



# seven week small group notes for small group leaders

## 40acts 2015

For use during Lent 2015: 18<sup>th</sup> February – April 4<sup>th</sup> 2015

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## Introduction

### What is 40acts?

40acts is a generosity challenge that invites people to do Lent a bit differently.

During the forty days of Lent, 40acts participants will be invited to take part in forty simple acts of generosity that will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2015.

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice.

Traditionally we mark Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent was a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

Small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big change to our communities, to our churches and ultimately, to our world.

### About this resource

This is a course of seven bible studies, prayers and activities for small groups, one for each of the seven weeks of Lent. Each session has been designed to last around 60 minutes.

Thematically, the seven studies weave in an understanding of God's generosity, God's '*indefinable gift*' (2 Corinthians 9:15) to us. The main studies, however, draw ideas on generosity from the miraculous signs of Jesus in the Book of John. (One of the traditional signs, Jesus walking on water, has been replaced in this series with what we have called Jesus' last miracle: His forgiving of those who executed Him on the cross.)

The gospel writer places these signs in the early chapters of his narrative so the reader can begin to ask and answer two important questions: 'Who is Jesus?' And 'What did he come to do?' Miracles are one-off displays of power; signs are symbols that teach and build learning and understanding. Miracles show **what** Jesus could do; signs point to **who Jesus is**.

Jesus came to earth so we could have saving faith in **who he is**. Some people just want Jesus in their lives to get Him to do things for them, but Jesus died for us so that we can experience His deep generosity and live deeply generous lives for and with Him. It is much more than simply what Jesus can do; it is about us changing to become more like Him. It is about us becoming deeply generous as we transform to His likeness.

Each discussion session includes prompts to help answer the vital question 'Who is Jesus?' As you work through the sessions, it will be helpful to draw together a journal of the group's thoughts on this question and to have it available for reference at the final session.

Through these studies, we are seeking to learn who Jesus is and to walk in His footsteps throughout Lent.

## Week one: generous with our will and purpose

### Objectives for this session

- To draw out an understanding of what generosity means.
- To consider the first sign in John's gospel: Jesus changes water into wine.
- To examine the role of change in bringing about acts of generosity.
- To look more closely at God's generosity to us and what our willing response to this might be.

### Icebreaker

What's in a word [see leader's section for instructions]

### Bible feature: Jesus changes water into wine

Read John 2:1-11 together.

*On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."*

*Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."*

*They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."*

*What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (NIV)*

### Reflection

This, the first traditional sign in John's gospel, is all about change and purposeful generosity. First, Jesus appears to change his mind at Mary's insistence. Then, miraculously and quietly, Jesus changes water into wine. He generously helps to solve what could have been a very embarrassing and shaming situation for the wedding couple. But this is also retold as part of God's bigger picture and points us to who Jesus is, and how He changed from God to man and became human. This is purposeful generosity at its best: His love for us.

### Initial discussion

**Q1:** What was the problem that Mary identified at the beginning of the story? Why did it matter so much to her?

**Q2:** List together the various changes that took place in the story.

**Q3:** Why does Jesus – the physical manifestation of the unchanging, ever-constant God – allow his mum to change his mind?

### Looking at the vital question: Who is Jesus?

**Q4:** Jesus replies to Mary that His hour has not yet come. What might this mean?

**Q5:** Why might the mention of 'wine' have broader significance?

**Q6:** What might be the greater significance for us of Jesus 'leaving the best till last'?

## Focus and application: Sometimes being generous requires us to change too

- To what extent do you agree with this statement? What prevents us from changing into being willingly generous people?
- What things might God be asking us to change in our lives so that we can be generous on purpose?
- What situations might we face this week where we might be used by God to pour out His loving generosity to others?

## Application activity

Fill in the blanks.

The best present I ever received was \_\_\_\_\_.

The best present I ever gave was \_\_\_\_\_.

If I had to give up a prized possession, it would be \_\_\_\_\_.

I need \_\_\_\_\_ to make my life complete.

I am a generous person \_\_\_\_\_ of the time.

The concept of God's generosity means \_\_\_\_\_ to me today.

I will deliberately do \_\_\_\_\_ differently so that I can be more generous this week.

