



Walking Humbly Bible Studies

Six encounters with Jesus on the road, that explore belonging, participation and ending hunger today, together and forever

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Walking Humbly Bible Studies

Six Bible studies for small groups exploring what it means to walk humbly with Jesus on the path to participation

**He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.**

Micah 6:8 (NIV)

God has shown us all how to live: do what is fair and just with all people, show God's resilient and persistent love and live in humble fellowship with God and all God's creation.

Micah 6:8 (translated and interpreted by Trussell's Christian Lived Experience Panel)

Introduction

At Trussell, we are inspired by the call of the Prophet Micah, of what is good and what God requires of us: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. For us, walking humbly means welcoming, including, and giving more influence to people who have a lived experience of facing hardship and crisis in all we do. Our panel of Christian lived experience partners meet us regularly to pray together and have shaped our thinking and working. We are hugely grateful that they gave their time to reflect on these Bible passages that open up our thinking about Jesus' encounters with a wide range of people.

This series of six Bible studies is an opportunity to explore as a church and a small group how we can create communities where people with lived experience of poverty or hardship feel welcome and find belonging. Some of the theory of this is explained in our Walking Humbly Leaders' Pack, which is also available on our webshop: trussell.org.uk/church-items

Each session looks at a story from the life of Jesus, where he walks alongside people in different situations. Through discussion questions and reflections, the sessions explore the values which underpin what it means to create welcoming spaces where everyone can feel like they belong in our church communities.

Jess Foster
Head of Church Engagement



What is participation?

Participation means involving people who use a service to shape or lead it. It is about working together, listening, and finding better ways to support one another. This is especially important when we are considering or seeking to address issues that involve a particular lived experience, or affect a specific group of people, such as financial hardship or hunger. Working towards belonging and participation for everyone requires humility: to listen to the experiences of everyone in the group, recognise where we might be creating or upholding barriers to participation, and learn what we could do differently to create a shared space where everyone can belong.

How have we created this resource?

We worked with **Hannah Fremont-Brown** and our Lived Experienced partners to put this resource together.

Hannah has been working with churches to explore what it means to be justice-seeking for several years, including with the ecumenical Joint Public Issues Team. She recently led Let's End Poverty, a cross-sector coalition to put poverty high up on the agenda at the last general election. She has also worked with The Methodist Church to explore what increasing participation by people with lived experience of poverty looks like at all levels of church life.



“

Over four weeks, we met for conversation about the stories used in this study. Each session has been shaped by our conversations. The discussion questions are either the same ones as followed by the group, or have been shaped by the reflections shared in our discussion. Throughout the course, you will read reflections shared by Trussell's lived experience partners and Church Engagement staff.

”

Hannah

Here are some of the other people you will hear from:

Dee, Laura, Shirley, Steve, Toni and Val are part of Trussell's Lived Experience Partners group.

Abe, Phil and Tad are members of our Church Engagement Team.

How you can run these sessions

These sessions are designed for small groups. They should take around 60 minutes each. When it comes to the discussion questions, you may want to split into groups of three or four people, to enable everyone to have a chance to share. You will also need:

- One or two people to act as leaders for the session. These people will read out the prayers and reflections, and introduce the discussion questions. You should choose these in advance, so that they can have some time to prepare.
- A copy of the session plan for the leaders to use.
- Bibles, or printed versions of the Bible passage being looked at.

Studying the bible together should be accessible for everyone. Here are some ways you could make your session more inclusive:

The leaders notes are designed to be read aloud by one or two leaders who have been chosen to lead the session. Reading information aloud and not relying on written words will include people who have different literacy levels. Always ask for volunteers to read the Bible Story. Don't assume this is something everyone would want to do.

You could have your Bible study session over or after sharing a meal. This could be something simple, like soup or pasta. You could ask your church if there is any money you could use to enable this. This would create an opportunity for fellowship, as well as offering a meal to people who might otherwise struggle to eat every day.

Each session includes the question: “Is this story familiar to you, or are you hearing it for the first time?” Sometimes in Christian contexts, we presume that everyone is familiar with stories from the Bible. This can make people who are newer to faith, or perhaps rely on being told stories in church, feel isolated and left out. Starting every session without this presumption may help people feel more open to joining in.

Talking about our experiences

Sometimes, when we talk about poverty and hardship, we can presume that everyone has the same or similar lived experiences.

We can fall into patterns of talking about hardship or food insecurity as something that happens to other people, rather than the people in our group. This can make people who bring this lived experience feel marginalised, or scared of sharing their experiences.

Equally, some people might not feel comfortable sharing their experiences with the group. The questions in this study do not presume that everyone has the same experiences, and as a group you can take steps to ensure that when people share their reflections, presumptions are not made about the experiences of others. You might choose to:

- Set out some ground rules at the start of each session, to remind people not to presume about other people's experiences.
- Have a phrase or word which reminds people to notice when the language they use marginalises people experiencing poverty. This could look like encouraging people to say: "In my experience..." when they share their reflections.

Session list:

On the road to Jericho, Jesus meets Zaccheus	page 8
On the road to Galilee, Jesus meets the woman at the well	page 17
On the road to Emmaus, Jesus meets the grieving disciples	page 28
On the road to Jericho, Jesus heals Bartimaeus	page 40
Jesus travels to Bethany, and is anointed by Mary	page 53
Jesus pauses his journey and eats with a crowd of 5,000	page 63

Session One: On the road to Jericho, Jesus meets Zaccheus

In this first session, we find Jesus walking along the road which passes through Jericho. On his way, he meets a man named Zaccheus. By exploring this story, we'll look at what happens when we step out in faith to make changes which create a more just and fair society.

Opening Prayer

Generous God,

Thank you that you walk alongside us as we explore your word together. As we gather today, help us to be curious about what you are showing us. Challenge us through this story from Jesus' life, that we may walk humbly with you towards justice and love.

Amen.

Read: Luke 19: 1-10 (NIV)

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.”

