

Lincoln Methodist Circuit

Lectionary 2017/18

“Holy Habits”

A series on discipleship

based on the book by Andrew Roberts

Quarter 2 part 2

January- February

Introduction

The first quarter of our first year together as a new circuit looked at what discipleship is and we hope, fanned our desire to “know him clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly day by day” (Richard of Chichester). The Advent series gave an opportunity to see discipleship in action in the lives of the main characters in the nativity story. In this quarter we move on to the “how” of discipleship, the “Holy Habits” themselves. But because January focuses on the Covenant service it seemed appropriate to pick up the threads by linking discipleship to the concept of covenant, with the opportunity in the service itself to recommit and “renew our covenant with God”. The service exploring “The concept of covenant” may be before or after the covenant service itself.

This quarter also has the first “practical” session, putting into action the habit of fellowship instead of a conventional sermon. There will be a separate briefing for churches with ideas for this, although we have included this briefing in with these preachers notes to give you an idea of what might happen: we hope you will really encourage people to come and do something different. The idea is for churches to take the initiative in a way appropriate for their situation, explore the reality of “Life together with Jesus” and give worship leaders (where available) a chance to develop their gifts. However it will still be appropriate to have accredited preachers present: we hope you will be able to liaise with churches to work out how best to use everyone’s gifts and skills to make these services make theory come to life.

As the last Holy Habits service in the quarter is on the “theory” of reading the Bible we have put in the church briefing on the practical session for this as well, even though it actually comes in quarter 3.

The numbering of the sections matches the Plan (2 is the Covenant service so there is no specific material for this). Holy Habits chapter numbers are in brackets at the end of the title. Attached with this is additional material for possible use for Introduction to the Holy Habits or Holy Habitats (courtesy of Margaret Roe –she has already used it at Moorland Park and W’boro) and a PowerPoint for reading the bible

May you know much blessing as you work on preparation. Our prayer is that we may all grown not only in knowledge of the truth but in our daily discipleship walk in it.

Tim Hirst)
Ian Lacy)
Chris Marsh) “The team”
David Sheehan)
David Stubbs)

1. The Concept of Covenant (not in “Holy Habits”)

This is of course not in “Holy Habits” as such but the Covenant Service is an integral part of our experience of “discipleship in the Methodist tradition”. Having looked at what discipleship is in Q1 it seemed a good idea for us all to have the opportunity to be reminded of what we are signing up as disciples to before we start on the “How” of discipleship. In addition covenant is a major theme in Scripture that many in our churches may not be familiar with.

Introduction

When we put our name to a contract we are making a legally enforceable agreement. We expect to obtain what the other party says they will deliver (or pay us): we are promising to pay for it (or deliver). Although we do not usually think of following Jesus as a contract and Jesus called his disciples to follow him without any formal agreement the concept of a “structure” to our relationship with God is deeply embedded in the Bible. Looking at “covenant” will enable us to see discipleship in a different way that should help us to understand the seriousness of “In obedience we hear and accept your commands; in love we seek to do your perfect will: with joy we offer ourselves anew to you.”

These notes are intended to help with preparation for a service before or after the Covenant Service itself. There is much more material than you will use or need but it may help you in your preparation to have a broad view of how God has dealt with his people over the millennia.

A summary of “Covenant”

- 1) God’s grace – his initiative, not our deserving
- 2) Sealed by sacrifice. Just as a new UK law does not come into effect until it has the royal seal applied, so sacrifice – of animals in the OT, of Jesus in the NT – brings God’s covenant into effect.
- 3) Blessing, not burden: keeping our promise to stay close to God keeps us in the position where we can continue to receive the blessings of the life he promises.
- 4) Renewing our promise regularly reminds us of his promises, and so challenges, encourages and comforts us.

The background to covenant in the OT¹

The concept of covenant was widespread in the ancient Near East. Sometimes it was a treaty between equals, usually related to boundaries and the return of runaway slaves. Solomon’s agreement with Hiram (1 Kings 5v1) to trade timber for food was of

¹ These notes are largely based on New Bible Dictionary 3rd edition 1996 IVP

this nature. However there were also “vassal” covenants or treaties between a great power and a lesser one (e.g. Israel’s agreement with the Gibeonites in Joshua c9-10. These might be phrased in friendly terms – “father and son” or sterner – “Lord and servant”. They had a standard format.

- 1) A preamble where the Great King is introduced with all his titles
- 2) A historical prologue, giving a history of the relationship between the Great King and the vassal and his ancestors (using actual events with an emphasis on the benevolence of the Great King).
- 3) The conditions necessary for the vassal to continue in the Great King’s favour which might include:
 - a) No relationships with other powers outside the are of the Great King’s influence.
 - b) Giving support to the Great King on request.
 - c) Paying taxes.
- 4) Arrangements to put the treaty somewhere safe and read it occasionally
- 5) A list of witnesses (the appropriate gods, or natural events)
- 6) A list of curses if the treaty was broken (some divine, some the Great Kings wrath)
- 7) A list of blessings if the treaty was kept (especially the long term security of the vassal king’s dynasty)

Covenants in the OT

- 1) Between God and Noah Genesis c6, 8 and 9
 - a) Noah is to build an ark (Genesis 6 v18), not eat meat with the blood still in it and be fruitful and multiply (Gen 9)
 - b) God promises protection from wild animals and never again to flood the earth
 - c) The rainbow is a witness of the promise
 - d) Noah makes a sacrifice.
- 2) Between God and the patriarchs Genesis 15,17)
 - a) The emphasis here is on God’s promises of he land and many descendants)
 - b) Abraham is called not to be afraid (Gen 15 v1 and to walk before God and be blameless (c17 v1)
 - c) There is a sacrifice (c15 v9- 17) which is a visual demonstration of God’s promise.
 - d) Circumcision is an ongoing reminder of the covenant. (c 17)
 - e) The covenant is renewed with Jacob (Genesis c28 v13-20): Joseph lives by it (Genesis 50v14-25)
- 3) The covenant at Sinai