## Worship ideas

**Song:** Jesus, you are changing me – Marilyn Baker

Close in prayer asking God to give each person in the group a generous heart. Seek God's power to help everyone present to begin to change what they believe He wants them to change in their lives.

OR use the prayer below:

Sir Francis Drake's Prayer (1577)

Disturb us, Lord, when  
we are too pleased with ourselves,  
When our dreams have come true  
Because we dreamed too little,  
When we arrived safely  
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when  
with the abundance of things we possess  
We have lost our thirst  
For the waters of life;  
Having fallen in love with life,  
We have ceased to dream of eternity  
And in our efforts to build a new earth,  
We have allowed our vision  
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,  
To venture on wilder seas  
Where storms will show Your mastery;  
Where losing sight of land,  
We shall find the stars.

We ask you to push back  
The horizons of our hopes;  
And to push back the future  
In strength, courage, hope, and love.

This we ask in the name of our Captain,  
Who is Jesus Christ.

Amen

## Week one: Leader's notes and preparation suggestions

### Preparation for icebreaker:

You will need a flipchart or similar and suitable pens. You may wish to research the definition of the word 'generosity' and also to reflect on 2 Corinthians 9:15.

Invite the group to work in pairs spending two minutes to write down what they understand by the word: *generosity*. Then pool these ideas together as a whole group on a flipchart. Make the link between these ideas and how Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:15 describes generosity as: 'God's indescribable gift'.

### Question guidance

**Q1:** Jesus' mother, Mary, sees that the wedding feast has run out of wine. In a shame and honour culture, this would have been a terrible start to a couple's married life.

**Q2:** The wine runs out; Jesus changes his mind; the empty jars become full; water changes to wine; the master of the feast changes his mind about the bridegroom's hospitality.

**Q3:** A key answer to explain why Jesus appears to change his mind is because generosity puts people first.

**Q4:** For Jesus his time – his hour – means his death. Once he starts these signs, and therefore his ministry, he is on the road to the cross.

**Q5:** Wine points to the death cup Jesus will drink from. The purpose, the meaning of His coming, His life and His death and resurrection was to put people – and that includes us – first. His act at Cana in changing water into wine (the first sign) accelerates him to death.

**Q6:** This first sign points us not only to Jesus' death but to His role as our Saviour, our Redeemer, and to His resurrection as Lord of All.

### Application activity

#### Preparation for activity:

You will need to photocopy/print the activity section for each member of your group. The questions are to get your group thinking more widely about generosity, particularly generosity with intention!

## Week two: generous with our actions

### Objectives for this session

- To set the scene for an understanding of active generosity.
- To focus on the third traditional sign in John's gospel: Jesus heals the man at Bethesda. (The second sign will be covered in a later session).
- To consider how inaction and a lack of generosity, as well as wrong actions can have consequences.
- To think about the continual cycle of God-given generosity that is at work in the world – and potentially through us.

### Icebreaker

Setting the scene [see leader's section for instructions]

### Bible feature: Jesus and the man at Bethesda

Read John 5:1-18 together.

*Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lay—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"*

*"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."*

*Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.*

*The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."*

*But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?" The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.*

*So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. In his defense Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (NIV)*

### Reflection

This, the third traditional sign in John's gospel, tells of a man who had spent almost 40 years sat at the side of the pool. Jesus sees the man's need and acts. The Lord speaks with authority to the man, who in turn responds and receives the generous healing of Jesus. Jesus didn't simply observe the man at the pool; he stepped in to heal him. Jesus models how sometimes circumstances require radical, even controversial, action to change them for the better. Generosity is a continual cycle, a thriving relationship, an endless flow of God-given goodness. Sometimes we will be aware of just how much we are receiving, at other times we will be aware of the extent to which God is involving us in the giving. At all times we have an active part to play.

## Initial discussion

**Q1:** The man in the story had spent nearly 40 years waiting to make it into the healing waters. Why then, do you think that Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be healed?

**Q2:** Jesus first gives the man two commands. What are they? Later Jesus gives him a further command. What is that and why is it important?

**Q3:** What contrasts do you see between Jesus' responses to the man and those of the Pharisees?

## Looking at the vital question: Who is Jesus?

**Q4:** What does this healing reveal about Jesus' character?

**Q5:** The Bible story says that *'a great number of disabled people used to lie there at the pool'* – so why this man, this time and this place? Did Jesus really care?

