up God's will for us. He shows us how to use our God-given free will to create best possible future for ourselves, by denying what is easy and turning away from the paths to evil, and destruction of ourselves and others, even our world.

And this helps us see that the one of the most mysterious things about God is that God finds the creation to be good and continues to call us, love us and bless us despite the risk that we will turn our backs, walk away and ruin the world that God has made.

Question

- How does Jesus help us understand how to seek God's will for us?

Something to pray

Loving God, source of all goodness,

help us to follow your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord,
and with him, understand and resist temptation.

Help us to put others before ourselves,
to resist the lures of power and an easy life,
to listen and reach out for your will above all.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.

Week 2 - The Mystery of God's Glory

Readings

- Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18
- Psalm 27
- Philippians 3.17-4:1
- Luke 13.31-35 or Luke 9.28-36, (37-43a)

Starting out - God gets our attention

Have you ever watched a thunderstorm approaching? Against the darkness of the thunderclouds, you might suddenly see a big lightning strike or a sheet of white light flicker suddenly and disappear. If you are looking directly at it, you might see an after-image of the intense brightness on your vision. That can be a startling and awe-inspiring experience – we see the power and intensity of nature at work.

It can be difficult to get across the idea of a transcendent experience and for many people who have had powerful and life-changing experiences of God, words simply fail them. In classical art, many representations of God and Jesus and in paintings of scenes from the Bible often show figures surrounded by haloes of brilliant light or lit with sun-rays. Other artists have used gold and silver to depict the idea of God's glory and what it might be like to look upon something heavenly rather than earthly. Similarly in today's reading about the Transfiguration of Jesus, Peter sees Jesus shining in clothes of dazzling white.

Quote

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil*

Gerard Manley Hopkins,
God's Grandeur

Something to talk about - Glimpsing God at work

- Where and when has God managed to catch your attention?
- When you look back, where do you see God at work in your life?
- What is your most memorable spiritual experience?
- When do you see God shining out from the lives of others?

Some scripture to ponder – A mysterious sign from God

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces [of the sacrifice]

(Genesis 15.12;17)

In this mysterious and spine-tingling scene, Abraham falls into a sleep as deep as that of Adam at the creation of Eve. God has promised him that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens, but from this cosmic external vision, Abraham is now alone with God in

this extraordinary internal darkness. Here too, he encounters God. God continues the solemn promise, a covenant, about his future and that of his descendants. The scene ends with something even more mysterious: a smoking brazier and a flaming light moving around the sacrifice in the darkness.

Questions

- Have you ever encountered God externally in the beauty of nature or internally in a dream? If so, what happened in that encounter and what effect did it have on your life?
- What do you make of the fiery lights? Where do you think we see God at work today?
- How do we know God is faithful to God's promises?

The Mystery of God - God reveals God's Glory

*Our King comes in majestic glory.
Let us light our lamps and go forth to meet Him.*

*Let us find our joy in Him, for He has found joy in us.
He will indeed rejoice us with His marvellous light.
Let us glorify the majesty of the Son and give thanks to the almighty Father
Who, in an outpouring of love, sent Him to us, to fill us with hope and salvation.
When He manifests Himself, the saints awaiting Him in weariness and sorrow,
will go forth to meet Him with lighted lamps.*

From *Hymn to the Light*,
St Ephrem the Syrian

Some of the most mysterious parts of the Bible are powerful descriptions of direct encounters with God or angels as messengers of God. In the book of Exodus, Moses asks to see the full extent of the glory of God, but God says that no one can fully encounter God's own self and stay alive. Instead, God gives Moses a glimpse of glory while protecting him from being overwhelmed by the Presence (33.17-23). Later, when Moses comes down from the mountain, he is transfigured by his encounter; his skin shines (34.29-30). Such encounters are called in Latin, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which means an experience of the numinous which is both terrifying and fascinating at the same time, inspiring awe. When the prophet Ezekiel meets God, he is completely overwhelmed and dumbfounded by the incredible vision (Ezekiel 1). Listen to the ringing words of Isaiah 6.1-5, and the incredible impact of angel voices, wings beating, the smoke swirling and the pillars trembling. Similarly, the shepherds in the account of the Jesus' birth are amazed and overcome by the dazzling sight of angels (Luke 2.8-14).