Check in, in pairs:

- Is this story familiar to you, or is this the first time you have heard it?
- When you heard it today, how did this story make you feel?

Being curious

“

I do wish I was in the tree to have a good nose and see what was going on. To be curious. Curiosity is good.

”

Dee

Lived experience partner

This story begins with curiosity. Zacchaeus wants to see who Jesus is. He must have heard about him, like the crowds who gathered around Jesus wherever he goes. But because he is short, Zacchaeus

can't see Jesus. To get a better view, he climbs a tree and peers down at Jesus passing by.

Whilst climbing the tree gave Zaccheus a good vantage point to see over the crowd, it would also have put him in the spotlight. As we begin these Bible studies, it's important to ask: what are we curious about? How can we bring our curiosity to reading the Bible together, looking for new perspectives and listening for what God has to say to us? Sometimes, expressing our curiosity means asking challenging questions, or putting our ideas and perspectives in the spotlight.

Throughout these sessions, you will be listening to the reflections of our Lived Experience Partners on each of the passages, as well as listening to each other. Are you curious about what insights the Lived Experience Partners have to bring?

Discuss:

- Do you think curiosity has a role to play when we read the Bible?
- How will you be curious when you explore the Bible and listen to the reflections of other people during these sessions?

Zaccheus becomes an agent of change

“

Zaccheus is so set on his word, and what he believes, that he's willing to be like, okay, well if I've done wrong, I will pay four times that. That's how strongly he believes.

”

Dee

The big, transformative moment in this story is when Jesus calls Zaccheus to come down from the tree. In this moment, something significant happens to Zaccheus. What has Zaccheus heard or seen which makes him change his ways so dramatically?

Dee reflects:

“

I've used a food bank myself. I was so scared to go. You are waiting to go in, and you don't know what's going to happen. You're in a long queue and it's very scary. But we've had people who use the food bank, and then come back to volunteer. Or come back with things to donate, because they have been so grateful. They've put their faith in that situation. The fact that Zaccheus says he will pay back four time as much... his faith was in that moment, so wholeheartedly, a bit like the people who come back to the food bank to say thank you. I'm smiling thinking about it, because it has such an impact. I imagine that's what Zaccheus felt like.

”

This was probably a moment of deep humility for Zaccheus.

Abe reflects:

“

It's not easy for people in high positions to actually put up their hands and say: I made a mistake, and I'm going to make it right. For him to be able to do something about the mistakes he has made, that shows humility.

”

Discuss:

- What do you think was going on in Zaccheus' mind and heart in this moment?
- Have you ever had a moment like this, where you've been motivated to change your behaviour or actions dramatically? What did it feel like? What changed afterwards?

The ripple effects

There is a big crowd gathered around Jesus, who see this interaction and hear Zaccheus' declaration of change. The ripple effects of this moment must have been significant - not least because Zaccheus says he is going to make a big donation to people who are facing hardship.

Dee says:

“

It would have created ripples, I imagine. I think the poverty line would have had a bit of a rumble that day! It doesn't matter which side you're on, whether you are the one that's been taken from, or you were the taker – both sides would have been rumbled.

”

As well as promising to give half of his possessions , Zaccheus also recognises that there are some people he has cheated in his work as a tax collector. By promising to pay back anyone he has cheated four times over, Zaccheus recognises that his privileges and wealth have come because he has benefited from an unfair system. He would have collected taxes for the Roman Empire, which was an oppressive system that worked for some people and not for others. Particularly for the Jewish community which Jesus was part of, there would have been hope that a leader like Jesus might have come to save them from the unfair systems of the Roman Empire. They might have seen Jesus' actions, and Zaccheus decision to go against his role as a tax collector, as resisting the rules and regulations being imposed on them. Zaccheus was someone who had power in his community because of his role. His actions would have had an influence on others.

The story ends before we get to hear what happens when Jesus spends time at Zaccheus' house. What might have happened here? Perhaps, Zaccheus spent time listening to Jesus, and realised that

the different way of life Jesus was offering meant a bigger transformation in the lives of people who believed in him.

Maybe this was just the start of Zaccheus' discipleship, where his life would become a witness to a different way of living, that was fairer and more just.

When we take action that seeks justice – campaigning against an unfair system, or changing the way we make decisions in our church communities to include everyone – our actions can be signs of God's compassion and love for justice, and point towards the transformation on offer in God's kingdom. Who knows what the consequences might be?

Abe reflects:

“

That simple act...it's going to change generations!

”

Discuss:

- Are Zaccheus' actions political ones? What difference does this make to the story?
- When you take action for justice, what are you trying to show about God's character?

Take action: “Salvation has come to this house!”

“

I think I see that all the time in the food bank. People come in with really, really bad struggles, and the food bank rally around them, makes sure they’re okay and say don’t worry, you’re safe, you are worth it. When Zaccheus heard Jesus say, “Salvation has come to this house”, it was probably a similar feeling that people from the food bank felt, when they felt heard for the first time.

”

Dee

When Jesus noticed Zaccheus, it changed his life. Laura reflects:

“

People didn’t like Zaccheus, and yet God wanted to spend time with him. I am amazed that God loves all people, including those we will try to avoid. He never leaves us. Sometimes we feel like we are not enough, like we fail God – but he’s there. Why me? Why does God care about me? I wonder if that’s what Zaccheus thought. I know I do.

”

Have you ever felt like someone noticed you, or listened to you, when you felt ignored? Friendship can be a powerful thing. The biggest transformations can begin with the smallest act of friendship, just like in Zaccheus’ life.

Discuss:

- What could your church community do differently to help people who might feel like they are on the fringes be welcomed in through friendship?

Action :

Think about one person or family in your church community who you could make additional effort to reach out to. This could be in a volunteering role, or as a member of the congregation. Pray for them this week, and ask God to help you to listen and be present alongside them well.

Closing Prayer

Loving God,

You have known me and loved me since before I was born. Thank you that even when I feel lost in the crowd, you see me and welcome me in. Help me to see how my actions could have a ripple effect, showing other people your compassion, justice and love. I take a moment now to think of the person or family you have placed on my heart today. Help me to show them your love by reaching out in friendship. God, fill us with your love which transforms.