**Q6:** How much do you think Jesus models God's endless flow of goodness? Why might this not be a comforting question?

## Focus and application: Generosity requires us to act, not just observe

- How ready are we as individuals and as churches to see that wrong actions can have consequences that are often repeated over the years?
- Do we tend to respond spontaneously to the needs we observe, or do we wait instead for someone to ask us to help them?
- What sorts of potential for good might we be sitting on?

- There is a famous quote: 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing'. How can we as Christians be more proactive in encouraging one another to take action?

## Application activity

Row the boat [see leader's section for instructions]

## Worship ideas

Play the song, 'God of Justice (We must go)' by Tim Hughes.

Close in prayer asking God to break down the barriers that prevent each one of us from taking generous actions. Seek God's power to help us not simply to observe but to respond in love.

OR use the prayer below:

Peace Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,  
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
 where there is injury, pardon;  
 where there is doubt, faith;  
 where there is despair, hope;  
 where there is darkness, light;  
 where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
 to be understood as to understand;  
 to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;  
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

## Week two: Leader's notes and preparation suggestions

### Preparation for icebreaker:

**In advance of the session you will need to search out pictures of Spa towns and an artist's interpretation of the story of the healing at Bethesda.**

Show the group pictures of famous Spa towns – can they name them and say what they hold in common i.e. the underground spring water in many of these places was thought to have healing properties. Then show an image of an artist's interpretation of the story of Jesus healing the man at the pool of Bethesda. Explain that the sick in that place thought that if they could enter the pool as it bubbled, they would be healed. In effect, this was a first century Spa town and it will be the scene for today's Bible feature to help us focus on generosity.

### Question guidance

**Q1:** Maybe it was because Jesus recognized that it is not uncommon for people, who have experienced a lifetime of disappointment, to assume that it's their lot in life.

**Q2:** First commands: *'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.'* Third command: *'Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you'.* The man needed to understand that he could not just be a passive recipient of healing, he needed to take Jesus' words on board and take practical action. This wasn't just for his physical healing either, to receive Jesus' complete generosity the man needed to stop sinning.

**Q3:** We know that Jesus observed the Sabbath (Luke 4:16) but He did not see it as an oppressive yoke. Rather He saw it as a place for grace and freedom and He was ready to meet the man's needs even without being asked. The Pharisees cared only for the minutiae of rules they saw as necessary to their religion and were unconcerned about the man's well-being.

**Q4:** Jesus is perceptive and knows our inner motives, as well as our deepest needs. Jesus is God's Son and continues to work to this very day.

**Q5:** Time and again it is apparent that Jesus only healed a small proportion of the people he encountered during His time on earth. Sometimes, too, we may feel that Jesus only chooses to answer a small proportion of our prayers. Are we simply seeking miracles and wonders, or are we seeking to know God and what is on His heart?

**Q6:** Sometimes generosity can be a profoundly disturbing thing both to receive AND to give. Remember what Jesus said about the widow who gave all she had to live on as an offering? (Luke 21:3) Generosity is relative, not absolute – sometimes we would rather know when to stop rather than be involved in a continual cycle of giving.

### Application activity

#### Preparation for activity:

**You will need to put aside two 'oars' (which might be broom handles or long sticks) – one labelled FAITH and the other labelled WORKS. A venue that has a room with space might be helpful.**

Divide the group into two and ask each to go to a different end of the room. Ask one person to sit in the middle and explain that they are in a rowing boat on the sea between two islands. The sea is filled with sharks and the boat is starting to sink. Give them an oar (e.g. a broom or long stick) with the word FAITH labelled on it. Ask the person if they think this oar will save them?

Ask another person to sit in the middle in a different 'boat', with a different oar labelled, WORKS. Ask the same question.

Explain that the answer is no to both questions, with one oar they will just go round in circles. Both faith and works are important. Read James 2:14-17.



## Week three: generous with our possessions

### Objectives for this session

- To think about the potential costs in being generous.
- To consider the fourth sign in John's gospel: Jesus feeds the crowds.
- To recognise how being tied to our possessions can limit our generosity.
- To look at how Jesus models generosity and what we might learn from this.

