



Lent 2019 - 40acts Generosity Challenge **A missional moment for your church**

Wednesday 6th March to Saturday 20th April 2019

Small Group Studies

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What is 40acts?

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice. Tradition has it that we mark the 40 days of Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent were to become a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

40acts is a generosity challenge which encourages people to approach Lent differently.

During the 40 days of Lent, 40acts participants are invited to take part in 40 simple acts of generosity which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2019. The acts or challenges are wide-ranging but all are designed to explore what it means to be generous in a very practical way.

They can be done by individuals or done in groups but the key is that small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big difference to our communities, to our churches and, ultimately, to our world. It's about creating a movement of generosity.

How to use this resource

-  This course is divided into **six separate sessions**, plus an introduction, and provides adaptable meeting guides, activity ideas and prayers.
-  The Bible studies follow the same **Scripture passages** as the Notes for Speakers, which can be used as additional research/information for the small group leader.
-  This Small Group Study series can stand alone, but has been designed to be **used alongside** the sermon series; it doesn't matter which happens first, sermon or small group.
-  Each session is designed to last approximately **one hour**.
-  This resource has been designed to suit a wide range of ages and interests. Group leaders should feel free to **adapt each study** to suit the needs and interests of their particular group.

About this series

40acts 2019 is inspired by the zeal of the early Christian church as described in the book of Acts. Acts is the account of a small and beleaguered group of those who had known Jesus face to face, and seen him crucified, resurrected and return to his Father's side in heaven. Now they were full of death-defying, insurrectionary passion to proclaim 'the good news that Jesus is the Messiah' (Acts 5:42).

The first disciples were shaped by their profound encounters with Jesus and had witnessed first-hand what he had done for the world. Their love for God meant they not only endured floggings, arrest, death threats and worse, but actively rejoiced because their suffering was a direct result of their devotion (Acts 5:41).

40acts calls us to practical, sacrificial, possibly even risky generosity in the name of Jesus. As we take part in

the challenges and study the book of Acts, we have an opportunity to wade into deeper waters of devotion. Who and what are we living for? Will we be obedient to God regardless of what people think of us? The early disciples 'never stopped' sharing their message (Acts 5:42). This Lent, let's ask God to increase our love for him and for his world.

Each week we will explore part of the unfolding story of the early church. The 40acts challenges are designed to complement the Bible studies and inspire us to act on what we have read. How you choose to engage with the challenges is up to you (more of that in 'Complimentary materials' below) but it is important you are aware of the connection.

Complimentary materials

These Bible studies can be used alongside the 40acts sermon notes. The bible studies delve into the lives, passions and challenges of the early Christians.

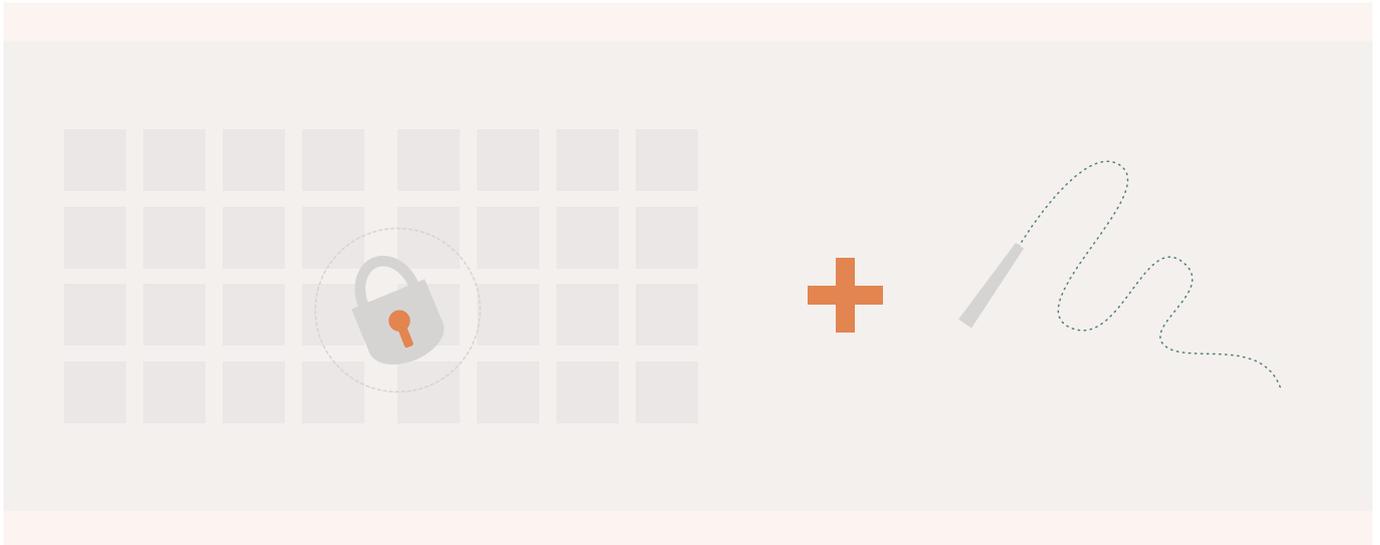
In a small group setting, people can not only study the early church but also have the opportunity to engage with the daily challenges as a group of individuals, sharing their experiences with each other.

The challenges are released daily during Lent. Each challenge has three traffic light options to choose from, so people can engage with the daily acts in the way that suits them best. There will be a complementary reflection, written by a different author each day, offering their take on that day's challenge, which can be a source of inspiration or insight. There is also the option to interact with 40acts via social media. However you use these resources, we hope that they are a way for you and your church or group to experience more of what seizing your opportunity to be generous looks like.

Please use these materials in whole or in part, or just as a reference, or not at all. They are a gift from Stewardship, and feedback from churches and their leaders indicates they work well together. Blessings throughout Lent!

