

ETHOS OF WALKING THE WAY (2): STUDY MATERIAL

WALKING THE WAY: AN INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the second part of the ethos for *“Walking the Way, living the life of Jesus today.”*

Last month we looked at the heart of being Church and at reflections on the word ‘Church’. It said *‘it is to help churches redefine who they are and what God intends them to be. It is about re-discovering the fact that Jesus calls us to whole life discipleship and not something we simply do on a Sunday.’*

This month you are invited to focus on those who would call themselves disciples within our churches. The 7,000’s plus members of the Southern Synod, scattered in over 140 churches across the counties from coast to the inner city and everything in-between, who seek encouragement as they face an increasingly hostile or indifferent world to Christ and the church.

The passage I used at Synod Meeting when *“Walking the Way”* was being presented was *“How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” Psalm 137*. This passage will form the bible study material while the sermon will look at ‘Walking with God’ (The road to Emmaus).

Like last month what follows are simply notes, a few ideas, a skeleton onto which you can add the flesh.

TIP

If last month you had the facilities to use the LICC illustration (the one with Red dots) it would be worth repeating as a recap as it’s a very useful visual aid. However, if you can’t try using the illustration of a snooker table. The red balls all tightly together, representing the church on Sunday. Then the balls are scattered and some end up in the pockets and not on the table at all and the rest on the table which represents the society in which we live and work. (For those who may not be used to giving talks or sermons please take note that if you push an illustration too far it ends up being a) confusing b) comical, in the wrong sense.

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WALKING THE WAY: Study Material

February 2018

- TITLE:** 'Walking the Way in the communities we live in'
- AIM:** 'To encourage one another that Christ hasn't given up on us nor should we give up on those around us. Even if the going is tough and feels alien'
- Means:** By looking at the passage and sharing experiences and feelings/thoughts. It is important that people don't feel there is a wrong answer and that their experiences don't matter. By doing so we may encourage others and ourselves to follow the way of Christ.
- Passage:** Psalm 137 **N.B.** There is an unsettling verse at the end and one can be tempted to leave it out, but leave it in its there for a reason.

Introduction

It might seem odd to start "Walking the Way..." with a bible passage having in its first line "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat...*" but this bible study is primarily aimed for those who feel exhausted in their discipleship or need to 'catch their breath' so that they can see how to continue the journey.

Start fairly light heartedly by asking a question: "In the last 10 or 5 years what has left you feeling out of touch with society or what changes have taken place?" e.g. mobile phones used to be for making phone calls, not any more, they're for watching films, instagram, texts etc.

As you progress the issues will/should become more serious.

TIP

Leaders set the tone of the meeting and you also give permission, by example, for people to share difficult or hurtful experiences. The group should do most of the talking but you will need to go first. The more vulnerable and honest you are, you will give the group 'permission' to be open too. Leadership is a risk, they may not follow but if you keep it light-hearted throughout then you are virtually guaranteeing a shallow meeting. No one is asking you to bear all your sins or things you feel deeply troubled about (this is not a free counselling session and to do so is an abuse of leadership). But there is a cost in leadership.

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The passage: Psalm 137

The Psalmist, who seems to be summing up other people's feelings, the Psalmist writes a) what life is like and b) a possible response but a response which will leave the psalmist and their 'tormentors' impoverished.

*¹By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.*

We can live in the past, we can sit back and remember the so called good old days when the church was full and we can weep as we see it today. It is good to be honest and honour the past but it is not honouring to the people who went before if we don't rise to the challenge. Our morale is affected if we feel that when we walk through the town/village/ neighbourhood no one is interested in God any more. We can feel disconnected.

Question. Do we respect the past – or live in the past? Do we remember only the good in the past and see only the bad in the present or future?

*²There on the poplars
we hung our harps,*

Is it tempting to down tools and to feel that we are being laughed at or ridiculed? Other faiths seem to get respect but Christians seem fair game for mockery or being targeted in the work place e.g. being disciplined for wearing a small cross as a necklace whilst working for BA.

Question. In what ways can we show our faith and show that we are proud of it?

*³for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

The Psalmist records the mockery of their captors. We too are sometimes mocked but we sometimes mistake an interest as mockery. People turn up for Christmas services (a 3% increase in 2017 on 2016 in the CofE alone) but we never see them at other times. We can hear the expression 'I wish I had your faith' and take it as a disparaging remark, as if we are an unthinking simple lot; when it is often a genuine statement of longing for the peace that you have that others may lack but don't think they could have or deserve.

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Question. Do we assume that people aren't interested in Christ? If they are interested can you think of ways to connect with them to answer the questions they are asking?

*⁴How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?*

Where does the energy come from – singing the great hymn 'Oh for a thousand tongues to Sing' with 9 people in the congregation! Highlights the fact that there are 991 people missing! Many of our hymns speak of the truths of God and are important to sing but can feel so far from our experience. One option is that we stop singing that hymn so we don't have to be reminded. But this misses the point; verse four could be paraphrased "How can we live a Christ like way while in a hostile indifferent town/city/village".

Question. Verse 4 has the feeling of exasperation, futility. Or we can ask the question as a challenge. How are we, as a church and individuals, going to live like Christ in your particular community?

*⁵If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
⁶May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.*

Jerusalem was one of the most significant places on earth for the Jewish people. God dwelt in the Temple the ARK lay in the Holy of Holies. They were clinging to the past, afraid that they would forget God if they got involved with the new culture around them. We too can mirror this attitude or we can move out with God. We can choose to define ourselves by what we were or by who we are; children of God, followers of Christ.

Question

(i) How can we respect the past and all that God, and others, have done but embrace the now and future?

(ii) What would our fellowships look like if we doubled our congregation with those who have no experience of church?

(iii) How do you embrace the future without selling out?

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⁷*Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.*

*"Tear it down," they cried,
"tear it down to its foundations!"*

⁸*Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.*

⁹*Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.*

It is easy to be repulsed by this blind hate and vulgar rage – but I wonder what our response would be if we were relief workers in Syria or witnessed the atrocities of so called ISIS. We should not dismiss it as simply a very human response. It has with it a call for Justice; a call for the return of Gods reign.

Question. How do we seek justice and uphold the values of following Christ without selling out? How do we handle anger?

Concluding comments. You may find that certain questions lead on to other parts of the passage but you haven't finished all of it. This is perfectly OK but don't let the conversation stay in the negative it is an opportunity to share dreams of what could be and see if there is a way of making those dreams a reality. The Psalm should give us comfort to know that also in scripture people had a hard time and struggled; and following Christ isn't easy. It's also a psalm that indirectly challenges us; how we are going to embrace the future? With isolationism and hate like the passion the psalmist talks about? Or hold our ground on what we believe whilst showing love to those around us as Christ would?

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