

The Parable of Social Distancing

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

LENT 1 2021 (31 Jan - 6 March)



The Jesus of history has given the church a great template when it comes to storytelling. He told stories about things he knew about, and stories about things he knew his listeners would know about. He then invited them to look for the meaning and the signs of the coming Kingdom of God that can be encountered in the lives and stories of everyday people like you and me.

So this month we are going to think about what would Jesus say about social distancing. What lessons can be drawn from our common experience of living at a distance from each other? We are going to invite our writers to reflect on passages from the lectionary along with some of the parables of Jesus. We hope that our contributors will help us ask questions like: what have we learned about holiness, communion, freedom and love as we live out the parable of social distancing?

We want to ask what do we learn about **holiness** from being social distanced from one another? Keeping in mind that to be holy means as one dictionary put it: "holy living **means** that the Christian lives a life that is set apart, reserved to give glory to God..." It is a life of discipline, focus, and attention to matters of righteous living. Could holy living draw us closer to each other or apart?

The next question we will reflect upon is; what do we learn about **communion** and **community** by being physically distanced from each other? Keeping in mind Paul's analogy of the Christian community being like a body the one and the many all functioning together but becoming incapacitated if one part is left on its own. How can we understand presence in a socially distanced church?

What do we learn about **freedom** when we feel our ability to make personal choices has been limited due to compulsory mask wearing and limited travel? What have we learned about the

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church beyond the walls? Are we discovering a new freedom in worship? Are we encountering a new kind of church?

What lessons of **love** have we learned during this time of social distancing? Does love lead us into holiness? Does love lead us into community and communion? Does love lead us into a new kind of freedom? Does love invite us to take risks?

During the period of Lent we are offering an additional spiritual exercise entitled Lent Legacy. This is designed to help us see that Lent is not about giving things up but rather a time of reflection to pick things up. To help us re-engage with that which really matters.

The following discussion questions are designed to accompany and adapt the monthly theme material (see the [The Parable of Social Distancing Resource Pack](#)) for small group work. They are divided into 5 parts to correspond with the 5 weeks of the Daily Worship theme.

These questions are just a guideline and there is no need to go through all the given questions in a single session, or in the following sequence. Feel free to pick and choose, or adapt to what interests your group.

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Part 1: You can't escape holiness

Read Psalm 111: 1-10

What does this passage mean — surely we are not to be afraid of God?

What does it mean to fear God and how can that be the beginning of wisdom?

Read Mark 1: 21-28

The premise of this theme is that the current safety measures of 'social distancing' can be read as a parable of how we have already been increasingly 'socially distant' from one another for years — becoming in many ways disconnected from one another. As we see from this encounter in the synagogue Jesus is fully physically, intellectually and spiritually present.

In our day to day lives have we socially distanced ourselves from healing, teaching and spiritually? Have we compartmentalised these things into a box that we only open once a week or even less?

How can we be like Jesus and be more present in body, mind and spirit?

Read Malachi 3: 1-4

Sometimes it is hard not to feel socially distant from God. But there is always a way back.

What has to be refined in our lives to bring us close to God again?

What parts of our body need to become alive again to Jesus to create community, to experience freedom, to live out love?

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Part 2: Your freedom is my freedom?

Read Luke 2: 22-40

How good are we at honouring and listening to the voices of older Christians? Have we become distanced from older voices like that of Anna and Simeon?

How can we ensure all generations are heard?

Read 1 Corinthians 9: 16-23

Humility, servanthood and love are the marks of those who risk all for the sake of the Gospel. How far will we travel down such a road in order to bring others to Jesus?

Read 2 Kings 2: 1-12

It's never easy to pass the mantle to another. What are the reasons for this?

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Part 3: Seeing with new eyes

Read Mark 9: 2-9

What do you think is the difference between a 'realisation' and a 'revelation'?

How do reasoning and faith interact in our walk with God?

Read Isaiah 58: 1-12

The true meaning of Lent (which begins on *Ash Wednesday* 17th February) is not about an outward show of discipline and abstinence. It is not a season of rule keeping. It is about an inward transformation that changes our will and our behaviours so that we become servants of the poor and afflicted rather than performers of services to the rich and powerful. True fasting is to choose "to loose the bonds of injustice".

What is one injustice that it is in your power and will to do something about?

Read Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Most of us (we assume) don't carry a trumpet around so that we can blast it every time we do something virtuous, but we often find subtle and not so subtle ways to brag about our actions to others.

When giving to charity why is it wrong to boast about it? Why is there an emphasis on secrecy in the reading?

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Part 4: Covenants, signs and promises

Read Genesis 9: 8-17

This reading is the dramatic ending of the flood narrative with God's setting his bow across the clouds as a sign of his covenant with a restored humanity.

When should we humans take the blame for incidents that insurance companies call an 'Act of God'? Tragically many of the disasters we suffer are as a result of humans upsetting the balance of nature.

The covenant in the reading is made between God and "and all living creatures of every kind on the earth". How can we take better responsibility for God's earth on behalf of every living creature?

Read Mark 1: 9-13

After his baptism Jesus socially distanced himself in the wilderness.

It is often in times of reflection and solitude that we see more vividly the signs and promises of God. But times of isolation can also bring strain and temptation as we are removed from those around us who support us.

What are the temptations we face when we 'get away from it all' and how can we make sure we stay tuned in to God?

Read Psalm 22: 23-31

In this time of pandemic and mask wearing verse 24 resonates especially: 'he did not hide his face from me'. During a time of absence and distance it is comforting to know that God is not hidden.

What have been the signs and promises of presence that have sustained you through lockdowns? It could be letters or emails or video calls with friends and family. What about signs of God — have there been any moments in the quiet where you have felt a sense of God's presence?

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Part 5: The parables of Jesus, lessons learned from social distancing

Read Luke 10:25-37

The priest and the Levite were practicing social distancing long before the rest of us...

The forced separation we are going through at the moment throws into perspective what you might call the selfish social distancing many of us were engaging in before the pandemic — preferring to hold back, look away, and cross to the other side of the street to avoid facing one another.

Who is your neighbour — the people who need you! In these restricted times and in the future when restrictions are lifted — what are things we can do for the people who need us?

Discuss as a group

Do you have a favourite parable?

What has social distancing taught us about the kingdom of God?

If you had to make up a parable about social distancing and the dilemmas it has brought about what would your story look like? What issues would you raise and resolve?

Read Matthew 9: 16-17

What has to change in the church to face the new reality that will meet congregations on their return to their buildings in the future? Can you put the the new things we have discovered about God and our communities in this past year into the same old formats?

How can we reshape how we 'do church' in light of what we have learned through this past turbulent year?