Introduction

Early Christianity was not for the faint-hearted. The decision to follow Jesus was a decision to put yourself in conflict with both religious and secular authorities, often with painful consequences. But as we'll see in Acts 5, the apostles were not afraid of conflict. Where did their courage come from? And faced with the choice to be bold in sharing our faith or to stay quiet and maintain our good-standing, will we be as brave as they were?



The aim

- ➔ To understand the implications of allegiance to Christ
- ➔ To think about what enables us to overcome fear and be brave for the sake of the gospel
- ➔ To discuss ways we can use 40acts to grow in courage as we live as followers of Christ

Preparation

The ice-breaker involves sharing stories of times people did something that made them afraid. Think of a couple of your own stories to kick things off. It could be something as mundane as going to the top of the Shard in London even though you are afraid of heights, or as adventurous as travelling solo around Africa.

Activity/ice-breaker

Ask people to tell the story of a time they did something even though they were scared. Perhaps they learnt to swim as an adult, gave a speech at a wedding, or did a bungee jump. What were they afraid of? What was it like doing it? And how did they feel once they'd done it?

Read

Acts 5: 40–42

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Reflection

Jesus came to proclaim the kingdom of heaven and to open wide its gates to all who believed in him, repented and received forgiveness through his sacrificial death. His message was a lifeboat to some and an enemy warship to others. The Jewish people had been the special ones, chosen guardians of the honour of God, and they were heavily invested in maintaining their exceptional status.

When the apostles 'filled Jerusalem with [their] teaching' (Acts 5:28) the religious leaders were desperate to shut them up. They first locked them up, but an angel let them

out and they went straight back to preaching on the steps of the temple (Acts 5:17–25). Then they were brought in front of the religious court, the ‘Sanhedrin’. Accused by the high priest of flagrant disregard of the strict orders not to talk about Jesus, Peter took the opportunity to restate the gospel to the assembly. The mood turned murderous and only the reasoning of Gamaliel, a highly respected teacher of the law, convinced the Sadducees to let them off with a flogging.

Still bruised and bloodied, in full knowledge of the severity of the risk they were taking, the apostles immediately continued ‘teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah’ (Acts 5:42). Their courage is quite staggering and I think can be attributed to three things.

Firstly, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus left his disciples, he promised they would not be abandoned orphans, but would be sent the Spirit to live in them (John 14: 15–17). We have this same Spirit living in us – the Spirit of God who gives strength, peace, and courage to be his witnesses.

Secondly, they were utterly convinced by their message and they knew the world desperately needed to hear it. As we carry out acts of generosity through this Lent, let’s remember the most valuable gift we can give anyone is an introduction to Jesus.

Thirdly, they were far more concerned with obeying God than anyone else (Acts 5:29). They must have had normal human responses to their suffering, but any fear they felt was overridden by a godly fear of the creator of the universe. We worship the same God today. Does he fill us with awe and command our utmost respect? Or are we more wary of stepping on the toes of our superiors at work, our teachers or professors, or even our colleagues and friends?

Questions

Vital questions

- When did you last tell someone about Jesus?
- Who are you most scared of talking about faith with and why?
- The core of the apostles’ message was that ‘Jesus is the Messiah’ (Acts 5:42). How would you express the ‘gospel’ (the good news)?

Reflective questions

- How might seeing evangelism as an act of generosity affect the way you go about it?
- What have been the worst consequences you’ve experienced as a result of sharing your faith?
- The apostles shared their message in the temple courts and they also went house to house. Do you think door to door evangelism could be effective in your context? How about street preaching? Why or why not?
- How might you grow in courage as you live for Jesus?

Practical questions

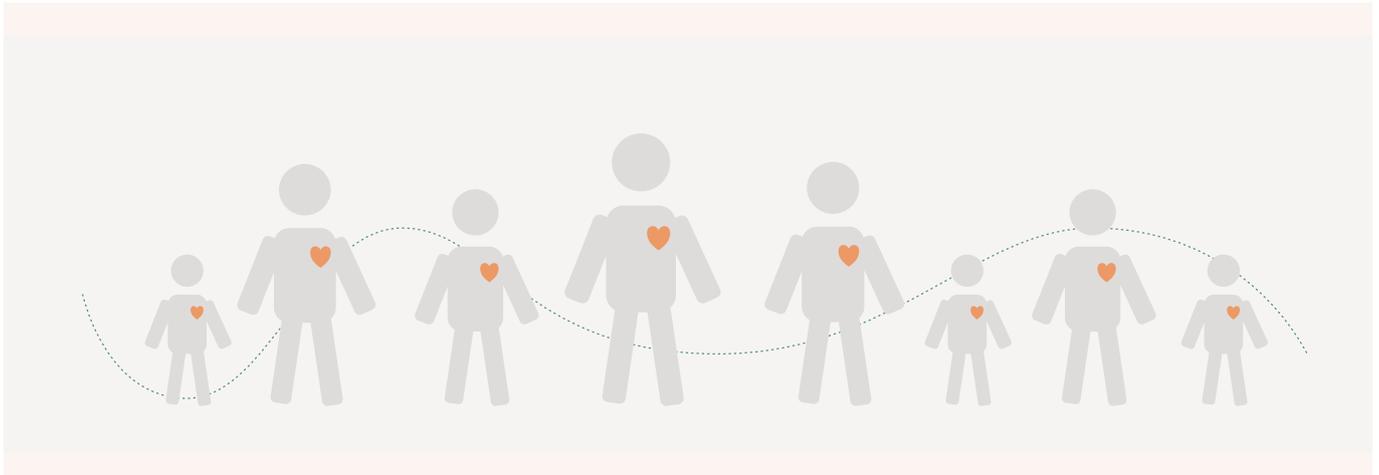
- Who do you know who needs to hear that Jesus can save them and give them new life?
- Where and how might it be appropriate for you to share your faith over this next week? Think about what you might want to say, while knowing the Holy Spirit will be at hand to help you find the right words.
- How might you use the 40acts challenges as a way of sharing your faith with others?