The giving of the Law in Exodus 19- 24 follows the pattern of “Great King/vassal” treaties closely except that the initiative is all on God’s side

 - a) The Lord makes himself known as he is (c19)

- b) He reminds Israel of what he has done for them (c20 v2)
 - c) He gives a broad policy outline in c20, then detailed stipulations in c21-23
 - d) The law is read out (c24 v3,7), written down (c24 v12) and kept safe (c25 v21).
 - e) There are witnesses – Moses, Aaron and the 70 elders
 - f) There is the promise of blessing (c 23 v20-33). (The warnings are implicit but spelled out elsewhere).
- 4) The covenant with David
- This can be seen as an extension of Sinai, made necessary because so many of the original promises had been fulfilled: the people had increased and now possessed the land they had been promised.
- God now extends the promises to his people. 2 Samuel 7 promises an eternal reign for David's descendants (as great Kings did in secular treaties) but Psalms 2 and 110 take this beyond human descendants to the promise of a King who will reign forever.
- 5) Renewal and ratification
- a) Renewal implies either the treaty period has expired (but God's promises don't) or that the terms have been broken. Exodus 32-34 tells how Israel broke the Covenant ("no other gods before me, no idols") and the consequent curse (Ex 32 v26-28). Moses had to mediate the renewal (Ex 34): note how God made Moses himself a witness (v29-35).
 - b) Jeremiah saw the covenant as so broken that it could only be replaced by a new one (Jer c31 v31-34)
 - c) The prophets are full of the ideas of covenant, though they take a wider approach and look at different elements. The idea of a lawsuit – God summoning the people to court to "sue" them for breach of covenant, usually by worshipping other gods – is common (Deuteronomy 32, Isaiah c1 v2-3, 10-20 Jeremiah 2 v4-13, Micah 6 v1-8). Judgement is pronounced and heaven and earth are often called as witnesses.
 - d) However covenants can be confirmed- ratified – either after being remade or on special occasions (Joshua c23-24) It is thought that the great annual festivals involved an element of remembering the Covenant (The feast of weeks - Pentecost – became a celebration of the giving of the Law).
- 6) Old Testament covenant in context of the New
- a) Covenant is a central idea in expressing the relationship between God and his people (though of course there are other expressions as well e.g. shepherd and flock, father and children)
 - b) The possibility of breaking covenant –sin – is inherent in the stipulations/penalty clauses.

- c) There is an emphasis on promise and expectation, leading on to the expectation of Messiah
- d) The anticipation of a new Covenant links OT and NT.

Covenant in the NT

- 1) Jesus links the giving of the bread and wine at the Last Supper to the giving of his own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, stating that this giving of his blood is the new covenant (Matt 26 v27, Mark 14 v24², Luke 22 v20, 1 Cor 11 v23-25)
- 2) Jesus is identifying himself as the Passover (pesach –hence paschal) Lamb of the New Covenant: a new arrangement between God and people, initiated by God, with the initiative taken by God, promising blessing to his people and sealed by sacrifice. (of course the death of Christ is much more than that: the various aspects are explored in a way that links the old system and the new in Hebrews)
- 3) There are links to:
 - a) The covenant with Abraham, where the sacrifice was a solemn confirmation of God’s promise.
 - b) The Passover itself where the death of a lamb and its blood on the doorposts meant that those “under the blood” were protected from God’s righteous anger (In Gal 3 v13 Paul sees Jesus s taking on himself the curse – righteous verdict - of the Law instead of us)
 - c) The sacrificial system of the OT (summed up in Heb 9 v22- “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”) but which was ultimately ineffective (Heb 10 v1-4): “but Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many” (Heb 9 v26b -28a)
 - d) The “Davidic” extension of the covenant to an eternal King (Heb 1 v2-3, 10 v12-13)
 - e) Jeremiah’s vision of a new covenant within hearts and written on minds (Heb 10 v15-18)

Covenant now

- 1) Because of what Christ has done for us on the Cross we are, as God’s people, safe and secure and need not (indeed cannot) do anything to add to that. The Covenant stands, guaranteed by God and we are the beneficiaries of his grace and mercy, as friends brothers, sons rather than the vassals of the ancient treaties (John 15 v15)

² In Matthew and Mark “new” is not in all manuscripts but it is in Luke)

- 2) Just as the people of Israel needed regular opportunities to be reminded of their relationship with God in order to maintain it so do we. We are still human and God knows has made provision for our tendency to forget or even deliberately go off course. God gave Israel a system of reminders of the Covenant in the festivals and special national occasions so they could ratify/confirm (and if necessary restore) their relationship and he has provided opportunities when we too can remember and re-commit.
- 3) Although our own times with God and church services (especially the communion service) are such opportunities the Covenant Service is a solemn annual event at a time when we expect both to look back at the past year and at the same time look forward to what is to come.
- 4) The Covenant Service makes explicit:
 - a) What God has done for us (“in Jesus Christ, Our Lord, in his life, work, death and resurrection”) (a *reminder*)
 - b) What he expects of us as a *result* of our being his redeemed people. We are now in *relationship* with him (“New life in Christ”) and the relationship must work out in how we live.
 - c) How we should *respond*: not to repay what we owe but because “We are no longer our own but yours”
 - i) “You are my friends if you do what I command. This is my command is this: Love each other in the same way I have loved you” (John 15 v14, 12)
- 5) Note that though the response in individual (“I am no longer my own”) it is in the context of a gathering of God’s people (“the Lord has made an everlasting covenant of peace with his people”)

Possible illustrations of “covenants” and their reaffirmation

- 1) Signing and then renewing a lease (responsibilities and privileges of landlord and tenant)
- 2) Marriage vows (cf the implied inequality in “Love, honour and obey” and the equality of “to love and to cherish” in the light of the comments on ancient treaties!). Witnesses are present, rings are exchanged (a sign of one-ness but also costly). There is a celebration and the event is recorded in the register and remembered at anniversaries, sometimes with special renewal of promises.
- 3) Employment contracts and annual appraisals and reviews.
- 4) Agreement with your children - pocket money in exchange for regular chores.