So encounters with God change us forever, but in a way which others can see, - if we let them. Peter wonders what he is supposed to do in response to the vision of glory. But Scripture shows us the answer, the vision of the glory of God comes in unforgettable experiences with news for human beings about who God is and what God is doing in the world – the Ten Commandments, the Good News of Jesus' birth, the reality of Jesus as God's Beloved Son.

And later, the disciples will find two dazzling supernatural beings sitting in an empty tomb... but that is for the end of our journey.

Question

- Where do you think people meet angels of God today?

Something to pray

Lord God,

You appear to us in unexpected places:
In forests and on mountain-tops
On city streets and in neon lights.
You come to us in the lives of others
In loved ones, in unloved ones on the street.
We see you shine out from the ordinary.
We hear your still, small voice.
We feel your presence in our hearts.
We know your glory in our worship
In bread and wine shared
In music made together
In fellowship with one another.
Help us to name your glory
In our words and in our witness
So that all may find you for themselves.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.

Week 3 - The Mystery of Sin, Suffering and Hope

Readings

- Isaiah 55.1-9
- Psalm 63.1-9
- 1 Corinthians 10.1-13
- Luke 13. 1-9

Starting out - The mystery of sin

*Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden ...*

John Milton
Paradise Lost

So begins John Milton's famous poem *Paradise Lost*. His subject is that extraordinary mystery, the broken relationship between human beings and the loving creator God.

We first get our understanding of sin from the book of Genesis, where we are told of the first disobedience in the Garden of Eden. God offers the first humans, Adam and Eve, everything they desire from the garden, but not fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Adam and Eve stop listening to God and listen instead to the voice of temptation, putting what they want before God's desire for them. Once they take the fruit from the tree the relationship of trust and love with God is broken, they know they have broken away from God and they can no longer live as before in the beautiful world of God's intention.

So this story asks us: do we recognise ourselves here? If we think about ourselves as humans we can identify with Adam and Eve after the 'Fall'; we are creatures who easily follow our own desires and ignore our conscience:

'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'

(1 John 1:8).

But sometimes we ignore the continuing story of the Book of Genesis. The wonderful mystery is that God goes with Adam and Eve and guides them and their descendants in their struggles and on their journey through history. God never abandons them. And in this is a tremendous hope. In the readings today we hear songs of praise and hope amid the disorder and suffering of the world. And where will we ultimately find this hope? That is what we must discover on our continuing Lenten journey with Jesus.

Something to talk about - Sin, suffering and hope

- Do you agree with this account of sin? How else might we think about the Garden of Eden story? How might the Garden of Eden story have been misused or misunderstood?
- How would you talk with someone who says that a good God would not allow the world to be in the state it is in today?

- Many people today think 'sin' is just a word for wrongdoing. How would you explain to them what sin means in a Christian context? Why is sin 'deadly'?
- What sort of gifts do you think God gives us to make a difference to the pain of the world?

Some scripture to ponder - The barren fig tree

Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down ."

(Luke 13.6-9)

One way of interpreting this mysterious parable is that Jesus suggests that God actively comes looking for our spiritual flourishing within the Creation but that we are found wanting. As the gardener, Jesus offers us the way to salvation. If we attend to Jesus we will find the way to bear the fruit God longs for. But if we don't, we have wasted all that God has invested in us.

Questions

- Jesus gives a stark message: repent or perish! Why do you think his message is so direct?
- What do you think the 'fruit' should be?