Prayer

Father God, thank you for Jesus, who showed us the way into your presence. Thank you for those who taught us through their words and their example so that we could come to know you and for the boldness of the apostles. Please give us courage to show others the same generosity – to fearlessly hold out the word of life to a world that so desperately needs you. Amen.

Introduction

The book of Acts is an exhilarating read – a pacy and dramatic account of how the church grew from a handful of frightened Jews to a bold and vibrant international movement. Acts 2 is a beautiful description of a united community who lived to serve God and each other and whose love was so attractive it drew others towards salvation. As we revisit the early days of the Christian church, let's reflect on what we might have lost along the way and how we could get it back.



The aim

- ➔ To discover the distinctives of the early church
- ➔ To explore the impact of a committed, radical Christian community on the world
- ➔ To consider making some changes to our life together as a local church

Preparation

You'll need enough pens for the group, some paper and a hat or a bowl from which pieces of paper can be pulled out.

Activity/ice-breaker

Give everyone a piece of paper and a pen, and get them to rip about a third off the bottom of the paper. Ask people to use the top section to make a brief inventory of resources they are willing to share. This might include anything from power tools to camping equipment, from a garage with storage space to plumbing skills, from well-stocked bookshelves to the willingness to babysit. Then get everyone to put down any needs they have on the other piece of paper, tearing so each item is on its own piece. Fold the pieces and put them into the bowl. Draw out a piece at a time and see how many needs can be met by things that are written on the lists.

Read

Acts 2:42–47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Reflection

What is church? There are a lot of metaphors in the Bible to bring the concept to life – it is a body, a building made of living bricks, and it is a family. This passage describes a group of mostly unrelated people living as a family does. They eat together, they see each other's needs as their own, they view their assets as common property, and their lives are intertwined. When you come into your family home, you don't see the sofa as yours and the armchair as your sister's – it is just the family furniture. You love each other as a matter of course, but you also have tensions and conflict to work out. For the early church, generosity was inbuilt into community life because they understood they belonged to each other.

21st century societies have grown more individualistic as they have become more prosperous. We increasingly have the means to meet our own needs and as we do we can be tempted to think the needs of others are none of our business. We rarely lend our possessions let alone give them away. We'll go to church and maybe to a mid-week meeting of some kind but we see the rest of our time as our own. We don't often live as though our church is our family.

The church of Acts 2 was freshly fledged, soaring on Spirit-given wings of passion and energy. They were instinctively living out Jesus' instructions to 'Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:34–35).

The love Jesus was speaking of was not warm feelings. It was tangible, visible, practical care that could be witnessed and attested to by an outsider. It was the sharing of homes and meals and finances. It was selling 'property and possessions to give to anyone who had need' (Acts 2:45). As the early church lived as a generous and sacrificial community, they drew more and more people into a relationship with Jesus.

In our times of isolation, loneliness and fragmentation, how much more compelling is a church that lives as a family? People are hungry, starving for belonging and acceptance. We have been welcomed into the generous heart of God and if we live well together we light the way home for countless weary travellers.

Questions

Vital questions

- ? How does each of the four practices in Acts 2:42 (teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer) shape the church?
- ? What factors contributed to the unity of this early Christian community?
- ? What were the key characteristics of the church in the early days? How did they come to live like this?

Reflective questions

- ? In what ways is your church like the church in Acts 2? What do these verses make you determined to do better?
- ? Share stories of times you have experienced the radical generosity of your church family.
- ? What was the response of your non-church friends if you told them about these situations?

Practical questions

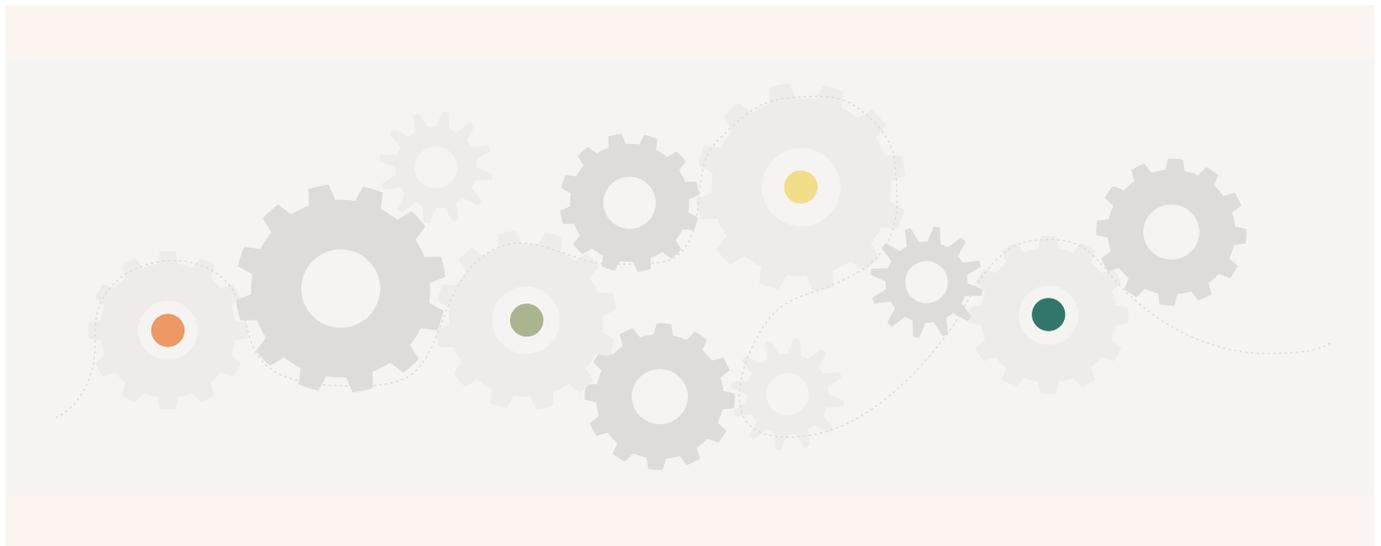
- ? Are there specific needs you know about in your church? Discuss ways you could work together as a group to provide what is lacking.
- ? Think about how you function as a church. Are there ways you could become more like a family?
- ? Consider setting up a forum on WhatsApp or Facebook where people can ask for help and offer services or possessions.