Group notes for “ The Concept of Covenant”

Because the Covenant Service includes communion not all churches can have it on the same day. So some of you may do this study before the service and some after. But in either case you as followers of Jesus will have an opportunity to consider again what it is you have signed up for! ³

Starting off

- 1) This may well be your first group meeting since Christmas –so enjoy some time together sharing the good things (and perhaps the more difficult things) that you experienced.
- 2) Now think back to 2017. What was the most important thing you learned over the year?
- 3) What are your hopes and expectations for 2018 –for yourself, your family, your church?

Beginnings

- 1) What encounters have you had with the law? Not (we hope!) in a criminal sense but life events that involve signing documents that have legal implications⁴, that mean you can no longer simply change your mind and go back. Think about one of these.
- 2) What is/was good about being “legally bound”? Was there any down side at the time? Was it always been easy to stick to the terms laid down?

Background.

In the Near Eastern world in Old Testament times it was common for kings and other leaders to make treaties. Sometimes these were between equals to minimise the risk of disputes (e.g. Genesis 26 v26-31). Sometimes a great king would make a treaty with a lesser king. The lesser king would agree not to go elsewhere for assistance, to honour and respect the great king, to provide resources (men, money, materials) when requested in return for the great king’s protection and friendship and his ensuring the lesser kings descendants would continue to rule. These treaties started off with the titles of the great king and what he had done and concluded with arrangements for sealing the treaty by sacrifice and making sure it was read at intervals.

³ Group leaders; you will probably find there are too many references to cover them all. In preparation select what you think will be most helpful for the group to get the main theme across

⁴ This could be marriage, signing a contract for buying a house or a car, signing a contract for employment or for having lasting power of attorney for someone. Individual experiences may have been painful, so perhaps choose something that you can now make a wry smile about and put it down to experience – like buying a car that was not the bargain it seemed!

But this is the 21st century AD, not 21st century BC....

We think of our relationship to Jesus as being that of friend, brother, teacher and saviour. But we also use terms that suggest there is also a more “formal” element to our relationship. Read Colossians 1 v15- 18, Luke 5 v5, John 13 v12- 17, John 18 v36-37 John 20 v28, What do these titles imply for how we are in relationship to Christ? How do you feel about that?

- 1) What benefits does Jesus promise us as his followers? e.g. Matt 28v20 , John 14 v16, 27, John 15 v11Philippians 4 v19, Col 2 v10, Romans 8 v31-35 etc etc !
- 2) What does Jesus expect of us? John 15v12-17, Ephesians 2v10

So far this sounds a bit like a standard legal agreement – we get blessings in return for paying the premium. Not very different to the covenant made at Mount Sinai – God had rescued his people and promised to give them a new land provided they kept to his rules, with a system to put things right if the people made mistakes in ignorance (animal sacrifices – Hebrews 9 v7).

- 3) Why didn't this work? Isaiah c5 v4,,8,11-12, 18,22-23. (Worth reading the whole chapter later). Hebrews 10 v3
- 4) Israel's OT history demonstrates the fatal flaw in humans. What is it? Isaiah 53 v6a
- 5) If we can't keep covenant by doing right –because we do not really want to – what is the remedy? Jeremiah 31 v31-34
- 6) How did Jesus pick up on this in Luke 22 v19-20? How does it fit in with Isaiah 53 v6b?
- 7) How are we part of this new covenant? How does that affect your approach to the Covenant service?

Consequences

As disciples we are part of God's covenant people. When we “joined up” and became Christians we in effect promised to “love, honour and obey” even if we did not fully understand the implications – we simply trusted in his love for us. Just as those who agreed to treaties were supposed to re- read them at intervals, just as the festivals of the people of Israel reminded them of their relationship to God, just as communion reminds us of what Jesus has done for us, so the Covenant service is an opportunity to remind ourselves whose we really are and to re-commit ourselves and ask for his continuing presence and strength so we can continue to live out who and what we are.

You might like to finish by singing, or prayerfully reading together “O Jesus, I have promised” (StF 563, H&P 704)

3. Introducing the Holy Habits (chapter 7)

Topic: – Life in the early church

Aim: To introduce the Holy Habits through which the Christian church was formed

Content: Roots of 10 “Holy Habits” in Scripture. Personal practice and life rhythms. Habits in the context of community.

Scriptures: OT: Micah 6:6-8 NT Acts 2:42-47

Also consider Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 4

This week forms the pivot point for our themed preaching. Up to now we have been laying the foundations and giving background to the subject of discipleship. From here on we will be looking one by one at the specific Holy Habits revealed in Acts 2:42-47 which our Superintendent Minister has suggested we encourage during the new circuit’s first year.

The devotion and commitment, which was shown by the first disciples as they left the Lakeside to follow Jesus, continued into the early church as disciples grew in numbers. In Acts 2 we find a community acting regularly and “habitually” to support each other through:

Bible teaching

Fellowship

Breaking bread

Prayer

Giving

Service

Eating together

Gladness and generosity

Worship

Making more disciples

All of these Habits have both divine and down-to-earth elements, which go back through the early church to roots in the Old Testament tradition. They do not amount to a set of rules but provide an outline for a way of life.

They can be related to the actions of God’s people throughout the bible and are equally applicable to Christian traditions and communities across the globe. Buzz Aldrin took his Habits of reading the Bible and Breaking Bread to his spacecraft while on the surface of the moon spreading the concept even beyond the limits of Earth!