Amen.

Session Two: On the road to Galilee, Jesus meets the woman at the well

In this session, we find Jesus walking from Judea to Galilee. On his way, he passes through Samaria, where he meets a woman drawing water from a well. Through this story, we'll explore what happens when power is confronted in relationships, and who gets to share the good news of the gospel.

Opening Prayer

Loving God,

we thank you that as we walk through life, we encounter you on the journey. Help us to be open to your guidance and challenge today as we explore your word together.

Amen.

Read: John 4: 1-31 (NIV)

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. So, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. So, he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was

about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is

coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?” Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him. Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

Check in, in pairs:

- Is this story familiar to you, or is this the first time you have heard it?
- Which part of this story particularly caught your attention today?

Power at play

“

I think, obviously she had heard of him, but she didn't...
she wasn't really paying him any attention until he
explained himself.

”

Dee

Power is at the heart of this story. We learn that the woman is a Samaritan, and “Jews do not associate with Samaritans.”

Steve comments:

“

There's also, you know, her being a woman and Jesus being a man. There's so many different factors at play that basically kind of say that those two shouldn't be interacting.

”

These factors would have meant that in most circumstances, Jesus was the more powerful person in this interaction. However, when the story starts, Jesus is tired, hot and thirsty. It's the middle of the day, and he has been walking far. But he doesn't have anything to use to draw water from the well. The woman he meets, however, has a jar which she could use to give him a drink. Jesus has to ask her for help. This puts the woman in a position of power instead.

Discuss:

- Have you ever had to ask someone else for something that you really needed? How did it feel?
- Why do you think power matters in this story?

Pushing the boundaries

“

But that's the whole point, isn't it? It is about pushing the boundaries.

”

Val

Despite the differences between them, Jesus still chooses to talk to the woman he meets at the well. When the disciples return from the town at the end of the story, they are surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman. However, the story tells us that no one asks any questions about it.

Dee says:

“

Maybe at first they were like... what?! And then thought, why would I say something? There's this presumption about men and women and stuff like that, but maybe it clicked in their head when they saw Jesus. Like, I wonder why we don't do that. Or, why would I ask him about it? They must have, maybe reflected on it, like, okay, if he's not bothered, then why are we so bothered about it?

”

Steve suggests:

“

We’re only in Chapter 4 of John, and I know it’s not quite as chronological as the other gospels sometimes, but it’s still one of the early stories we get told. So, I suppose it could be a bit of both - on one hand, the disciples might have thought ‘Well, it’s Jesus, and we know that he doesn’t make a lot of sense around what we know, and challenges a lot of it’. But at the same time, they might have thought, ‘How can we ask? He’s our teacher, so let’s just try and figure this out’

”

Discuss:

- Dee and Steve suggests that Jesus’ action challenges what the disciples already know, and sets them an example to follow. Do you think Jesus was trying to set an example?
- Do you think it is the responsibility of people with influence to show how we can challenge unbalanced power, or act in more just ways?

“

If Jesus can amaze his followers by talking to one woman, how can we inspire each other through small ways of including people?

”

Tad

Who are we to judge?

“

There's no judgement there, it's just a conversation that slowly develops to give her all the information that she needs, to show to her that he is the Messiah.

”

Steve

Jesus gets quite personal about the woman's life and her relationships. Her marital status and living arrangements are unusual for the society she is living in. The fact that she is visiting the well at the hottest time of the day suggests that she doesn't want to be around other people, perhaps for fear of their judgement or exclusion. But when Jesus acknowledges these things about the woman, he doesn't express judgement.

Dee reflects:

“

Maybe she thinks: what do you want me to do about that? That was probably a decision that was hard, and it doesn't even explain why it might not have been her fault that she had five husbands. People got remarried because they needed the support. Jesus' comments don't explain enough about why. It would be nice to know, but I guess he didn't know either. He didn't get into the specifics of her circumstances with her, he just accepted her.

”

Discuss:

- What presumptions did you make about the woman's life from the story?
- Did you judge the woman when you heard about her circumstances? What difference does this make to how you heard the story?

Steve reflects:

“

When I first went to the food bank, there was no judgement that I was there. Then the more I've shared my story with people, sharing about going through addiction, and breakdowns, and all kinds of things, and getting to the lowest point in my life, people still just accepted me in. It showed me that I am worthwhile. That's had such a big impact on me that I'm here now, trying to do the same for other people.

”

Discuss:

- How can we challenge ourselves not to judge people based on their circumstances?

Who gets to share the good news?

This is one of the only times in the New Testament that Jesus reveals himself to be the Messiah in such a clear way. Jesus shares the good news he has come to bring with the woman, despite the fact that she is marginalised by many other people.

At the end of the story, the woman goes back to the town and tells everyone about her interaction with Jesus. She tells people that she might have met the Messiah. Because of this, some people call her the 'first evangelist', because she is one of the first people recorded in the Bible telling others about the good news Jesus has shared with her.

Jesus shares the good news of eternal life with her, without trying to 'tidy up' her life or asking her to change her ways. He trusts her with the good news in the midst of all of this.

Steve reflects:

“

She's in that group that was least likely to be believed, because she's a woman. Not only is she a woman, but she's also a Samaritan. If you look at the social hierarchy of the time, then Jesus is moving down the list, to kind of say, yeah, I can work through anybody.

”

Discuss:

- Why does it matter that Jesus shares the good news with her, and that she shares it with others?

Take action: Living water

Val reflects:

“

For the first time in quite a long time, I feel relatively comfortable and secure. Because I feel calmer and safer inside, you respond differently to people. I'm thinking that in the case of the woman at the well, now she's got that sense of love and faith from Jesus, then she might not need to go out and seek yet more husbands. As something changes inside of us, our external world changes.

”

In this story, Jesus offers the woman a life changing message of good news. This has the potential to change everything. He wants to include her, not despite everything that is going on in her life – but in the midst of it.