Prayer

Father God, thank you that you adopted us as your children and made us a family with you as our generous, loving parent. Help us to live in a way that shows the world your character. Help us to see our belongings, our time and our abilities as communal assets, not wealth to be hoarded away. Please forgive our disunity and our independence. Thank you for your gracious patience. In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.

Introduction

Have you ever watched one of those documentaries about unusually large families? Instead of the chaos you might expect, often they run like well-oiled machines with each family member pulling their weight and looking out for the others. Sure, the parents betray signs of chronic exhaustion, and routine chores like doing the laundry and washing up become monstrously time-consuming, but somehow, at least in front of the TV cameras, it all seems to work just fine. By Acts 6, the Christian family is getting big and new systems have to be put in place. And the key to success is delegation.



The aim

- ➔ To recognise the range of gifts that build up the church
- ➔ To explore how to discern who should be doing what
- ➔ To reflect on how we can live together as church in a way that fosters health and growth

Preparation

This ice-breaker requires a bit of space for performance, so you might want to set up your seating so that there is somewhere that can be easily cleared.

Activity/ice-breaker

Hold an impromptu talent show where people can show off any unusual abilities they may have. Are any of your group members particularly flexible? Do you have someone who can whistle a symphony or play the spoons? Have you got someone with a flair for impressions or reams of poetry committed to memory? How about someone who knows sign language or how to identify birdsong? See if you can find something for every single person to demonstrate.

Read

Acts 6:1–7

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Reflection

For many in the early church (and this is still often the case in some places around the world), joining the family of God meant saying goodbye to their blood relations. In the first century there was no welfare state and the job of caring for the vulnerable fell to the family. A woman who had lost her husband was in dire need of support and Christian widows were reliant on the church for food. As the group got bigger, the logistics involved in providing for the widows became more complex (Acts 6:1).

Church life today remains organisationally complicated. There are endless tasks to be undertaken, from preaching, leading worship, running kids' groups and serving tea and coffee, to visiting people in hospital, cooking and delivering meals, and organising soup kitchens, charity collections and outreach events. Some tasks are more glamorous than others but all are of value. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about the vast array of spiritual gifts God gives: 'All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines' (1 Corinthians 12:11).

Perhaps you are one of those people who tries to run the whole show yourself. The apostles had laser focus on their priorities; they needed to focus on teaching the Bible and praying (Acts 6:4). There is great wisdom in streamlining your church commitments: not only does it mean you can focus on doing what you do as well as you can, but it also gives everyone else a chance to shine.

Maybe your tendency is to hold back, undervaluing what you have to offer or feeling it isn't your job to keep the church running. Either way, we have to recognise that a church is only as good as the sum of its parts. The whole body suffers if one part opts out: 'Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it' (1 Corinthians 12:27). 40acts is a chance to use your gifts for the benefit of others in profoundly practical ways. We hope you will be encouraged to see that anything you have to offer can be used for the glory of God.

Questions

Vital questions

- ? What is the significance of the fact that those chosen to 'wait on tables' needed to be 'full of the Spirit and wisdom' (Acts 6:2-3)?
- ? What factors described in this passage might have contributed to the growth of the early church?
- ? What needs to be done in order for your church to function? Try and capture every role currently being filled.

Reflective questions

- ? What is the result of people not contributing their gifts to the church?
- ? Do you have a tendency to over commit or to hang back?
- ? How do we discern the specific part we each have to play?

Practical questions

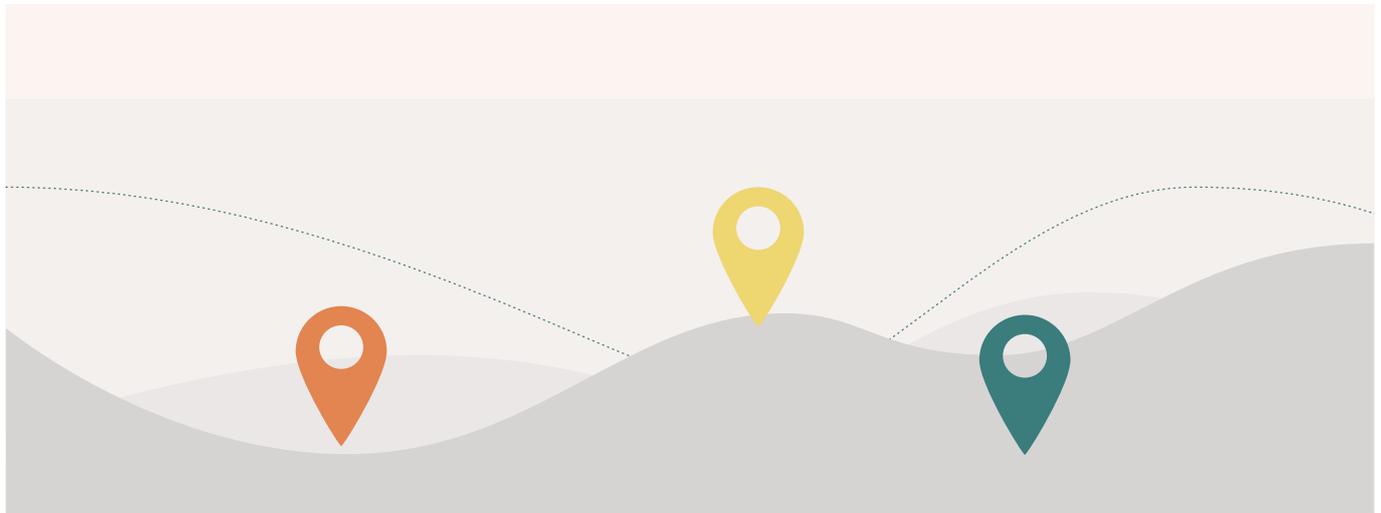
- ? Take a few minutes to quietly reflect on whether you need to take up or put down any responsibilities at church.
- ? Are there any particular areas of need that your church is not able to respond to because of a lack of manpower? Discuss different approaches you could take to address this issue.
- ? How can you serve other people with your gifts in this week of 40acts?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the wealth of gifts represented in the group of people gathered here today. Thank you for how each person is generously blessing the church. Show us if there are ways we could serve more, and help us to be wise about not taking on too much. Amen.