### Icebreaker

Just a little bit more [see leader's section for instructions.]

### Bible feature: Jesus feeds the crowd

#### Read John 6:5-14 together

*When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.*

*Philip answered him, 'It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!'*

*Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, 'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?'*

*Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.*

*When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, 'Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.' So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' (NIV)*

### Reflection

This the fourth traditional sign in John's gospel shows that generosity can be an incredibly powerful force. Jesus looked at the needs before him and created an opportunity for generosity to meet those needs. The boy in turn trusted Jesus and offered Him his entire lunch. This act became a sign of surrender, a releasing of generosity that would endure for ever. This same opportunity is available to us; to empty what we have into Jesus' hands and watch Him work wonders with the offering. Nothing will be ever be wasted.

### Initial discussion

**Q1:** What did Jesus see when he looked at the crowd at the beginning of the story?

**Q2:** What problems did the disciples focus on when Jesus asked them where they could buy bread for the people?

**Q3:** What was significant about the boy's offering to Jesus?

### Looking at the vital question: Who is Jesus?

**Q4:** What strikes you about Jesus' approach to this miracle?

**Q5:** How much do you think compassion and thankfulness characterise Jesus' broader ministry and service to others? Can you think of other examples that illustrate this?

**Q6:** What did the people say about Jesus once they had observed the sign of Him feeding the crowds? Did this impression last?

## Focus and application: Being generous will cost us

- When we are faced with a need, how ready are we to look at the bigger picture and our role in that?
- Why is it tempting to hold on to, and put our security in, our possessions? What holds us back from giving more away?
- To what extent do you think we have been entrusted with our lives and the resources we have at our fingertips by God?
- How might things be different if we were to choose to be generous, to trust God and watch and wait for Him to act?

## Application activity

Bags or baskets? [see leader's section for instructions]

## Worship ideas

**Song:** I will offer up my life – Matt Redman.

Close in prayer (perhaps using the basket that was filled in the activity) offering up those present to God for his blessing and commissioning.

OR use the prayer below by Marie Birkinshaw.

I take my bag of worries – pour them on the floor.  
I try to work out this and that and see what each is for.

I lay them down before the Lord and ask him for his peace.

I know he'll help me with each one, though worries never cease.

Each day has worries of its own, I'll trust him for today.

I turn my heart unto the Lord, and wait for what he'll say.



## Week three: Leader's notes and preparation suggestions

### Preparation for icebreaker:

You will need a flipchart or similar and suitable pens.

When John D Rockefeller was asked, 'how much would be enough?' he famously replied, 'just a little bit more'. Explain that while this quote speaks to our insatiable consumer appetites, it can also be applied to the fact that sometimes different roles in life will cost us. Use a flipchart to brainstorm roles and situations that require 'just a little bit more'. These might include jobs such as, e.g. being a school governor, visiting the lonely, helping out with a food bank, funding an overseas development project. The 'little bit more required' might include more time, money, belongings, compassion.

### Question guidance

**Q1:** It is characteristic of Jesus that he looks with compassion and is alert to the needs of those around him. This time he realises that the crowd, who may have travelled a great distance just to hear him, are hungry. He knows that he can be an answer to their needs and responds appropriately.

**Q2:** The disciples took a practical, very logical line. They saw the economic, logistical, cost and resource problems. They forgot that with Jesus generosity is key to the response.

**Q3:** It is clear from Andrew's comment that the boy's offering is no match for the need. The most significant thing about the boy's offering was not the quantity, but the fact that he held nothing back. He ran the risk of going hungry on a hunch that Jesus might be able to do something bigger and better with his meagre resources.

**Q4:** Jesus 'already had in mind what he was going to do'. He knows a miracle is needed. Yet he does not seek magnificence and glory. He doesn't decide to act alone and instead involves others. He calmly and quietly gives instructions on crowd management to the disciples and makes sure everyone is comfortable. He accepts and blesses

the boy's offering. He manages the hospitality so that all are fed and nothing is wasted. This is an ordered and very quiet sign of God's glory at work in the everyday.

**Q5:** In Mark 9:13-16, we see Jesus' response to the little children who were brought to him. Instead of rebuking them like the disciples did, he blessed them and said '*anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*' (NIV) How childlike (or like the boy in the story) is our openness to the Kingdom which Jesus offers us?