Entering the mystery - God so loved the world

St Ambrose, meditating on the mystery of sin, suffering and hope, thinks about the story of Noah and the Ark to explain how God forgives human sin.

God, willing to restore what was lacking, sent the flood and bade just Noah go up into the ark. And he, after having, as the flood was passing off, sent forth first a raven which did not return, sent forth a dove which is said to have returned with an olive twig. You see the water, you see the wood [of the ark], you see the dove, and do you hesitate as to the mystery?

The water, then, is that in which the flesh is dipped, that all carnal sin may be washed away. All wickedness is there buried. The wood is that on which the Lord Jesus was fastened when He suffered for us. The dove is that in the form of which the Holy Spirit descended, as you have read in the New Testament, Who inspires in you peace of soul and tranquillity of mind. The raven is the figure of sin, which goes forth and does not return, if, in you, too, inwardly and outwardly righteousness be preserved.

St Ambrose
On the Mysteries

In a startling image, St Ambrose thinks of human sin as the raven which is released from the Ark and does not come back. The world is full of human wickedness which needs to be redeemed. So the story tells of God acting directly to enable human beings to change the world and to be saved. God does not save Noah, Noah has to listen and turn to God to be saved.

For St Ambrose, the water of baptism declares us God's people and the Jesus on the wood of the Cross is our salvation, our safe ark. As the raven of all our sin flies away never to return, the dove of peace comes to us with its olive branch, and the Spirit directs our lives. So the Noah story is one of tremendous hope and promise and full of God's love.

The purpose of the Lenten journey is to come face to face with that mystery of the Cross and to know its relevance for us in a world still damaged by sin and suffering today.

Questions

- Where do you see stories of hope in the world today?
- What do you make of St Ambrose's meditation on the Noah story?

Something to pray

God, our guide and shepherd,

We wander away from you like lost sheep.
Sometimes we can't remember
where we are supposed to go.
The path gets blurred, we turn aside
from the places you have made for us
to keep us safe, to guide us.

Sometimes we end up hurt in a ditch.
Sometimes we lead others astray.
Sometimes we simply suffer.

Yet we have hope.
We know you will come and find us
You will forgive us our trespasses.
You will forgive our sins.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.

Week 4 - The Mystery of Relationship and Reconciliation

Readings

- Joshua 5:9-12
- Psalm 32
- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
- Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Starting out - The Others in our Lives

A therapy called 'Human Sculpting' is often used with families as a way of visualising relationships, but it can also be used as a form of theological reflection to help people see the complexity and web of our personal and spiritual relationships. How it works is to take a scenario – a real life situation like going into hospital for instance, or a Bible story – and to think about all the people who might be involved in such a scenario, no matter how distantly. In a hospital scenario, that might mean the patient, their family, nurses, doctors, therapists, others on the ward, tea providers, taxi drivers, the hospital chaplain, the parish priest and all the church family praying for the person. Lots of people are somehow involved with the patient and with each other.

The group members position themselves as one of the characters in the scenario and decide where to stand, sit or kneel in relation to each other. Once everyone has put themselves in position every person is invited to look around at the web of relationships. Nothing has to be said; it's not role play.

The exercise is done several times as the scenario develops – who else do you need to be close to, or further away from? Who is dominating the scene, blocking the view of others? Who is left out? Who is being taken into the heart of the sculpture? Gradually people change places and each time there is a pause to look at who is inside and who is on the outside. Once the exercise has been done a few times, the group 'freezes' and takes time to absorb the final web of relationships. People are then invited to review where they were and whether they wanted to move or not.

All kinds of issues emerge about power, loss, separation, divided loyalties, inclusion and exclusion, faith, care, danger, loneliness and so on. Surprising things can be revealed, especially who is affected by the scenario. It often makes people realise just how complex our relationships are and how we relate to people around us daily. What keeps the relationships together or drives them apart? As a form of theological reflection, there is another perspective to the final form of the sculpture, when we begin to ask: where is God?