Discipleship can bring with it great joy but persistence and perseverance through spiritually lean and hard times is of great importance. See Romans 8 and 2 Cor 4.

The aim for Christians is to become more Christ like in our character and this progression should be expressed in the way our lives are lived. Holy Habits are intended to help us routinely act as Jesus did.

Habits can be general in nature as in Micah 6:8 or linked to the calendar with habits formed around daily, weekly, monthly and annual practices.

As we follow habits we learn and are changed as exemplified by the benefits of practice, which is well known in many areas of life including music and sports. Regular and disciplined attention to the Holy Habits allows them to be embedded in the rhythm of our everyday lives.

Forming these habits that, in turn, develop Christian characteristics takes place more effectively within a community of people who have the same aims. Practising Holy Habits can have affects that go beyond our personal development to positively impact the community around us, creating a circle of benefit.

Life rhythms vary between countries and cultures and from individual to individual. We could each examine our own life rhythm to see where we can develop regularly one or more of the Holy Habits that will take us forward in the adventure of discipleship.

The 10 habits selected are interrelated and though we will look at them separately over the coming weeks they can be taken together to outline a way of life for each of us as disciples of Jesus as well as providing direction for the Lincoln circuit as a community.

In future weeks we will be concentrating in turn on each of these particular 10 habits, inspired by the reading from Acts. However there are many other Holy habits that might already be practised in our congregations, regularly or from time to time. These range from stillness, fasting and meditation to celebration and play. Poverty, chastity, obedience and the requirements set out in Micah 6:8 represent more general and all encompassing habits. You may like to look at the groupings of habits given on page 112 of the book.

Group Material for “Introducing Holy Habits”

Imagine 3000 people in Lincoln all coming into faith in a single day. It's a wonderful thought but would we know how to go about sustaining and growing the faith of so many?

This was the problem that had to be solved following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Read Acts 2:38:41

So what would you do with those 3000 new Christians? How would you organise them? What would you suggest they do to become active disciples of Jesus?

As we try to answer those questions now we have the benefit of our knowledge of the traditions and practices that have grown-up over 2000 years within the Christian church. Lets see how the Christian community and their leaders who faced the problem for the first time responded.

Read Acts 2:42-47

How many things can you find that match our activities as a Christian community today? Can you see any differences?

The author Andrew Roberts has identified within Acts 2:42-47 Ten “Holy Habits”. Our superintendent minister has asked that we encourage these habits and practices of discipleship that helped form the first Christian churches, as we go through our first year together within The Lincoln Circuit. We will look at each of the Habits one by one over coming weeks but this week we can take the opportunity to think about the benefits of good habits in general.

Are you keen on sport or do you play a musical instrument? If so you will know the importance of a regular pattern of practice. Practice that is so regular that it becomes a habit is the best way to improve your performance. It also helps to be part of a team or group who can encourage each other. We can develop Holy Habits in the same way and we can be helped both by being supported and by supporting our church community. In what ways does your church community support you? What do you offer back in return?

We all know that we have bad habits but we also have many good habits that are so natural to us that we hardly notice. Can you think of some of these?

The Holy Habits that we will be looking at link together to form a way of life. It is a lifestyle that goes back, not just to the first disciples, but is also demonstrated by all of God's people through the whole of the Bible.

To end read **Micah 6:8** and either individually or as a group pray through how "what the Lord requires" fits into the idea of Holy habits

4. Holy Habitats (c6)

Topic: Intentional Communities of grace

Aim: To Nurture Discipleship

Content: The development of the habits of discipleship by deliberately providing and/or putting ourselves in, the right places to develop our faith, and grow as Christians.

Scriptures:

OT: Deuteronomy 11 v1-21

Gospels: Luke 22 v 14-26

NT: Colossians 3 v8-17

Other Scriptures that may be of interest:

Deuteronomy 6 v1-9; Psalm 4 ; Jeremiah 31 v31-34; Ezekiel 11 v17-20

When Jesus began His ministry, He called His first followers into community. That community was their Holy Habitat, where they could share life with Him and each other, learn, grow, be changed into the people Jesus wanted them to be. It was a safe environment of trust and acceptance where they could make mistakes without being condemned, express doubts and fears, where they could find support and friendship and fellowship, and from which they could be, and were sent out to minister to those around them.

It was also a place to which they could return when things didn't work out as they hoped or expected, when they experienced failure, where they could receive forgiveness and be helped to go on serving, and be sent back out again!

We need communities like that in our churches, if we are to be effective in our communities.

(Matthew 14 v28-33)

1) We need to be **Intentional about community**

- eating together
- Holy Communion
- sharing

Holy Habitats of this kind don't just happen. They need to be worked at and worked for. We need to introduce and develop them deliberately, and work at maintaining and developing them. They are places where the Holy Habits we need, can be taught, learned and practiced. It can be hard work, but it's worth it. It is within and

from communities like these that that the missional life of churches develops and grows.

(Luke 10 v1-3)

2) We need to be **Intentional about relationships** within these communities

Paul in Galatians 5 lists the fruits of the Spirit. Even the ones we think of as primarily as being in our own experience they are all fully expressed within relationships

- love
- joy
- peace
- patience
- kindness
- goodness
- faithfulness
- gentleness
- self-control

Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about 5 essential ministries that need to be exercised in these communities:

- Holding one's tongue
- Meekness
- Listening
- Helpfulness
- Bearing with each other

(Colossians 3)

None of us would claim a consistent 100% in all 5, but unless we practice them (both in the sense of 'doing' and "getting better at") our communities will not become the places we want them to be.