Sometimes, we can be the gatekeepers of good news. We judge people based on our view of their circumstances, rather than getting to know them and welcoming them in to our communities. How can we be more like Jesus, sharing the good news without trying to 'tidy up' people's lives beforehand? How can we be more like the disciples, and be challenged by a different way of doing things, which breaks down barriers and includes everyone in our communities?

Discuss:

- How can you listen out for the good news from unlikely places this week?
- What steps can your church community take to address power imbalances and make sure that everyone is included in receiving and sharing the good news?

Action:

Think about one aspect of the life of your church community where power imbalances might stop some people from feeling included. Pray about this area of church life over the next week, and consider what action you could suggest that would reshape this practice or place to ensure everyone can be included.

Closing Prayer

Inclusive God,

Your good news of eternal life is a gift for all of us. We are sorry for the times when we have failed to hear your good news, because we have judged people before listening to the message you have given them to share. Help us to notice where power imbalances are stopping everyone from being part of receiving and sharing your good news. This week, help us to pray and think about the area of church life you have put on each of our hearts today. Help us to see people through your eyes, and be part of transformation.

Amen.

Session Three: On the road to Emmaus, Jesus meets the grieving disciples

In this session, we look at a story which takes place after Jesus' death and resurrection. Two of Jesus' followers are walking on the road to Emmaus, when a man they don't recognise joins them. Through this story, we will explore what it looks like to listen well, and how walking alongside each other in challenging times can be the route to transformation.

Opening Prayer

Living God,

You walk alongside us, even when we do not notice your presence. Thank you that you are our gentle friend, who accompanies us through the ups and downs on the journey of life. Help us to listen well to you and one another as we explore your word today.

Amen.

Read: Luke 24: 13-35 (NIV)

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” “What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.” So, he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Check in, in pairs:

- Is this story familiar to you, or are you hearing it for the first time?
- What surprised you about the story?

“

I think, when he disappeared, I was little bit like, well, you've just left them! You've revealed yourself, and you know, and they've probably got lots of questions for you, but why did you go? Is it... “my work here is done”, you know? That's one thing that stood out for me.

”

Toni

“

One thing for me was, where they tell Jesus everything that was happening. And his response was, how foolish you are!”

”

Steve

Keeping things hidden

“

Why would they have been kept from recognizing him? That's a question I have.

”

Toni

When the disciples first encountered Jesus on the road, the story tells us that they are kept from recognising him. This feels unusual, especially as the disciples shared their sadness about Jesus' death. Steve suggests:

“

I think it is because it enabled him to go through and show how all the script is fitted together. And it wasn't until, you know, almost as soon as they recognised him, they went running back to tell everyone else. So, if he was clearly Jesus right at the beginning, they might have run back and missed how the whole thing fitted together. That then enabled them presumably to bring it all together for the gospel, and actually figure it all out.

”

Perhaps, the fact that the disciples didn't recognise Jesus gave them a chance to listen to what he had to say before they made presumptions about who he was, or whether they should listen to him. Instead, they share their experiences with a stranger, and listen to what he has to say in response.

“

I always interject, and it's not good. But I've got a friend who always says: you should never listen to respond, always listen to understand.

”

Dee

Discuss:

- What would be different in our interactions with other people if we got to know someone before judging them based on first impressions? Do you think curiosity has a role to play when we read the Bible?

Walking alongside grief

“

The men, they seemed, initially at least, quite burdened. You know, low. Their minds were burdened.

”

Toni

The story tells us that the disciple's faces are downcast. They speak about their hope that Jesus would be the one to deliver them, but that his death has broken this hope.

“

The person that they knew and thought was going to save them from the Romans – it all went horribly wrong. They kind of thought, well, that's it. It's all finished. And then they had this weird experience where some of the others were saying, we've been told he's risen again. It just doesn't make any sense. And so, they were on their way to go back home after thinking, well, that's it, it's all finished. Then, a stranger starts to say to them: it's not like that. This is how everything you've believed and been taught fits together, and that person really is the Messiah!

”

Steve

Before he reveals himself, Jesus walks alongside the disciples in their grief. He listens to their sadness, and rather than trying to fix their problems straight away, he creates space for them to process how they are feeling.

Steve reflects:

“

It's something that we kind of do through the food banks, isn't it? It's not just about giving the food – that's just a small part of it. If we just focused on that, and kind of going through the process, then we would miss the bigger picture, and not really make as much of a difference for people. It might take a few days, but it's having somebody sit down and find out what the issues are. Just listening is the one thing that consistently comes up, and that's what really makes a difference to people.

”

“

I see Jesus as someone who's empowering and enabling without doing for them. I think sometimes we miss the purpose of walking alongside people in a humble way. It is life-affirming. I think it affirms us as human beings. I think it is life changing. And I don't mean that dramatically, I mean it in a quiet way.

”

Toni

Discuss:

- Why do you think it was important for Jesus to walk alongside them as a stranger, and listen to their grief?

Heart of hospitality

Whilst Jesus is still a stranger to them, the disciples invite him into their homes. This offer of hospitality becomes a transformative moment where, as Jesus breaks the bread, his true identity is revealed. Steve reflects:

“

I think it is showing the importance of the breaking of the bread. That was one of the last things Jesus did with the disciples before the crucifixion, and then one of the first things that he's done afterwards.

”

Abe says:

“

You see that a lot in Jesus, that he was building a community. Even in that little act towards the end - I mean, this is the superstar, he's like the main character of the story. He's just resurrected from the dead. What would you be doing going in their home and sharing their little breads? The humility of that is just crazy. He goes in there, and he sits with them, and he does community with them. For me, that's huge.

”

Discuss:

- When was the last time you shared hospitality with a stranger? What happened?
- Why do you think Jesus chooses something as essential as bread to be important in this transformative moment?

“

My understanding is that it would have been a lot more common for them in those days to welcome people in. Something that we wouldn't even dream of these days, really.