**Q6:** The people began to say about Jesus, '*Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.*' (John 6:14 NIV) They were beginning to realise that He was someone very special and someone who was inspired by God. They had yet to appreciate that He was the Messiah, and it is important to recognise that many were already refusing completely to recognise that He was a Prophet and who were adamant He was not of God.

### Application activity

#### Preparation for activity:

You will need a set of weighing scales and a selection of bags with a stone in each, along with a set of labels and a wicker basket.

Explain that often in life we can feel weighed down by the life baggage that we try to carry on our own. Weigh the first bag and ask for suggestions on what might weigh us down – possessions, bitterness, troubles, worries, sickness... Write the first suggestion on a label and attach it to the bag. Repeat this with further bags and attach labels for each suggestion. Like the disciples we can become weighed down by the problems, rather than looking to Jesus.

Now ask for suggestions of the resources and talents that God has given us. Write each suggestion on a label and put the labels in the basket. Next weigh the basket and notice how light it is. Explain that we can offer our talents and resources as a gift back to God. In this way we can know lightness in watching him do something bigger and better than we can ever do on our own.



## Week four: generous with our words

### Objectives for this session

- To think about how questions and answers can help reveal who we are.
- To consider the fifth sign in John's gospel: Jesus heals the man born blind.
- To explore the importance of words and how they can be used generously.
- To begin to see who Jesus is as the Son of God.

### Icebreaker

The 'Yes/No Game' [see leader's section for instructions]

### Bible feature: Jesus heals the man born blind

Read John 9:13-41 together.

*They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. 'He put mud on my eyes,' the man replied, 'and I washed, and now I see.'*

*Some of the Pharisees said, 'this man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.'*

*But others asked, 'How can a sinner perform such signs?' So they were divided.*

*Then they turned again to the blind man, 'What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.'*

*The man replied, 'He is a prophet.'*

*They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. 'Is this your son?' they asked. 'Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?'*

*'We know he is our son,' the parents answered, 'and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.'*

*His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the*

*Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'*  
*A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. 'Give glory to God by telling the truth,' they said. 'We know this man is a sinner.'*  
*He replied, 'Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!'*

*Then they asked him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?'*

*He answered, 'I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?'*

*Then they hurled insults at him and said, 'You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.'*  
*The man answered, 'Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.'*

*To this they replied, 'You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!' And they threw him out.*

*Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'*

*'Who is he, sir?' the man asked. 'Tell me so that I may believe in him.'*

*Jesus said, 'You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.'*

*Then the man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshipped him.*

*Jesus said, 'For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.'*

*Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, 'What? Are we blind too?'*

*Jesus said, 'If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. (NIV)*

## Reflection

This, the fifth traditional sign in John's gospel, is also the first record within John's book of someone acknowledging that Jesus is Lord. Journeys to faith have multiple pathways. Some happen in a definitive moment. Some, as with the man born blind, come gradually. His belief in and account of Jesus each have a tremendous cost. He is excluded from his family, his home, his church and the world he has known all his life. But his words and Jesus' words after the healing, *'...I have come into this world, so that the blind will see...'* live as a sign of hope and faith for all to see.

## Initial discussion

**Q1:** What qualities would you say describe the man's account of how he was healed and his interchange with the Pharisees?

**Q2:** What emotions might lie behind the exchanges from the Pharisees as they talk first with the man born blind and then with his parents? Explain using examples of their words from the Bible passage above.

**Q3:** What types of words do the parents use when they are challenged by the Pharisees? How convincing are they?

**Q4:** Describe the conversation between Jesus and the man whom he healed. What characterises their words?

## Looking at the vital question: Who is Jesus?

**Q5:** What was the Pharisees' response to anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah?

**Q6:** This is the first account in John's Gospel, where someone else describes Jesus as *'the Son of God'*. How does the story help to reveal this for us too?

**Q7:** What does Jesus say his purpose is in coming into this world?

## Focus and application: Our words are just as valuable as our money

- Do you agree with the above statement? Try to explain your answer.
- In our busy world of fast-moving conversations, 24-7 news and instant social media, whose voices tend to dominate for each of us? What or whose words are we really listening to?
- How prepared are we to speak up for Jesus? Are we willing to take risks for Jesus, like the man born blind?
- Are we prepared to be better listeners? What steps can we take to improve our listening skills?
- In what ways can we use our words to encourage one another?