3) We need to be **Intentional about evangelism**

- Going out
- Courage
- Preparedness

4) We need to be **intentional about fellowship**

Small groups have been essential Holy Habitats ever since the church began. Our own history, as Methodists gives powerful testimony to the effectiveness of small groups, in the way the Class system encouraged mutual accountability and discipleship, and provided opportunities for Christians at all stages of their development to help each other to grow, and provided something of a springboard for witness and mission in the wider community and indeed, the world. It is not just a Methodist phenomenon, other churches have experience of the effectiveness of small

groups, and it is not just something we needed in the past. Growing churches today are, in effect, made up of vibrant small groups!

(Acts 1 v12-24; Acts 2 v42-47 espec. V48)

5) We need to be **Intentional about making space for God**

- Quiet times
- Personal devotions

6) We need to be **Intentional about learning and growth**

- Bible study
- Prayer
-

Although these are habits we should be practicing in our own personal times with God, small groups will help and encourage us in them as we learn from the experience, joys (and frustrations!) of others

Small groups aren't the only Holy Habitats we need to nurture and encourage.

If there is opportunity, it is good to have Christian fellowship in a work or school setting. Making a work place a Holy Habitat can have a profound effect on the ways we witness there, do our work, and even, on the whole work environment.

Our homes and our families are also very important and valuable places in which to nurture a Holy Habitat. Christian parents and guardians of children and young people need to intentionally bring their families up in Holy Habitats, talking naturally and often about their faith, and encouraging one another in their own discovery of what it means to know Jesus. It doesn't just happen, and it's not someone else's responsibility!

(Deuteronomy 11 v18-21)

Other types of Holy Habitats also have an important place.

Large events such as festivals, large congregational worship services. (Acts 2 v21-47)

One to one friendships – Mentoring, Spiritual Directors, Soul Friends, Companions on the Way (Luke 24 v13-15ff)

As we develop our Holy Habitats, we begin to develop in our use and application of the Holy Habits.

Active Worship

Grow a broad bean or similar in a jam jar.

They puts down roots – intentional

But they don't come to anything much in the jar

- They need more than what they provide for themselves.
- Beans fix nitrogen! – Help provide for others!
- They need support otherwise they'll flop over.
-

In the right environment, they become fruitful (and produce lots of other beans)

Other:

In all weeks we need to reference back to Circuit vision as appropriate.

Group material for “Holy Habitats”

Read and consider Colossians 3 v8-17 and Deuteronomy 11 v1-21

What do habitats do for the things that live in them?

What do they have to provide? What makes a good habitat? A bad one?

Destruction of habitats is a big issue these days.

Is it a problem for Christians? What is happening to *our* (holy) habitat?

In some places, habitats are being deliberately restored, to encourage the desired creature inhabitants to flourish, and, in some cases, to allow re-introduction of species which used to live there. - What can we learn and take from that, and apply to our Christian discipleship?

What makes a good, Christian, Holy Habitat?

What are *your* Holy Habitats? How do you benefit from them? How important are they to you?

5. Fellowship (c9)

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship.”

Acts 2 :42

Aim: To understand how the Holy Habit of Fellowship builds up both churches and individual Christians.

Content:

What is fellowship?

How fellowship is experienced

Potential Scriptures: (see below for these passages in full)

OT: Job 4:3–4

Gospels: Matthew 18: 19-20

Epistles: Romans 12:9-21; Ephesians 2:19-22; Philippians 2:1-4; Hebrews 10:23-25

Some thoughts about content and progression to act as help (not a blueprint!)

The word translated fellowship in the acts 2 passages is *koinonia* which come from the Greek *koinos* meaning “common” or “shared”, and in itself encompasses sharing of resources and time.

On page 130 of “Holy Habits” Andrew Roberts describes *koinonia* as:

”seen in followers of Jesus eating, praying and sharing goods together. In short, sharing their lives with each other and the world around, in a prophetic symbol of the Kingdom of God. A powerful sign of a Spirit-filled way of life that stands against the sinfulness of selfishness. A wonder of hope, reconciliation and generosity. A true community of belonging and service”.

As we mentioned a few weeks ago when we were looking at “Holy Habitats” communities of fellowship like this only come about intentionally, not by accident.

We live in a society that is more technically connected than ever before, with mobile phones, email, Facebook, Snapchat and all the other ways of communicating which are new in our generation, but people often feel disconnected and isolated. This is as true inside church communities as outside them.

What are the ways in which our church tries to build fellowship? Do we have regular small group meetings? Are they open to new members?

There are some essentials for creating fellowship in our churches. We need to be:

- Open and welcoming: we don't want to be a clique or an elitist group.
- Realistic: We mustn't think that by being in a fellowship group we will have no further problems in our relationships as a group; the New Testament is full of examples of people within fellowship groups falling out or making serious mistakes (e.g. Ananias and Sapphira or 1 Cor 1:11)
- Safe: It is good to have spaces in which we can be vulnerable and sharing, but we need to always consider the requirement to keep each other safe from exploitation, bullying and misuse of personal information.
- Committed: Many of us can probably think of people, whether Sunday school teachers, Youth group leaders, house group leaders or others, who have provided us with Fellowship, by being committed to "live along side" us in the past. It is this commitment that gives Christian fellowship its depth and meaningfulness. We need to consider, do we at the moment have enough commitment to our places of fellowship at the moment to enable them to thrive.

Next week we'll be looking in practical terms about how we can help to build true fellowship in our church.

Idea for Creative worship:

Encourage congregation members to think of people they know, whether current church members or not, who may be lonely or in need of fellowship. Take a moment in the service to ask people to compose a text message to those people, sending a message of encouragement, or an offer to meet up etc. (Those who don't use mobile phones can use the time to think about whom they could ring or write to when they get home.)