”

Steve

“

I think hospitality is just fundamental. I think it's so important. It's what knits us together rather than divides us and pushes us apart from one another.

”

Toni

“

And I think sometimes you see that in church as well, there's lots of people that don't know each other, but it's so symbolic and important, and you're connected by the food.

”

Dee

It all turns around

When Jesus reveals himself to the disciples, the story tells us that “they got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.” In this moment, their grief turns to joy. Where they had once been walking away from their hope that Jesus was the Messiah, they now turn around and run back towards their community.

“

It’s a sharing, of joy, of hope. Of something that they can only share. They need to share it! They can’t contain it and keep it for themselves. Their impulse is to share it with the other people that are part of their community.

”

Toni

“

Yeah, when you hear something good, you want to be part of it. I think that’s why the disciples returned, because they wanted to be connected.

”

Dee

“

A lot of us, we've been at points where it's been the deepest, darkest points of our lives. And people being with us and talking to us, and just spending time with us, helped us to realise that there is hope, and that there's so much more to life. Life is worth living. I think that's what really jumps out to me – is that hope and excitement. That turn around movement. I love that.

”

Steve

Discuss:

- Have you ever had exciting news you can't help but share? What did it feel like?
- How can we create communities where people can share their experiences of Jesus with one another, even when it also means talking about the hard times too?

Take action: Turning things around

“

Even helping one person in your whole life is such a good thing, because it literally takes one drop to make a whole ripple. I think just reaching your hand out to someone, just telling someone, I'm here for you, I see you, I'll listen to you. It's so important just to see somebody, just acknowledging them can impact everything.

”

Dee

In this story, Jesus walks alongside the disciples in their grief and challenges. It is because of this journey that when he reveals himself to them, they jump up and turn around, and share the good news with their community. The steps Jesus took alongside them in the midst of their challenges were important.

It also takes bravery from the disciples, to share their challenges with a stranger. They connect as they go on the journey together, and share food and hospitality. Walking humbly together helps them to build enough trust that they can support one another in the hard times, as well as the good.

Discuss:

- Are there changes you could make in your church community that would help you be alongside people in their challenges?

Action:

Can you make sharing a cup of tea a central part of your community? If you run a food bank, could you make space for everyone who comes in to be offered a drink, and a chance to chat to a volunteer? Perhaps you could also do this in your church services, or other projects. What needs to change to make sure you have enough time to stop and listen well to the people you meet?

Closing Prayer

God who is with us on the journey,
we thank you that you share with us in the challenging times, and
transform our grieving into gladness. The news of your
resurrection is joyful and transformative, and has the power to turn
our journey around. Help us to make space; walk humbly alongside
the people we encounter, making space to listen well. Remind us
that you are on the journey with us too.

Amen.

Session Four: On the road to Jericho, Jesus heals Bartimaeus

In this session, we meet Jesus as he is walking on the road through Jericho, followed by a large crowd. As he passes through, he encounters Bartimaeus, who is sitting at the side of the road. Through this story, we'll explore how we feel about stories of healing and what it means for people to participate in their own transformation.

Opening Prayer

Attentive God,

Thank you that you notice and call each and every one of us. As we explore your word today, help us to listen to your calling on our hearts and lives today, as we work to show your justice and love in the world.

Amen.

Read: Mark 10:46-52 (NIV)

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to

be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.” “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Check in, in pairs:

- Is this story familiar to you, or are you hearing it for the first time?
- How do you feel about stories in the Bible where Jesus heals people?

Stories of healing

“

I think I perhaps have mixed feelings, if I'm honest. Are certain people then picked out for healing? You know, what's that about?

”

Toni

This story is one of several in the New Testament where people with illnesses or disabilities are healed by Jesus, including stories where Jesus heals people who are blind. In this story, when Jesus heals Bartimaeus, Jesus says: “Your faith has made you well.”

Steve reflects:

“

There are so many different things you can hear in churches about not being healed. Like ‘Obviously you don’t have enough faith’, or ‘maybe its unconfessed sin’. I’ve even heard, kind of, generational sin and things like that. It’s not helpful, because I know that for whatever reason, my health isn’t all as it should be. But I know that God can and does heal, sometimes instantly. So being told that it’s my fault – that’s not what this passage or many other say. It’s saying that in this case, Jesus chose to heal him, there and then. That is not always the case.

”

Discuss:

- How do you feel about the phrase: “Your faith has made you well”?
- What narratives have you heard expressed about disability or illness in church spaces? Do you find these helpful or challenging?

“

Does it mean that if you have three-quarters of faith, or your faith is consistent in a certain way every single day, that you will be rewarded? Is that what Jesus is alluding to there?

”

Toni

“

In my version, it says: ‘go, for your faith has healed you.’ Which is more about Jesus saying your faith in me has healed you, because you persisted in asking me for help.

”

Val

What do you want me to do for you?

One of the distinctive parts of this healing story, which makes it different from others in the New Testament, is that Jesus asks Bartimaeus: “What do you want me to do for you?” Instead of presuming that because Bartimaeus is blind he would like his sight restored, Jesus puts the decision in Bartimaeus’ hands.

Read the reflections from Laura, Steve and Val below:

“

I suffer with my mental health, and sometimes in church people say, “Jesus can heal you”. But I don’t know if I want him to. I’ve had this illness my whole life, so I don’t know who I would be. For Jesus to say, “what can I do for you?” – If he came to me and said that, I might say I’m fine. Obviously I don’t like my mental illness when I’m having bad days... I’m very 50:50 on this one. It’s a bit of my identity.

”

Laura

“

I've been in really dark places, with my mental health, and with addiction. But I've become a lot more confident and comfortable with who I am. So that side of things has been healing. I think certain parts of us that might be healed help us to be included. But it doesn't mean we have to be in the perfect body and the perfect mind. Nobody's perfect.