Introduction

According to Bosch, makers of household appliances, the average Brit moves house eight times during their life; in 2013, the mothers of a quarter of UK babies born in the UK were themselves born elsewhere; there are 300 languages spoken in London schools. We live in transient times and we are increasingly dislocated from place, reluctant to invest or commit where we may not stay long and may not even particularly like. By Acts 7 the Jerusalem church faces dramatic opposition, and in Acts 8 most are flung to the wind. But where they land they put down roots and flourish, and as they do they bless their new homes. Their example is both an inspiration and a challenge to us.



The aim

- ➔ To reflect on our attitude to where we live, work or study
- ➔ To identify opportunities to serve and grow in love for our immediate surroundings
- ➔ To consider the influence we have on our context and the influence it has on us

Preparation

You will need a laptop with internet access. This ice-breaker involves finding out about places via a website which maps the information from the latest census (in 2011).

Activity/ice-breaker

Using the largest screen you have available, visit www.datashine.org.uk. Put in the postcode for your location and then search to see numbers of self-identified Christians, education levels, employment levels and so on. What does the picture tell you about mission opportunities? How about what approaches to evangelism might be most effective? If deprivation levels are high, offering practical help with

food, clothing or finances might be a good place to start; if your area is highly educated, people might be receptive to courses or debates on ethics.

Read

Acts 8: 1–8

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Philip in Samaria

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralysed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

Reflection

To this point, the fledgling church had come into conflict with the Jewish authorities for sure, but nothing too disruptive. Now the heat is turned up and they begin to suffer real persecution for their faith. Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food for widows, is singled out as a particular threat to Synagogue teaching. Stoned to death, he becomes the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:59–60).

What follows is a full-scale assault on the church in Jerusalem. Everyone bar the apostles is 'scattered' (Acts 8:4) or 'dragged' (8:3) to prison. These are both words with profoundly negative connotations in this context and yet God uses the circumstances for good.

Philip, another of the seven, ends up in Samaria. Samaria was a hilly area between Judaea in the south and Galilee in the north. Samaritans had stayed behind when most Israelites were exiled to Babylon and had intermarried with other nations with several aspects of their faith changing along the way. Jews had viewed them with hostility and suspicion ever since and there had been several instances of violent conflict between them. It would have been understandable if Philip had decided to keep a low profile and move on quickly and quietly as soon as he could. Instead he 'proclaimed the Messiah there' (Acts 8:5), cast out evil spirits, performed dramatic healings and was the source of great joy in the city.

We might live our whole lives in the same small town, or we might float from place to place like a dandelion seed on the breeze, but either way the challenge is the same: how can we serve the communities and neighbourhoods we find ourselves in right now? Will we bloom where we are planted?

Questions

Vital questions

- ? How do you see God using the persecution of the early church for good in this passage?
- ? How can you be someone who influences the culture for Jesus rather than being influenced by it?

Reflective questions

- ? What experience do you have of displacement?
- ? To what degree have you embraced where you are now?
- ? In what ways has your church impacted the local area?

Practical questions

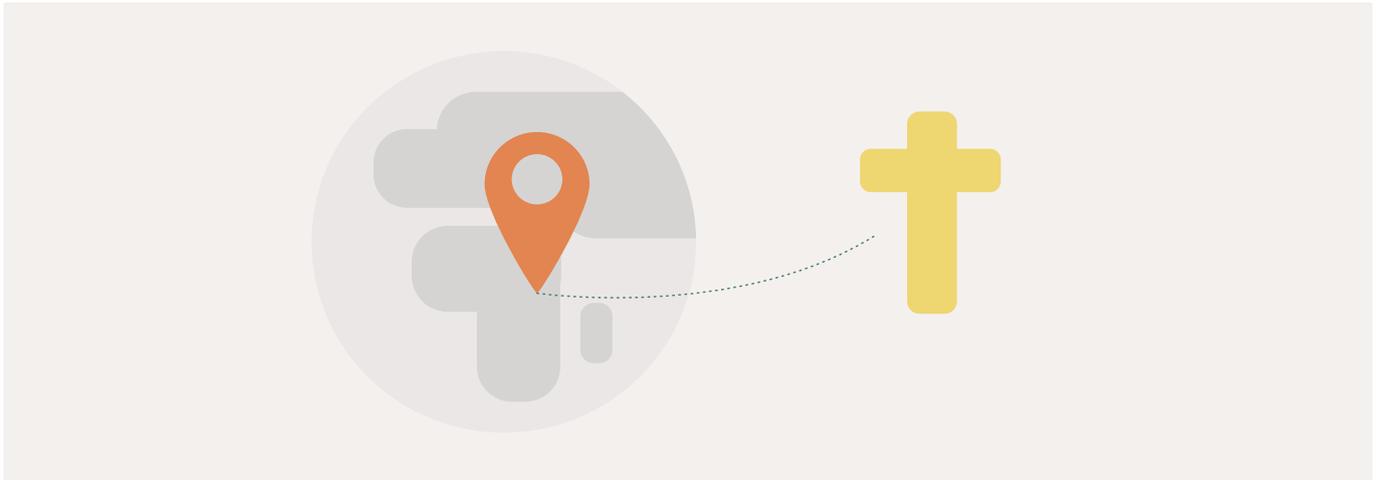
- ? The early disciples could be certain that wherever they went there would be people who had never heard the incredible message that Jesus was the way to God and eternal life. Who do you know that hasn't heard it? How might you go about telling them?
- ? Which areas of your community are in need both spiritually and practically? How might you bless them through 40acts?
- ? Part of the reason Philip was given such close attention by the Samaritans was the fact his words were accompanied by 'signs' – miracles that pointed to the nature of the kingdom of God (Acts 8:6–7). What might get your message some attention?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to put down roots in the soil where you have planted us so that we can flourish for the sake of your glory. Show us the ways we can bless the places we spend our days, bringing joy and hope in your name to those around us. By your Holy Spirit, use us to extend your influence in this world. May your kingdom come. Amen.