Quote:

"They devoted themselves ... to the fellowship (koinōnia). Koinōnia (from koinos, 'common') bears witness to the common life of the church. [] It expresses what we share in together. This is God himself, for 'our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ', and there is 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'. Thus koinōnia is a Trinitarian experience; it is our common share in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." (John Stott : The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Acts. p82)

Passages:

Job 4:3–4

3 Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands.

4 Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees.

Matthew 18:19–20

19 'Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.'

Romans 12:9–21

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

1 Corinthians 1:9–10

9 God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 10 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Ephesians 2:19–22

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him

the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Philippians 2:1–4

1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Hebrews 10:23–25

23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Group material for “Fellowship”

Icebreaker: Have you experienced a time of real fellowship with Christians in your Christian life (whether Sunday school, Youth group, University group, House group, or other group)? Share this with other members of the group.

We’re looking this week at Fellowship. This word isn’t used much in everyday life (outside of Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring!) The word translated as Fellowship is Koinonia, which means, boiling down a complicated set of meanings to its essence, “commonality”, a sharing of our lives together.

Read Romans 12:9-21 and have it so everyone can see a copy

In this passage is a list of things Paul thinks we should and shouldn’t do in our lives as Christians together.

Which of these things can we do together as a fellowship group, and which are individual?

What do we gain by doing these things together?

Read Hebrews 10:23-25 and have it so everyone can see a copy

Why do you think the writer to the Hebrews makes a point of suggesting that people don’t give up meeting together?

Have any of the group ever been through a period of not meeting up with other Christians? How did that affect your sense of fellowship, and your spiritual life?

Think as a group; are there ways that your group can be more supportive of each others’ spiritual walk? Do you see each other enough? Do you have ways of supporting each other between meetings? Do all people who come into the church building know that fellowship is available from groups like this?

Prayer and worship:

Spend time:

- Giving thanks that God brings us into a community of believers and wants us to live our lives with them.
- Singing “bind us together Lord” or “Blest be the tie that binds”.

6. Fellowship 2 - practical (c9)

Notes to help churches plan

Preparation

1) Some churches will be well used to having mid week groups and have several people who are used to leading them. But even in a church like that there will be folk who are not used to this sort of approach.

2) We think groups of 8 or so are probably the best size. This will make it possible for some people to stay quiet without feeling they stick out, but is not too large to make it difficult to hear.

3) It would be good to nominate the group leaders in advance: emphasise this does not mean they need to know more than the group: they simply have to draw people in as much as they want to, encourage where necessary and perhaps make sure that no one person just keep on talking!

4) You will also need to decide where the groups are going to be. They will need a bit of space between them to avoid noise problems, even if they are not in separate rooms and work out ways in which all the members can face each other (a circle is best if the chairs are moveable).

5) There are lots of ways of putting people in groups – you could simply give each person a number from 1 to 8 (if you expect 64 people!) consecutively as they come in, or hand numbers out when they are seated. You may need to adjust for mobility problems (no good having a wheelchair user in a group that will go upstairs) and perhaps other disabilities. Someone will need to explain which group goes where but it won't matter if there is a bit of confusion provided no group gets too big or too small.

6) Remember –the group session is instead of a sermon so will only last 20 minutes or so (plus say 5 minutes for getting sorted). Someone will probably need to go round to give a five minute warning! It won't matter if the group has not “finished” – these sessions are for people to get the experience trying out, not completing a task.

The session itself –ideas (remember you will only have about 20 minutes!)

1) If your church has coffee/tea after the service why not have it during the group session- and perhaps make it different by arranging for cake as well as biscuits!

2) Once everyone is seated go round and get everyone to give their name – even if (they think) they already know everyone!

3) Try some simple questions like “what was the thing you remember best about Christmas?” or “What's your favourite sort of cake?”

4) Or – if people already know each other you could try something a bit more personal but not threatening – “Can you share something about yourself no-one else in the group

knows?" (The leader needs to have something lined up: "I was second shepherd in the school nativity and Mary bit me!")

- 5) (Do try and get this one in) Ask people for experiences of living in a Christian community (even for a short time-Christian holiday centre or camp. Retreat –even a Christian home). What were/are the good things about it? What was/is difficult? If no-one has this experience ask about other examples of communal living.
- 6) Then (if still time) perhaps something more definite like "What are you looking forward to in the next month?"
- 7) Allow conversation to flow naturally, though you might need to steer it a bit if only one or 2 people are talking a lot and you think other people want to have a say
- 8) If there are people who aren't joining in you will probably sense if it because they don't want to or because they can't get a word in. Let them just listen if they want to.
- 9) To finish off (perhaps at the 5 minute warning) you could ask whether anyone has something they would like others in the group to pray about –not then and there but at home. (Again it would be good for the leader to have something very simple lined up – "For my grand-daughters birthday party- for everyone to have a good time"
- 10) Finish off by saying the Grace together.

Having given a taster of a small group this would be a good opportunity for existing fellowship groups within the church to say a bit about themselves and perhaps invite those not currently in a group to come and give it a try.

Group Material for “Fellowship 2”

There is no specific group material for this service but existing groups might find it is a good opportunity to consider how they are doing (assuming that they are no-one has responded to your invitation to come and see in which case your task will be to ensure they are welcome and the group begins to reshape into a new group!)

- 1) What is good about this group –how does it help us grow as individuals, as a group
- 2) How does our group contribute to the life of the church?
- 3) Are we falling into any of the traps (becoming exclusive, being unrealistic, becoming “unsafe” –including “group think”, becoming too comfortable and insufficiently challenging)
- 4) What could/should we be doing that we aren’t doing at the moment?
- 5) What is our vision for the group? Is it time to change? (Some churches insist on their fellowship groups reforming every 2 or 3 years so as to avoid the risk of stagnation. What do you think of this?)
- 6) Are there people not currently in a group you could welcome in? How would you make them feel part of the group?