”

Steve

“

I lived with massive debt for years and years. It's still my go-to place, if I'm ever worried, I think about money. But when I finally got to the point where I paid off my debts, it was the most discombobulated I had ever been! It was so scary. Because, it was like, well who am I then, if I don't have this? When change happens, that's why people go back to what's safe and familiar. I think we need to recognise this – because change is stressful.

”

Val

Discuss:

- Why do you think it is important that Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he would like him to do for him?

Persistence

In this story, Bartimaeus is persistent. When he hears that Jesus is coming past, he cries out to him, even when the people around him are telling him to be quiet. Laura and Dee reflect:

“

I like this one, because it's him shouting, knowing that Jesus can heal him. Everyone is telling him to be quiet, but he actually says I'm here, come here, help me. Even though everyone else says, shh, you can't do that, he says no, because I know he can heal me.

”

Laura

“

You know, I feel like his faith is stronger than the social stigma he's used to. He's like, yeah, I don't care what you think. He just blanks them out, because his faith is stronger than that.

”

Dee

Discuss:

- Why do you think Bartimaeus' persistence matters in this story?

The character of the crowd

There is a big crowd following Jesus, who go past Bartimaeus sitting on the road side. It must have been noisy and overwhelming for Bartimaeus, who could not see what was going on. When he begins to cry out, they tell him to be quiet. Often, people with disabilities feel unseen or ignored by people around them. Dee and Steve reflect:

“

I've seen it a lot in care. When you have to lift somebody, people talk to the other members of staff, rather than the person, rather than making them involved. I can only imagine how scary it is, like with the man in the story as well.

”

Dee

“

It's similar with a lot of disabilities. Especially with wheelchairs. People will speak to the person behind you, rather than to the person in the wheelchair.

”

Steve

Discuss:

- Have you ever felt unseen or unheard? How did it feel?

Jesus shows the crowd a different way to respond to Bartimaeus. Instead of telling him to be quiet, he calls him up. Toni reflects:

“

Maybe it taught them some compassion. Maybe they would reflect on that if they had the will to, and the insight, and the empathy to rethink it. But discrimination of disabled people goes on as we speak. And whilst we're trying to challenge it on all fronts, it speaks to the mindset of the crowd. There are always going to be people that sadly will not stand up and speak up, because the crowd has power. You know, no action is action.

”

Discuss:

- Are there situations in the life of the church today which make people feel like Bartimaeus, being ignored by the crowd?

A new beginning for Bartimaeus

In the story, Bartimaeus begins on the outskirts of society. He's on the side of the road, and not being invited to join in with the crowd who are following Jesus. However, by the end of the story, we hear that Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way with the rest of the crowd. Phil reflects:

“

I think it's not the fact that the man is blind that's the problem here. It's the fact that the society and the community shunned him. He was on the outskirts of that community because he was blind. So, the problem to be solved is the community. To me, sounds like Jesus has been chatting, and people in Jericho have gone, this guy sounds great, I'm going to follow him. And yet Bartimaeus is left. What's really interesting is at the end of the passage, he follows Jesus. He joins in, he's part of the community, he's part of the crowd. I find it problematic that we might read this as: well he's blind, therefore he's an issue, therefore we have to solve it. Actually, it was the community, it was the other people that were the problem.

”

Bartimaeus' life is transformed in many ways by this encounter with Jesus.

Discuss:

- What could you do in your church community that would help people who have previously been excluded or kept on the edges of society to become a more integrated part of the community?

“

When I got baptised, a phrase that was important was: “the old has gone and the new has come”. It’s such a breathtaking moment. You want to be shouting, or say, oh my gosh this just happened to me! I don’t know how to put it into words.

”

Dee

Take action: Who do we want to be?

“

I suppose the challenge is, are we the crowd, saying to people – be quiet, or are we saying be part of this community, be part of our group?

”

Steve

When we don’t create communities that are welcoming and inclusive or everyone, we miss out on all that people have to offer. Phil reflects:

“

We don't get to hear everyone's name in the Bible. So why do we know Bartimaeus' name? I think to think that when the gospel writers include a name, it's because the people who are reading it would know who that is. They'd go "oh Bartimaeus, he's one of us!" People would say "we remember him, he's part of our community". It makes me hopeful that there was a lasting legacy from this moment, that he did remain part of the community, he was part of the early church.

”

This story presents us with a challenge. Too often, without even realising it, we can ignore people who are crying out to be welcomed and included. As communities, we can make different choices, to help us to listen and respond as Jesus does.

Discuss:

- What is one thing you will do differently, to listen out for the voices of people who often go unheard?
- If you do this – what change would you be hoping to see?

“

Don't be afraid to ask. And don't marginalise people who do, or who have needs.

”

Val

“

With a lot of us, we've been to that point of needing to ask for help with the food bank, or something else. It then requires somebody saying, yeah, that's okay, come on in.

”

Steve

“

It just takes five minutes. It just takes putting yourself in the shoes of that person, and having empathy.

”

Toni

Jesus stops when he hears Bartimaeus, and asks him to come over to him. This moment of invitation is a crucial turning point in the story. Even though the crowd will not listen to him, Jesus hears Bartimaeus' voice. Laura says:

“

In my version of the story, it says “Come on, he's calling you”. And I just think: Jesus calls us every day, doesn't he? We just have to be there to hear it.

”

Action:

Over the next few weeks, keep a note of times when you hear something which surprises you, or speaks to you in a particular way. In a few weeks' time, take a moment to look at your notes. Pray through them, asking God to show you the messages you need to hear. Are they from unlikely places?

Closing Prayer

God, you call us every day, deeper into your friendship and love. Help us to be ready to hear you call, even when you choose to use unlikely messengers. Strengthen us, that we would not be dismissive like the crowd, but like you we would invite other people in, and listen to what they have to share.

Amen.

Session Five: Jesus travels to Bethany, and is anointed by Mary

Split into two groups

In this session, we are going to split into two groups. One group will look at the story from Mary's perspective. The other group will look at the story from Judas' perspective. Assign everyone to a group before you read the story.