Something to talk about - Different relationships

Questions

- In the hospital scenario suggested above, how many different sorts of relationship can you think of?
- What other kinds of relationships do we have beyond those we have with other people? What about objects, houses, pets, wealth?
- How do you think our relationships with our neighbours, our families and others affect our relationship with God? How would you talk about that with someone who was not a Christian?

Some scripture to ponder - Being reconciled

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

(Luke 15.20-24)

Questions

- What do you think this story tells us about the nature of God?
- What do you think Jesus' hearers made of the love and reconciliation in this story?

For a prayerful meditation:

Prayer brings together two lovers, God and the soul, in a narrow room where they speak much of love.

(The Cloud of Unknowing)

The Mystery of God - God's Longing for us and Reconciliation

In the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), we sometimes hear about God as utterly beyond human comprehension and experience.

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'

(Isaiah 55.8-9).

This makes God sound essentially unknowable, so far beyond human reason and imagination that the mystery of God is impenetrable, so that we can only respond with awe, wonder and silence. What would we have to say to God, whose thoughts and actions are so far beyond us?

When Job ponders on human existence, God stuns him with the amazing miracle of creation, so much vaster and more incredible than a human lifetime: *'where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?'* (Job 38.4). We can only know *'the outskirts of his ways'* (Job 26.14). We can only ever scratch the merest surface of the mystery that is God.

Many theologians and Christians following the mystical tradition, such as St John of the Cross and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, have followed this 'apophatic' tradition, contemplating the mystery of God which is always greater than human knowing and through which more is always being revealed.

In other places in the Hebrew Scriptures though, we come across different ways to describe God. Sometimes God's power comes to the fore as a king or a judge or a warrior, but in other places God is imagined as a nurturer, a shepherd or a gardener, or as a parent, as a woman in labour in Isaiah 42.14 or as a father:

'I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me'

(Jeremiah 3.19).

But one of the most extraordinary things Jesus did in his life and ministry was to tell his friends that they could relate to the mystery that is God, by going beyond metaphors and likenesses to being in immediate, intimate relationship with God. Is this what Jesus realised when he stayed behind in the Temple, in 'his Father's house'?

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples and followers to call God 'Abba', (father) and teaches about God not just in terms of metaphor but active relationship. To call God Abba, expresses trust, honour, respect, and confidence in that relationship.

Through Jesus we discover that God longs for us, searches us out, rejoices in us and brings us home. To be out of this relationship is the utmost abandonment and desolation, as we see in the story of Dives and Lazarus, in the destitution of the Prodigal Son and in Jesus's own cry of despair from the cross.

And in his death and resurrection, Jesus makes sure that relationship with God is never lost to us – if we offer ourselves to that relationship. We can always go home to where God waits for us. So St Paul can say,

'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'

(Romans 8.38-39).

Questions

- If you say the Nicene Creed slowly and carefully, thinking about each section, what do you learn about God as Trinity and God in relation to human beings?
- How do you think people reflect the love of God to others through their own relationships?

Something to pray

Loving God,

We know you as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are a mystery of wonderful relationship,
Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining,
Reconciling the world to yourself
And making new.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.

Week 5 - The Mystery of Love and Sacrifice

Readings

- Isaiah 43.16-21
- Psalm 126
- Philippians 3.4b-14
- John 12.1-8

Starting out - To die that we may live

One of the most well-known verses in the gospels is John's assertion:

'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'.

(John 3.16)

This is how God's love for us is supremely expressed, that God sends us God's own self in Jesus, so that we can truly relate to him, because Jesus is a human being like us. Through the New Testament we learn more about the mystery of God through Jesus, as, by word and deed, he reveals more about who God is and what God wants for us.

But God's love goes much further than this. It's not just about learning how to live and how to understand the world, it is about turning ourselves around to be people who actively work with God to create God's kingdom and to be with God after our lives are done. We have to learn to die to ourselves and our selfish wants. We have to learn to sacrifice. For that destiny to be real for us, barriers of brokenness, disorder and sin have to be destroyed.