## Application activity

Use words to pay compliments! [see leader's section for instructions]

## Worship ideas

**Song:** May the words of my mouth – Tim Hughes & Rob Hill.

Speaking generous words often starts with listening and stillness. Use the following short 'Jesus Prayer' in an attitude of meditation.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.

The history of the Jesus Prayer goes back, as far as we know, to the early fifth century, with Diadochos, who taught that repetition of the prayer leads to inner stillness. Invite the group to use this time of inner stillness to seek God's voice; to hear his encouragement – both for themselves and others in the room.

## Week four: Leader's notes and preparation suggestions

### Preparation for icebreaker:

**You will need to choose and write the names of well-known bible characters on pieces of paper, one for each member of your group.**

Play the 'Yes/No Game'. Give each person in the group the name of a well-known bible character, written on a piece of paper. The group then asks each person in turn questions about their character, and the person must answer only yes or no in response, until their character has been guessed correctly.

### Question guidance

**Q1:** Honesty, integrity, certainty, simplicity, plain truthfulness all characterise the man's account.

**Q2:** Anger, jealousy, spite, fear, denial, hatred, feeling threatened, are all emotions that might well be brewing up within the Pharisees.

**Q3:** The parents are not prepared to deny their parenthood, but they are willing to hand over their son, whatever the consequences for him, rather than risk being thrown out of the Synagogue and losing their reputation themselves.

**Q4:** Jesus' gentle discussion with the man born blind is in strong contrast to the Pharisee's earlier response to him. Jesus' words show welcome, acceptance and assurance. The man's words show his growth from searching, to belief, to worship; or metaphorically from spiritual blindness to sight.

**Q5:** The Pharisees were ready to throw anyone out of the Synagogue who claimed that Jesus was the Messiah. Clearly rumours were already beginning to circulate and the Pharisees were prepared to take drastic action.

**Q6:** Describe the progression of the healed man's gradual awakening to who Jesus really is from his physical healing right through to worshipping Jesus as Lord. Where do we think we are in this progression of understanding?

**Q7:** Talk about Jesus' role as Judge of all. How does the group feel about this? Jesus points out to the Pharisees their hidden motives that belie their sin and guilt. How much might sin get in the way of a real understanding of who Jesus is?

### Application activity

#### Preparation for activity:

**You will need to collect A4 sheets of writing paper and suitable writing implements for each of the group.**

In our culture we are not good at paying compliments, which also often means we don't know what our family/friends/work colleagues think of us. This week's activity will help us to use words generously. You will need a sheet of paper and pens/pencils for each person in the group. This activity works best in groups of less than seven so you may need to split into smaller groups.

Ask everyone to write their name at the bottom of the piece of paper. In a clockwise motion, passing to the left, hand the sheet round one place.

Now take two minutes to list any positive qualities, gifts and special talents that describe the person whose name is at the foot of the sheet. When the time is over, fold over your comments. Pass the sheet clockwise again and repeat the process until everyone has their sheet back and can read the results.

## Week five: generous with our hearts

### Objectives for this session

- To set the week's study of generosity within an understanding of the generous heart of God.
- To consider the second sign in John's gospel: Jesus heals the royal official's son.
- To think about our role as intercessors to God on behalf of those who struggle in life.
- To seek God's love to fill our hearts so that we might reach out to others and go on reaching out when the going gets tough.

### Icebreaker

The Father's Heart [see leader's section for instructions]

### Bible feature: Jesus heals the royal official's son

Read John 4:43-54 together.

*After the two days he left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honour in his own country.) When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there. Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.*

*"Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."*

*The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies."*

*"Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live."*

*The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him."*

*Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and his whole household believed. This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee. (NIV)*

### Reflection

This, the fifth traditional sign in John's gospel, shows the generosity of Jesus reaching out to heal the royal official's son and that for Jesus distance is no object. The royal official's heart is broken by his son's impending death and he comes to beg for Jesus' help. Jesus sees this and responds. The royal official straightaway takes Jesus completely at his word. He does not doubt that Jesus will intervene and save the boy. Belief in Jesus starts from the heart; it is impossible to know God through a merely intellectual process. We must surrender our will and our hearts to Him. In doing this, we acknowledge our own dependence on Him, our own sufferings, our own failings, our own brokenness. Then we can be moved to bring the broken and hurting world to God too and find ways to work with Him to bring relief.