7. Reading the Bible (c 8)

Topic: Appreciating and applying the Scriptures

Aim: To help individuals get more into the Bible and so get more out of the Bible!

Content: What is it (and how did we get it)?

Why do we read it?

How to get the most out of the Bible.

Scriptures:

OT: Ps 119: 97-112

Gospels: Luke 4: 16-21; John 8: 31-32; John 17: 17-21

NT: 2 Timothy 3: 14-17; 1 John 5: 13

Additional Information for Service Lead:

As preachers of the word this is probably one of the Holy Habits that should most excite us as we share the structure of the Scriptures with others and encourage them to turn to the Word of God as their reference point. In bringing encouragement these are areas you might find it useful to explore. The balance between the sections will be down to your assessment of the highest priority for your congregation.

The "Bible presentation PowerPoint (sent as a separate attachment) may be useful both in preparation and the service.

The Big Story:

First and foremost the Bible reveals God and His plan to us, you could talk through the 5 stages of God's redemptive plan:

- Creation Gen 1
- Fall/Rebellion Gen 3
- Incarnation John 1
- Redemption John 15
- Consummation Revelation 7

If you wanted a great explanation (which you could easily play during a service) see Malcolm Duncan – Bible in 3 min <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wC32RCqLok4>

God Speaks:

This is the truth – from Creation onwards God has been communicating:

- God spoke and things came into existence;

- God spoke through His creation;
- God spoke through His prophets;
- God spoke through His Son (the living word);
- God spoke through His Holy Spirit – this included the inspiration of...
- The Written Word (our Scriptures);
- God continues to speak;
- We are called to be hearers and doers of His word

The Purpose of Scripture:

- An invitation to know God and to respond to Jesus – following Him in the company of others
- In that journey of discovery we will:
 - Learn about ourselves and spiritual matters
 - Be instructed on salvation and how to live the life of a follower (disciple)
 - See things through Gods eyes and from His perspective
 - Be set free
 - Experience unity
 - Be empowered

How do people view Scripture?

- Great literature
 - Good advice
 - History and relationship
 - Spiritual
 - teaching
- YES – to all of the above but it's so much more
- Gods revelation to us

And thereby the touchstone on matters of faith and authority against which we measure any other stated revelation or teaching.

John Wesley's view

We believe:

- That all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God,
- The written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule, both of Christian faith and practice
- Christ to be the eternal, supreme God

The Contents of Scripture⁵

This is Our Bible

OLD TESTAMENT		
Pentateuch (Torah) 5 books	Genesis - Deuteronomy	Story of beginnings and foundations
History 12 books	Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Conquest and occupation, exile, loss and restoration
Poetry/Wisdom 5 books	Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Eccl's	"does what is says"
Prophets 17 books	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lam, Ezek, Dan & 12 "minors"	Warning and encouragement, promise and hope

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This is Our Bible

NEW TESTAMENT		
Gospels 4 books	Matthew, Mark, Luke and John	Four eye witness or contemporary accounts One Jesus
History and Letters 22 books	Acts through to Jude	Early Church, teaching and theology - understanding of scripture in the light of Jesus and through revelation of the Holy Spirit. Some letters to churches or communities others about individuals
Future prophecy 1 book	Revelation	Endings and future hope. The fulfilment of all things.

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The Bible:

THE BIBLE

- Is not:
 - A single book - it is a library (A collection of 66 books)
 - Written at a single point in time (The writings span around 1500 - 2,000 yrs)
 - Set in a single location or country (In fact it covers up to 3 continents)
 - By a single person (there are more than 40 different writers)

BUT

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THE BIBLE

- IT HAS:
 - A single author - God through his Holy Spirit
 - A developing story (revelation)
 - A complete harmony
 - Present and future promises and hope
 - A message for living, a call for belonging and a mandate for serving

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HOW do we engage with it?

- Listen (Hear);
- Read;
- Study;

⁵ The slides reproduced here are part of a whole day's teaching I prepared and delivered in 2011, there is a lot of useful background information contained and if you want a full set of slides (electronically) let me know (David Stubbs)

- Memorise;
- Meditate.

Some of the above topics may best be explored either in the next week (practical) or in mid-week activities

Ideas for Creative activity:

You may wish to consider the following (either planned in advance or on the day):

Invite some brief testimonies on How God has helped individuals through the scriptures or to share Bible verses which are particularly significant to them and why) – could do in small groups or from the front and then use for basis of thanksgiving, or could get people to write down sentences that could then be displayed

Other:

For the two weeks we look at the Bible we need to help people both understand why it is important and also give them tools to help them handle it rightly.

In all weeks we need to reference back to Circuit vision as appropriate.

Group Material for “Reading the Bible”

Ice breaker: (BUT running into main discussion – this could take up a good proportion of the time)

Try a light-hearted bible quiz – leader will have to do a little research first!

Pick half a dozen or more characters from the Scriptures (including some more obscure ones like a minor prophet⁶ or Absalom or Jethro – your choice) and ask people to write down or discuss what they know including what book are they in, how do they fit in and what’s their story? You could also pick some books of the bible and ask people to put them in order – as they are in the bible and then as they are chronologically. Think of other little questions such as how do Kings and Chronicles relate or what is special about the book of Esther.

The aim is to show how much there is in the bible that we are less familiar with.

Get people to share about how easy or difficult they find the bible, about their preferred version/translation and about what aids they use if any. Open this up to help look at new or additional ways they can consider.

Explain the difference between different translations (there is a slide in the pack I have referred to which sets this out well)

Set a bible challenge around daily readings or reading a book of the bible individuals haven’t read before or get the group to identify a book they would like to explore in more detail.

Ask people to share honestly about difficult passages or areas.

Often people look for passages that bring comfort but sometimes God wishes to challenge or stretch!

Look at some of the passages given for the Sunday service particularly Psalm 119 and see what stands out for people.