For this session, you might need extra Bibles, or copies of the story, and a copy of the notes for 'Group One' (55-57) and 'Group Two'(58-59) in this booklet for a leader to read from. Each group will need to agree who will share a summary of their conversation with the wider group too.

In this session, Jesus pauses on his journey to attend a dinner given in his honour. His friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus are there. During the dinner, Mary's actions cause controversy. Through this story, we'll explore if money ever gets in the way of faith.

Opening Prayer

God, who joins us when we gather together here, thank you that you want to be part of our lives and have a relationship with us. As we explore your word today, help us to notice the things that can get in the way of really knowing you. Strengthen us to move beyond our preconceptions, and learn to worship you. Amen.

Read: John 12: 1-8 (NIV)

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume, she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, asking "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Check in, in pairs:

- Is this story familiar to you, or are you hearing it for the first time?
- From your first impressions, what do you think this story is about?

Group One: Mary's story

You will be looking at the story from Mary's perspective.

What has happened to Mary before this moment? How did we arrive here? Take a moment to look at what happens before this story. Invite someone in the group to read John 11.

Read John 11

Tad and Steve reflect:

“

I wonder if Mary's has asked herself: What has Jesus given us? He's given us back Lazarus! Even a year's worth of wages... how do you compare that to a life? So, from Lazarus and his sister's perspective, Jesus has given them so much. Is this a recognition of that? Mary thanking him for that.

”

Tad

“

There's something about giving somebody something of value. Because that says, you are important. And maybe partly what Jesus was saying was, okay, I recognise that you spent a year's wages, just to say, you are so important to me.

”

Steve

Discuss:

- How is Mary feeling during this story?
- What is Mary trying to say with her actions?

What if, rather than being a story about wealth, this is a story about worship? In this story, Mary is responding to the compassion Jesus has shown to her family with an extravagant demonstration of her gratitude, worshipping Jesus with her action. Steve reflects:

“

There is a mirroring, of Mary giving everything she has to thank Jesus for what he did. For us, Jesus died, and gave everything he had to save us. In some ways, we are Mary then, asking: what are we giving Jesus in return? Have we been asked to give everything?

”

Perhaps, Jesus is not giving a sermon about poverty here. (We can see him do that in Luke 20:45 – 21:4). Instead, this is a story that shows a beautiful, intense moment of gratitude and worship – which is interrupted by a disagreement about money. ‘The poor will always be with you’ is only half of Jesus’ response to Judas. In saying it, he points towards Deuteronomy 15, where God commands generosity at an individual and societal level. In these verses, there is an aspiration, that if people follow God’s commands to be generous with their resources, then together with God’s faithfulness: ‘there will be no one needy among you’!

To get distracted by the price of perfume means we can miss this call to justice, which is interwoven with Jesus' invitation to generosity, and to participate in his way of life.

Discuss:

- Do we let money get in the way of faith?
- Can you think of examples where this might be happening, in small or large ways, in your church context? Consider Dee and Toni's reflections:

“

I feel like, for some churches, I guess monetary value is important. I've seen that before. Like, some churches can be quite cliquey. But others, it honestly doesn't matter how much money you've got, if you're there and you're a good person, then that's all that matters.

”

Dee

“

You know the whole idea of passing a bowl around and people putting their donations in? If someone passes that bowl and doesn't put money in... it feels like judgement. I've seen that sense of, well, if I've got to put money in, so have you. We should find a way of not making it so obvious who's contributing and who's not. It's a very contentious subject, money.

”

Toni

Group Two: Judas' story

You will be looking at the story from Judas' perspective.

In this story, we get a glimpse of Judas' character, before we find out about his involvement with Jesus' death. Of course, the gospel writers already knew how Judas was involved, and might have been trying to build up an impression of Judas' character here.

“

You know, there, Judas shows his duplicity, doesn't he? Because it said that he would help himself to the money that's meant for the poor, and so he was quite inflamed by the fact that this precious expensive perfume is wasted, and the money could have gone in that money bag.

”

Toni

Steve reflects:

“

You'd expect that to be the point, that using the perfume like this is kind of a waste of money. That it could have been used on something better. But I think the question is being asked by the wrong person. So, because Judas was stealing the money, he wasn't asking for the right motivations. It just seems a bit strange, and completely against what we might expect.

”

Discuss:

- What do you think are Judas' motivations here?
- What do you think your reaction to this moment would have been?

The disagreement in this story is caused by judgement. Judas is judging Mary for the way she has spent her money, and feels entitled to comment.

Discuss:

- Have you ever felt judged about how you have used your money? Or have you ever judged anyone else about how they are using their money?
- Is there ever a situation where it is okay to judge how someone uses their money?

When we read this story in isolation, we don't get to find out about Mary's relationship to Jesus. We hear in the story that the dinner was being given in Jesus' honour. But why? Ask someone in the group to read John 11, the chapter which comes before this one.

Discuss:

- How does this context change how you see Mary's actions?

As a whole group

Agree someone from each group to reflect back:

- Following your discussions, what do you think this story is about?
- What did you learn from looking at this story from Mary/Judas' perspectives?

Take action: What is our challenge?

“

There's givers and there's takers. Judas was a taker; Mary was a giver. Does that make some sense? Because it does to me.

”

Toni

When it comes to creating church communities which are welcoming to people from all walks of life, how can we have a more open attitude around money? How might the way we approach money affect whether people feel welcome in our community?

Read Toni, Laura and Shirley's reflections:

“

Be open-minded. It's quite a complex passage, with multiple meanings. But my challenge, I think, would be to keep very open minded about it all.

”

Toni

“

What does the word poor mean to you? What can you do to help the poor?

”

Laura

“

Look for a lack of judgement of people. There's a great saying that says: while you're pointing one finger at someone, you've got three fingers pointing back at you.

”

Shirley

Discuss:

- What steps could you take in your church community to make sure that money doesn't get in the way of faith?

Take action: As a group

Consider one action you could take in your church to change how money is used and viewed. If you have the power in the group to change this, make a commitment. If you need to talk to someone else, such as a church council or PCC, make a plan for how you will do this.