### Initial discussion

- Q1:** What sort of welcome might Jesus have expected to receive when he went back to his home town?
- Q2:** What kinds of people were drawn to Jesus? What might have been their motives? Think particularly about the royal official in this context.
- Q3:** Who is Jesus drawn to? What signs of generosity does this story reveal about Jesus?
- Q4:** What are the positive outcomes of this story?
- Q5:** What is different about this healing story from other healing stories that you know about Jesus?

## Looking at the vital question: Who is Jesus?

**Q6:** Look back to John chapters 2 to 4. What events happened at the Passover Festival and beyond which involved Jesus and drew people's attention to him?

**Q7:** What else does this sign teach us about who Jesus is?

## Focus and application: Being generous should lead us into contact with those people who are struggling

- Like the royal official and the prodigal son's Father, do we allow ourselves to be moved, disturbed and inconvenienced by our hurting and broken world? What outcomes might this have if we do?
- Generous love for others is always a faith journey. How can we ensure that our love for others will grow and work healing in them?
- Even with the best of motives, our love is flawed. What things might stop us from giving and limit our generosity?

## Application activity

The broken heart of God – see leader's section for instructions.

## Key worship

**Song:** Bless the Lord, Oh my soul (10,000 reasons) – Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin.

Use 1 Corinthians 13 (Paul's letter on love) as a prayer:

*If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to*

*hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

*Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (NIV)*



## Week five: Leader's notes and preparation suggestions

### Preparation for icebreaker:

**Familiarise yourself with and write down the main events in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).**

The group should retell the story without looking at actual bible text (go for as much drama as you can). Then read the passage: were any critical events missed out, what does it say here about the Father's generosity? Who does the Father in the story represent for us?

### Question guidance

**Q1:** Jesus' first disciples came from Galilee, but we know from Mark 6:1-6 that many there refused to recognise Him as special, after all they knew his brothers and sisters. The gospel-writer Mark notes that healings were not easily forthcoming there.

**Q2:** We often read in the four gospels that the sick, the blind and the lame were drawn to Jesus. Here we see that the crowd came for signs and wonders; but the royal official typifies those who come with a need to Jesus on behalf of others. He was like the Centurion in Luke 7:1-10). The royal official is insistent that Jesus can help and begs for Jesus to heal his Son.

**Q3:** Jesus' compass swings to those in need; towards those whose hearts are broken. Adversity comes to everyone at some point and Jesus is willing to meet us at our point of need, as well as in the good times too.

**Q4:** Not only is the boy healed and the royal official becomes a believer – such is the effect of Jesus' powerful word, that all the official's household become believers too.

**Q5:** This healing takes place at a distance, Jesus' powerful word is enough to bring healing. He does not need even to touch to heal and his glory is revealed from afar. Jesus gives the royal official the opportunity to believe in him at a deeper level and not just seek for a miracle.

**Q6:** Outline briefly how Jesus clears the temple, his teaching of Nicodemus, his talks with the Samaritan woman and his disciples, and the testimony of John the Baptist. Point out the phrases that relate to the authority of Jesus; that he is the Son of God sent to save the world; that he is the living water and the Messiah.

**Q7:** Distance is no limit to Jesus' healing power; the generous intercession of others can lead to healing and restoration. God works in the lives of those who are prepared to put their trust in Him.

### Application activity

#### Preparation for activity:

**Before the session collect articles from national and local newspapers along with some gluesticks. Cut out a large heart shape from card and draw a jagged cut down the middle.**

Explain that this picture of a heart represents the broken heart of God.

Encourage the group to share news stories that have touched them during the week, or concerns that they may have about loved ones. Ask the group to stick the newspaper cuttings you have collected and the names of the individuals they are concerned about onto the heart as an act of intercession.