⁶ Don’t forget to include women- how about Huldah , for example?

Think of what it cost to have the bible in our language in our country (again the slides cover Wycliffe and Tyndale amongst other things); turn our thoughts to those areas where there isn't free access or translations don't exist (Bible Society, Open Doors and Barnabas Fund provide v helpful information for these)

Prayer and worship:

Spend time:

- Giving thanks for God's word;
- Seeking fresh revelation, understanding and hunger for the word;
- Pray for those where access is difficult because of persecution or availability.

Reading the Bible 2 –Practical.

Notes and ideas for churches

This is actually in Q3 (so no number) but we thought it would be helpful to have the ideas now, especially so churches have plenty of notice for planning the service. We will repeat it in the full Q3 notes.

- 1) The idea is to explore and develop the teaching and ideas on the nature and importance of the bible that were shared in the “theory” section in a previous week. The aim is to get us all excited that we can actually get to hear God speaking through his words/Word and that it will change our lives!
- 2) There are all sorts of ideas you could try –here are some.
 - a) Organise a groups or individuals in advance in advance to read a short passage from each of the “genres” of the Bible:
 - Beginnings and the Law – (first 5 books)
 - History
 - Poetry and wisdom
 - Prophecy
 - Gospels
 - Church history and letters
 - Prophecy (Revelation- technically “Apocalypse”)

You could perhaps look at modern equivalents to show how the Bible’ structure still resonates today.

- b) Or take the big themes
 - creation in Genesis 1-2
 - Fall and rebellion= Genesis 3
 - Incarnation
 - Redemption
 - Consummation – a new beginning – Revelation
- 3) Perhaps practical activities as well such as
 - Group memorisation of a verse
 - Demonstrating how we can meditate on a verse (read it several times – break into phrases - what do they say to me? – into words – when I say “faith, what does it mean? – turn it into prayer

- “Sword drill” – someone reads out a reference while people hold their bibles ready. At the word - everyone looks it up –first to find it reads it out (and gets a prize?!)
 - Two or three people sharing how they read the Bible and what they find helps them
 - Read the same passage in different versions
- 4) A table with a range of different bible reading aids- Scripture Union and Bible Reading Fellowship notes, E100, “Everyday with Jesus” (remember to put a note to say how you can get these on line as well- some will send you a daily email with the passage and comments). See the small group notes for more details
- 5) And lots more!

The key concept is that if we are friends of Jesus and the bible –always there - is the main way God speaks to us then it is very odd if we only listen once a week, even if we talk to him every day. It is not like that (usually) when we share a house with someone.... scope for a small drama?

Group material for “Reading the Bible 2”

The aim of the time together is to help develop a framework for not only reading the Bible but really getting to grips with what it says.

Icebreaker

Past experiences of starting a task without reading the instructions (IKEA furniture assembly?)

How do you set about reading something you know will be complicated but is important? (the small print in say a car insurance policy).

In contrast how do you set about reading a story? A poem? What do you do if you lose the thread?

God’s word is truth and truth can be very simple and very complex, often at the same time. So it is not surprising that we may find some parts hard to grasp (especially when it talks about situations very different to our own). But even then it often turns out that our world today is not as different as we might think – and the people of the Bible not so different to us !

But it does help to have a method (or methods) for reading. This will help us to get the most out of it, perhaps especially if we are reading a passage that is unfamiliar or difficult. It will also be useful for when we don’t really feel like reading it!

A simple approach I have found helpful is the “Scripture Union Bible Reading Method” –used by millions of people round the world for 150years!

- 1) Pray- you are starting a dialogue with God so ask him to speak to you through his word “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening (1 Samuel 3 v9)
- 2) Read slowly and carefully through the passage – perhaps several times and perhaps with the bits immediately before and after to set the context.
- 3) Reflect
 - What is this passage actually saying?
 - What is the main point?
 - What does it show me about God? About me?
 - What does it require of me, in thought, words, action?
- 4) Apply it The Bible is not just there for information but to help us live in the right relationship with God and others (2 Timothy 3v16)

- How am I going to apply it in my life today – situations at home, work, school, church? (Bible study notes are often helpful –they have questions that challenge us if we are trying to duck out of what God wants us to hear!)

5) Pray - about what you have learned, about how you are going to use it

Now, as a group try it out together! Take a short passage (how about Matthew 7 v24-27?). read it- slowly and imaginatively (it is a story). Go through the questions above. What are you going to do with the answers in your group, as individuals? Pray through your response.

This is not the only way to read the Bible of course. It is well worth reading a whole book in one or 2 sittings – try Esther for a gripping drama, or Song of Songs as a love poem or Mark’s gospel to get the pace and excitement of Jesus’ life and ministry. There are schedules available to help you read right through the Bible in a year without getting bogged down in Leviticus!

If you don’t read the Bible as much as you would like to, then why not set yourself a challenge – 10 minutes a day, perhaps using the framework above –for a week? You could follow on from Matthew 7 by working through Matthew 8 in a translation you find easy to follow

Day1 - v1-4

Day 5 – v23-27

Day 2 - v8-13

Day 6 – v28-32

Day 3 – v14-17

Day 7 – c9 v1-8

Day 4 – v18-22

Sources of help/schemes to read the Bible

“How to read the Bible for All its worth” – Gordon D Fee and Douglas Stuart

Bible Reading Fellowship (biblereading notes.org.uk). Several different styles of notes for different people at different stages of life e.g.” Day by day with God”

Scripture Union (contents. Scriptureunion.org.uk) “Daily Bread”, “Encounter with God”

These are available as a daily email in several formats including audio from www.WordLive@scriptureunion.org.uk. They are free, though donations help in production costs.

E100 – 100 OT and NT passages to give the Big Picture of the Bible to read over 100 days (www.e100.scriptureunion.org.uk)