Closing Prayer

Generous God,

All you desire from us is our love. We are sorry for when we let other things get in the way of our love for you, like money or judgement. Help us to create communities of faith where everyone can come to know and worship you, without fear of judgement or exclusion. Strengthen us to seek justice and equality, so that money won't create barriers to anyone's flourishing.

Amen.

Session Six: Jesus pauses his journey and eats with a crowd of 5,000

In this final session, Jesus' journey pauses, as he sits with a crowd of 5,000 people. When they are together, the disciples face a challenge as to how they can find enough food to feed everyone there. Through this story, we'll explore what it means to be fed until we're full, and how we can be part of Jesus' miraculous transformation.

Opening Prayer

Loving God,

When we are longing for change, you always meet us with your love. When we are hungry, you feed us until we are full. As we explore your word today, help us to listen to our own longing and hunger, and to look for your sustenance in the good news you have to give.

Amen.

Read: Mark 6: 30-44 (NIV)

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many

who saw them leaving recognised them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So, he began teaching them many things. By this time, it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." When they found out, they said, "Five – and two fish." Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So, they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Check in, in pairs:

- Is this story familiar to you, or are you hearing it for the first time?
- This is one of many of Jesus' stories that is centred around food. Why do you think this happens?

Lost sheep

When we meet Jesus at the start of this story, he's trying to get some space. He has spent time teaching, healing and talking to the crowds. From the passages just before this story, we also know that his

cousin, John the Baptist, has just been killed by the authorities. We might imagine that Jesus was tired, and grieving for the loss of his friend. When the crowd followed him, we might reasonably expect that he was a little annoyed!

However, the story tells us that Jesus' response was different: "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

Toni and Laura reflect:

“

Hearing about the people being lost touched me. Because sometimes, I feel like a rabbit in headlights, just getting through the day. But that touched me, the generosity, you know, feeding people.

”

Toni

“

When he said that they were like sheep without a shepherd, I just thought: that's what I felt like before I found Jesus. I was a lost sheep, running around fields on my own, not knowing what I was doing. And the other thing that struck me was that Jesus said, let's go to the quiet place, because we've not had time to eat ourselves, and he gets there and it's just as busy. He's so wonderful, he's not even bothered about that. He's like, oh well, we'll just feed them then. It just got me that he was just like, let's get this done.

”

Laura

Discuss:

- Have you ever experienced someone's compassion and care when you felt lost? What did this feel like?
- Jesus responds to the crowd by teaching them, and feeding them. Why do you think both of these things were important to him?

Relying on God to provide

When it's getting late, the disciples can see that the people are hungry and need something to eat. We don't find out who is in the crowd, and whether they have the resources to go and buy food, as the disciples suggest. From Jesus' other stories, we know that often some people following Jesus were struggling or needed his help. Perhaps that was the case for some of the people in this crowd. Laura reflects:

“

It made me think of when I was using food banks. It relates to this story a little because I had to go to somebody else to provide food for my son. I didn't even have enough to feed myself. It makes me think about the food bank being Jesus in my story, if that makes sense. I had to lean on them to feed me and my child.

”

Discuss:

- Have you ever had to rely on someone else for food? How did it feel?
- Why do you think Jesus thought it was important to feed the crowd?

The disciples didn't think they had the resources to feed the crowd. They weren't convinced by Jesus' belief that they would find a way to feed the crowd, and wanted to send people away to find their own food. When they found five loaves and two fishes, they probably didn't believe that this was going to solve the problem.

Discuss:

- Why do you think they struggled to trust that Jesus would provide?

Feeding until you're full

One of the many miraculous things about this story is that by the end, everyone leaves full and the disciples collect up 12 baskets of leftovers. What begins as a challenge to find enough finishes with plenty.

Discuss:

- Why do you think the story includes this detail about leftovers?
- If you were struggling with food insecurity, how do you think this story would feel to listen to?

Toni and Laura reflect:

“

You know, I don't feel like my fridge is empty. In giving to others, I feel that it fills me up. It doesn't empty me.

”

Toni

“

Jesus never just gives you a handful of things, does he? He doesn't drip feed you. He doesn't give the bare minimum. He always goes above and beyond.

”

Laura

Jesus' response to the challenge is to create generosity. Toni's reflection shows that for her, generosity is always the best, most fulfilling response. This is a reflection of God's caring response, even in challenging times.

Take action: Handing out plenty

In this story, Jesus blesses the little food that they have, and gives it to the disciples to hand out. It is in this process that the disciples probably realised that they had more than enough! Jesus makes the disciples get involved with the miracle – they are invited to participate.

Dee reflects:

“

My food bank is in a church, and every six weeks we have a different meal. Sometimes we have meals from different cultures. One of the six weeks, it's bring your own, so everyone brings at least one think from home, and then we have dinner together. I usually bring brownies and flapjacks, and then people bring salad, meat or something. Each person might spend two or three quid, but by the end of it, everyone is fed. And you get to try different things! It's like that in this story, everyone bringing little bits. It doesn't seem like much, but it is when it's all added together.

”

Discuss:

- What do you think this story has to tell us about the role we have to play in making change?
- How can we be church communities who go above and beyond for other people?

Review of the six sessions

Over the last six sessions, we've looked together at different stories where Jesus has walked humbly alongside people in their different circumstances. We've seen examples of what it looks like to come alongside one another in the midst of life's challenges, to share the good news together, and to create communities where everyone can belong.

Discuss:

- What one key thing are you taking away from these bible studies?
- What one thing will you do differently now as a result of these conversations?
- What would you like to learn about next?

Closing prayer

Generous God,

Thank you that you have walked alongside us, as we have explored your word and listened to one another over the last six weeks. Thank you for the things we have seen for the first time, or new perspectives that have grown in conversation. As we go from this place, help us to hold onto our confidence in your love and justice. Strengthen us to have courage in the face of challenge, and to build communities where all of your children can belong.

Amen.

What's next?

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