Introduction

As Christians around the world and through time all testify, it is possible to have a genuine, two-way relationship with the God who made the universe. He speaks to us through the Bible, through creation, through circumstance and through quiet nudges from his Spirit to ours. In this story from Acts 8, Philip was both responsive to the Lord and the Ethiopian, and as a result Africa got its first Christian convert. How responsive are we?



The aim

- ➔ To explore how we can become more alert to the prompts of the Holy Spirit
- ➔ To think about ways we can help people understand the Bible
- ➔ To encourage each other to be generous with our time with genuine seekers

Preparation

For this session you will need a long piece of string and a ring.

Activity/ice-breaker

Feed the string through the ring and tie the ends together, making a loop large enough for each person in the group to hold. Get a volunteer to stand in the centre and close their eyes for a moment while someone hides the ring in their hand. When they open their eyes, the volunteer has to guess where on the string the ring is, while the others pass it from one to the other as subtly as they can. Whoever has the ring when the volunteer finds it then goes into the middle.

Read

Acts 8:26–40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means ‘queen of the Ethiopians’). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked.

‘How can I,’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: ‘He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’ Then Philip began with that very passage of

Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Reflection

This is an intriguing story in many ways and raises numerous questions, some of which have answers and some about which we can only speculate. For instance, how did the Ethiopian come to be worshipping the God of Israel? As a eunuch he would not have been able to be a proselyte to Judaism. Maybe he didn't take to the gods and worship practices of his own culture – we'll never know. And what was it like for Philip to disappear in one location and appear in another? We can only imagine. If you've ever wondered how Philip heard the man reading, that's something we can answer: it was considered rude to read silently until a couple of hundred years ago!

There are several things worth noticing about how God directed Philip and how Philip responded here. The God of this account is the same God who still speaks today, and the more we know of his ways the more we are likely to recognise his voice in our own lives.

Firstly, the Holy Spirit doesn't give Philip the entire plan – just one step at a time. He's told the road and the direction to take, but no more information than that. And Philip 'started out' (Acts 8:27) – no hesitation. When he gets the next instruction, to get close to the chariot, he's so eager to obey he runs (8:30). Let's have the faith to obey God even if we don't know why he's asked us to do something.

Secondly, God gets Philip to the right place but doesn't spell it out or micromanage what unfolds. We don't need the Holy Spirit to spell out every tiny detail: as Paul says in Romans 12:2, if we are 'transformed by the renewing of [our] mind' we will 'be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.'

Thirdly, God speaks through Scripture, the meaning of which is sometimes explained to us by other Christians. Philip knew his Bible and took time to help the man understand what he was reading in Isaiah. Are we willing to help others hear God through the Bible?

We don't know what happened in the life of the Ethiopian after his desert encounter with the vanishing evangelist. Often we won't know if we've made an impact when we tell people about Jesus. But if we are responsive to God and people around us, it could be life changing.

Questions

Vital questions

- ? How open are we to hearing from God in our day to day lives?
- ? Get into pairs and re-read Acts 8:32–33 (a quote from Isaiah 53). Take turns explaining it to each other as if speaking to someone who had never encountered it before.
- ? What stories do you know of people coming to faith through reading the Bible?

Reflective questions

- ? Share examples of times you have heard God speak in different ways and how you responded.
- ? Who has played a part in your own faith journey?

Practical questions

- ? Come up with ideas for ways to introduce the Bible to people who don't know it. As we approach Easter, perhaps you could invite someone to read and debate the Gospel accounts of the resurrection with you? If you have school age children maybe you could offer to go and teach the Easter story to their class? Could you give Easter cards to colleagues with a couple of Bible verses in and an invitation to a church event?
- ? What can you do to ensure you are attentive to hearing God? Are you reading the Bible regularly? Do you have regular stillness and silence in your life? Do you spend time with godly friends and in God's beautiful creation?