We cannot do it by ourselves. But Jesus can, and does. His life, God's life in the world, is willingly sacrificed on the cross. And we have seen what a great mystery it is, when Christians and other people of faith in all times and places, have sacrificed their lives for others.

Something to talk about - Who would you die for?

- Lots of popular love songs swear, *'I'd die for you'*. Who do you love enough to die for?
- How do you think your church could really show love and sacrifice for others?
- How would you start a conversation with someone about *'God so loved the world..?'*
- How can we live out Jesus's love and sacrifice in our own lives?

Some scripture to ponder - Extravagance and love

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

(John 12.3)

Have you ever broken a bottle of perfume or cologne, or maybe just gone into the bathroom after a young person has been getting ready for a party! Concentrated scents can take your breath away. You can smell the rich scent for days. In this scene, the hospitality of eating and drinking at the house in Bethany is overwhelmed by Mary's sacrifice of a costly fragrance with which she anoints Jesus's feet as for his burial.

When we know those we love are going to leave us, or are approaching the end of their lives, it makes us re-evaluate all our priorities. What's the last thing we can do to show our love? Surely, things like money should become the least of our problems or concerns. And yet how often we wait until the person is dead and then put our extravagance into the funeral – the flowers, the coffin and the wake.

Mary does not wait, much to Judas' disgust. She pours out the perfume to show her love for him. And Jesus pours out his life for us. God shows his extravagant love for us.

Questions

- Judas was angry. What do you think Martha and Lazarus thought about Mary's actions?
- What do you think is the significance of the cost of the perfume and Mary's act of anointing Jesus?
- How can we show more of our love to those we care about?
- If we say we love God, why don't we sacrifice more of what we have to show that love?

The Mystery of God - God so Loved the World

'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 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. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.'

(1 John 4.7-12)

This passage of Scripture reminds us that travelling the Lenten journey with Jesus is more than just getting together and having a time of fellowship and study. Entering into the mystery of God's love confronts us with a shocking truth – if we say we believe in God and in Jesus then we have to truly believe that God loves us enough to send Jesus to die for us. More than this, we have to show that love ourselves. If we don't, the mystery of God's own love for us cannot be made known to other people.

Do we, as Christians, truly love one another? That is a tremendous challenge, not least because there are many faithful Christians who have been hurt by their church, their Christian neighbours and friends. It's not a new issue; St Paul's letters set out his requests to people in churches to spend more time witnessing through Christian love, rather than arguing, fighting and misbehaving.

Yet the world is desperate for messages of God's love. And if the Lenten journey into the mystery of God means anything, it is that we will emerge from it with a stronger, clearer conviction of who God is and what God has done for us. And that means showing it to others in our own congregations and fellowships. It's often harder than we think; there are so many issues diluting our love, making it conditional, or sparing. What would it take to show love to the people we usually avoid, to make room for people who are least like us, to pour out, extravagantly, God's love on those who would be shocked and surprised to receive it?

Question

- What ONE thing could you do, as a church, to overwhelm your community with God's love?

Something to pray

Loving God

All too often, we come to the tomb too late,
bearing our spices, our final gifts, our loves
all the things we never said, the promises,
the things we were going to get around to.

Yet you gave us your Son that we might have eternal life.
Jesus poured out his life as Mary poured perfume.
We are drenched in your love, it cannot be stopped.
We know that we do not deserve it.

Help us not to leave love too late.
Teach us to show our love not hoard it.
Help us to be worthy of the sacrifice.

Amen

We finish by joining together in saying the Lord's Prayer.

We hope you have enjoyed this Lenten journey into the Mystery of God. We are now entering Holy Week with Jesus. Let us go forward into the Mystery of the Easter Journey.

Bible verses

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