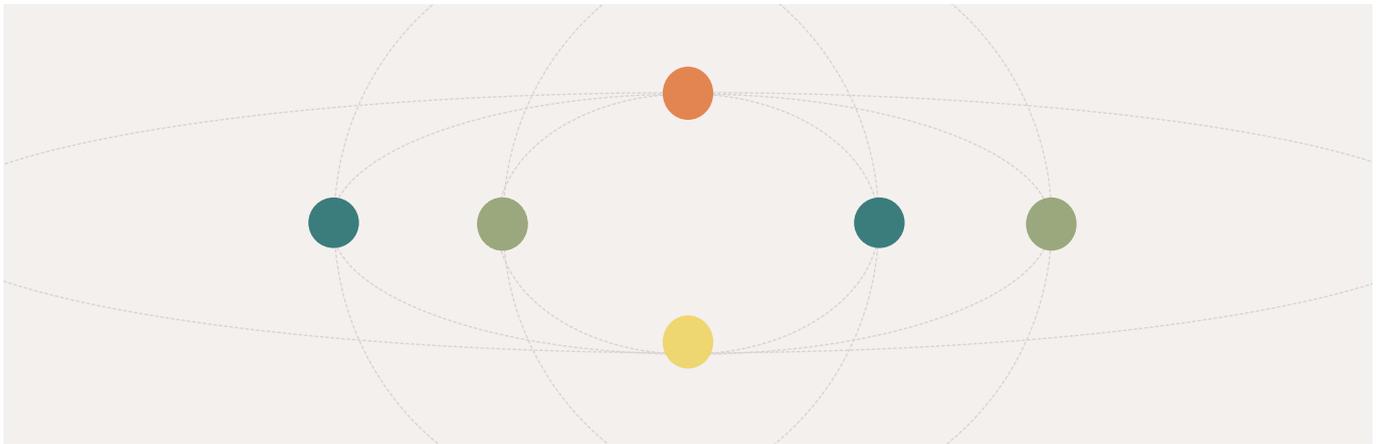
Prayer

Lord, you are a God who speaks. Thank you that you desire relationship with us and that you sent your son to show us who you are and to set us free from our sin. We want to hear you. Give us ears and eyes and hearts attentive to your voice and the willingness to respond. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Introduction

'No man is an island, entire of itself,' wrote the poet John Donne in the 17th century. In the 21st century, at least in some parts of the world, island-like independence is a mainstream aspiration, not a warped fantasy. Our society places first importance on the self, followed by immediate blood relatives. If your concern stretches further, perhaps to an elderly neighbour, your child's school or the local political scene, good for you but don't make me feel pressured to get involved too.

The Acts church was born in a time and place where people were more interdependent than we are but their connectedness was of a whole other order. The implications for us are challenging, but let's remember as we read, discuss and pray that there is nothing we could give up worth more than what we have gained in Christ.



The aim

- ➔ To examine our attitude to our possessions
- ➔ To consider how the needy in our church community are cared for
- ➔ To explore the connection between the power of the early church's verbal testimony and their sacrificial generosity

Preparation

You will need some slips of paper, pens and a bowl or hat to put them in.

Activity/ice-breaker

Give each person a piece of paper and ask them to rip it into three strips. Ask them all to think of three famous real-life people alive this century (i.e. not fictional characters from books or film) and have them write down one name per strip. Put all the names in the hat and get everyone to take a turn pulling one out. The aim is to connect yourself to that person via someone you know who knows someone who knows them, etc. The person who has the fewest links in the chain is the winner.

Read

Acts 4:32–37

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Reflection

Have you ever come across the Toddler Rules of Ownership? Rule number one: If I like it, it's mine. Number two: If it's in my hand, it's mine. Number three: If I can take it from you, it's mine. And so it goes on – you get the idea. Toddlers have to learn hard rules about sharing, taking turns and hiding the force of their desire to possess everything in sight, but growing up doesn't solve the underlying issues. Adults like acquiring and holding on to stuff too. And we really believe we deserve what we have, that we have earned it and so we can keep it for ourselves. Like the proverbial monkey, we can be trapped by our inability to release the nuts in the jam jar, holding tightly on to material wealth we really don't need.

The early church modelled a radically different approach: 'No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had' (Acts 4:32). Those with plenty supported those in need and each member of the family had equal status. This appears to have been such an intrinsic characteristic of the early Christian movement that Paul had to address a tendency among the fit and active to sponge off the group instead of earning a living (see Thessalonians)! The point was that resources were shared according to need.

As we look at this passage, we might identify with the needy or the well off. But if we are doing this group study on a full stomach, have shoes on our feet and the ability to read, we are among the world's richest inhabitants. And what we have is a result of God's grace, not our own worthiness.

There were two direct consequences: firstly, their testimony about the resurrection was powerful (Acts 4:33). The reality of Jesus' defeat of death played out in concrete, practical terms among his followers. Can we say the same today? Does our communal life proclaim to the world around us that Jesus is alive?

Secondly, 'there was no needy person among them' (Acts 4:34). This verse echoes Deuteronomy 15:4: 'there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you'. When we live as God's covenant community, seeing what we have as there to be shared with each other, there should be no poor among us.

Questions

Vital questions

- What do you think is the connection between being 'one in heart and mind' and sharing resources (Acts 4:32)?
- Given that many countries now have some kind of welfare state funded by taxation, do we still have responsibility towards needy people in our church? Why or why not?
- In what ways does your church enable connection between its members?

Reflective questions

- What do you think the church in Acts would make of your church?
- How can we learn to be less possessive of what we have?
- What examples of open-handed generosity can you think of?

Practical questions

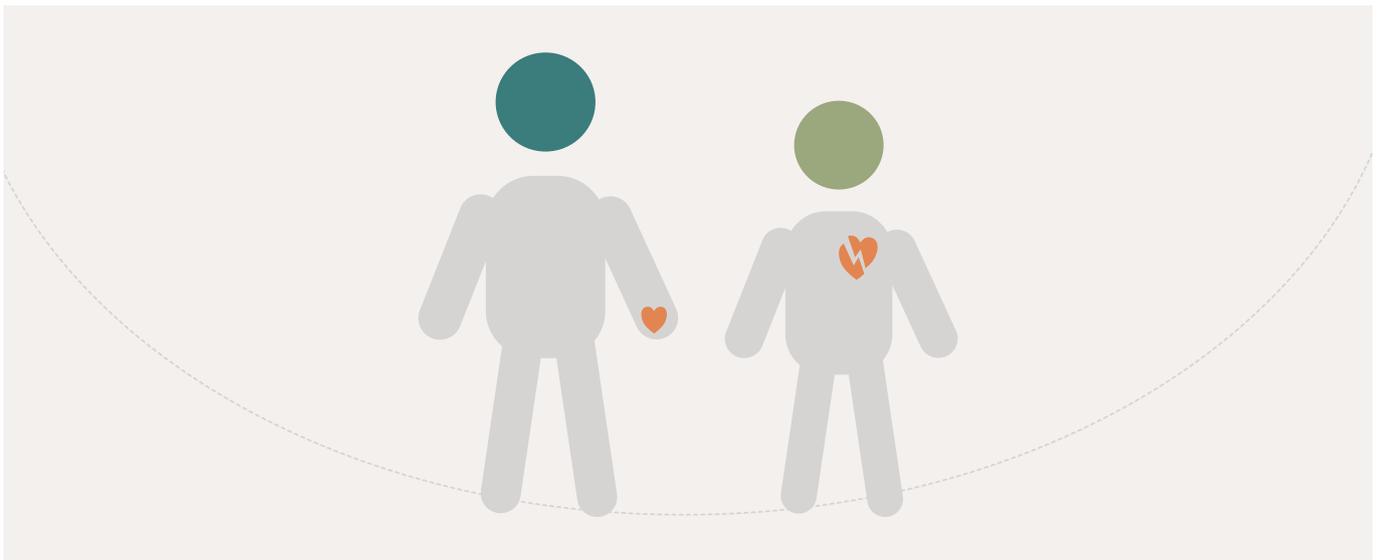
- How can we make sure as a church that we do not leave anyone in need?
- What could you do to deepen the connections in your church family? How about planning 24 hours away together? Or a bring-and-share Sunday lunch every month?
- Do you give a proportion of your income away on a regular basis? If so, how about increasing it? If you don't give in a planned or organised way, perhaps now is the time to consider doing so.

Prayer

Father God, thank you that we belong to you and we belong to each other. May your grace work powerfully in us as it did in the church of Acts so there would be an end to poverty. Give us the willingness to give generously, joyfully and obediently, to your glory. Amen.

Introduction

Living as a human alongside other humans entails being wronged in ways large and small. Whether it is the neighbour who persists in blocking your drive, the colleague who takes the credit for your work, the thief who broke in to your house and took your grandmother's ring, the husband who had an affair or the best friend who betrayed your trust, people constantly do things that make us instinctively want to get revenge. The desire for retribution is hard-wired into us, but the Holy Spirit enables another way: the way of forgiveness.



The aim

- ➔ To be inspired by the story of Stephen's death
- ➔ To explore what forgiveness entails
- ➔ To learn what enables us to forgive

Preparation

You don't need to do any preparation for this session.

Activity/ice-breaker

Take turns to present the group with a difficult choice. Each person must make a decision and explain it to the others. Here are some examples to get you started.

Would you rather always be 10 minutes late or always be 20 minutes early?

Would you rather lose all of your money and valuables or all of the pictures you have ever taken?

Would you rather go to prison for two years for something you didn't do or get away with something horrible you did

but always live in fear of being caught?

Would you rather live in the wilderness far from civilisation or live on the streets of a city as a homeless person?

Read

Acts 7:54–60

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried out, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Reflect

The stoning of Stephen has been painted by an impressive number of masters from Rembrandt to Rubens to Tintoretto. Perhaps you've seen one of them in a gallery? As we study the composition, analyse the perspective and admire the depth of the colours, it is almost possible to disengage from the ugliness and brutality a stoning involves. This is a slow, messy, torturous way to die. Tragically it still happens today in some parts of the world.

As Stephen's body is bruised, broken and crushed by rock after rock, he is not silent. He does not cry for mercy or plead for his life. He does not call down judgement or incite his supporters to violent protest. As Jesus did from the cross, he forgives his murderers and prays their actions wouldn't be held against them by God. Most of us struggle to forgive for a long time after we've been hurt by someone. Stephen forgives instantaneously.

Jesus didn't mince his words about forgiveness: 'For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins' (Matthew 6:14-15). Forgiveness is core to discipleship; it is not an optional add-on.

Knowing we are to forgive is a first step, but actually doing it can feel impossible. Let's consider Stephen's example, which will help us see how it could be done, even in the most extreme of situations we might face.

Luke writes that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. As the heat turned up around him and the crowd became dangerous, he remained calm and unafraid. We have this same Spirit living in us, and 'the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline' (2 Timothy 1:7). If we ask the Holy Spirit to help us let go of grudges, walk away from any plans to retaliate, and have compassion for our enemies, the Holy Spirit will help us.

Luke also tells us that Stephen had a vision of heaven. As though a heavy mist suddenly lifted, he was able to see 'the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7:55). Instead of seeing the high priest and the rest of the judges, he saw the only judge who mattered: a judge who had declared him righteous. He was able to forgive because he knew forgiveness.

Questions

Vital questions

- ? What is your reaction to the account of Stephen's stoning?
- ? In what ways does this story echo the story of Jesus' death?
- ? How would you describe what it means to forgive someone? How do you know whether you have done it?

Reflective questions

- ? What is the most dramatic true story of forgiveness you have encountered?
- ? How do you think those carrying out the stoning might have felt on hearing Stephen pray for their pardon from God?
- ? What is the result of a lack of forgiveness?

Practical questions

- ? Identify one person or group you know you haven't yet forgiven and ask for the Holy Spirit's help.
- ? How can we encourage and support each other to be forgiving?
- ? What is one step you can take towards forgiveness right now?

Prayer

Father God, thank you that you do not hold our sins against us. Thank you that you have made us pure and holy in your sight through the sacrifice of your perfect son, Jesus. You know we find forgiveness hard. By your Holy Spirit, give us the power, the love and the self-discipline to obey your command to forgive all who wrong us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Acknowledgements

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