## Week six: generous with our faith

### Objectives for this session

- To imagine reaching out in faith and love to those we come into contact with.
- To consider the sixth sign in John's gospel: Jesus raises Lazarus.
- To think how sharing our faith and trust in Jesus might be an act of generosity.
- To look at Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life and what this might mean for us.

### Icebreaker

The ripple effect [see leader's section for instructions]

### Bible feature: Jesus raises Lazarus

Read John 11:17-46 together.

*On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.'*

*After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. 'The Teacher is here,' she said, 'and is asking for you.'*

*When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary*

*in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.*

*When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'*

*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'*

*Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away the stone,' he said. 'But, Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days. Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. 'When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.'*

*Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. (NIV)*

### Reflection

This, the sixth traditional sign in John's gospel, shows that true generosity – the sort that Jesus modelled – is always sacrificial, sometimes painful and constantly personal. For Jesus relationship was key, not only with his Father, but also with his friends and in his role as Saviour of the World. We, too, are designed for relationship. We give to demonstrate how we feel about another person or



situation, and we also give in response to a Generous God who first gave to us. When we start to see giving as an expression of gratitude to God, we stop wanting to give with strings attached. We become like Martha, able to draw strength from faith in the midst of trial and suffering.

## Initial discussion

**Q1:** Talk with your group about the characters in the story called Martha and Mary. What other stories do they know about them and what are they most likely to be remembered for?

**Q2:** In this story Martha runs to Jesus after a tragic event, the death of her brother. She confesses him as the Messiah in the midst of the tragedy. Why?

**Q3:** Martha next runs to her sister Mary to bring her to Jesus. She generously shares His presence with Mary. Why does she do this?

**Q4:** Jesus gives thanks to the Father before he raises Lazarus from the dead. Why do you think he does this?

## Looking at the vital question: Who is Jesus?

**Q5:** Which 'I am' phrase does Jesus use in this story? Can you list the other six 'I am' phrases. Which one speaks most clearly to you today?

**Q6:** What promise does Jesus give for those who believe in him?

**Q7:** What does Jesus' weeping tell us about him?

**Q8:** What was the point Jesus was making in raising Lazarus from the dead?

**Q9:** Did Jesus' actions convince everyone that he was the Son of God?

## Focus and application: Faith is a gift we have been given, and can continue to give

- What does this statement mean to you today?
- What sorts of things is God asking us to trust Him for today?
- Do you think it is still possible to trust in God's generosity, no matter what happens or doesn't happen? Take time to reflect on times of God's faithfulness.
- Share individual experiences of evangelism and sharing your faith; have you considered that this is a generous thing that you have done?
- Does taking a generous stance in faith-sharing alter your perception of how you might go about it in the future?

## Application activity

Burn the burden – see leader's section for instructions.

## Worship ideas

**Song:** Men of faith, rise up and sing – Martin Smith

Lead your group in this prayer, and then pray together for specific opportunities to be generous in sharing faith with others:

Loving God, today, help me to overcome my unbelief. Help me to be generous in faith: faith in people; faith in life; faith in the areas I am weak and troubled in. Resurrect areas of my faith that need you, O Lord. Make me a Martha, someone who runs to you with sorrows and hurts. Make me into a Martha who confesses you and shares you with hurting others. Amen.

## Week six: Leader's notes and preparation suggestions

**Preparation for icebreaker: you will need to prepare in advance a card containing concentric circles for each group participant. They will also need pens/pencils and pebbles.**

On an A4 piece of paper draw a small circle in the middle and add your name. Add more circles moving out and add the names of people who are closest to you in the second circle. For example, the second circle could contain the names of their family members; the next the names of friends; the next work colleagues; neighbours and community contacts; charitable organisations; world events and so on.

Once complete, place a pebble in the centre of your card and imagine the ripples that would drift out from the centre to the edge of a pool. You could imagine sharing your faith or reaching out in love to the very edges of your circles.

### Question guidance

**Q1:** Martha generally gets a 'bad rep' in church circles. In Luke 10:38-42 Jesus visits the home of Martha and Mary. Mary spends the time listening to the teaching of Jesus, whereas Martha anxiously spends her time working in an attempt to be hospitable. She asks Jesus to get Mary to help her and Jesus responds, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed... Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'

**Q2:** It may be because in the height of her sorrow, she knows that in Jesus she can find hope and comfort. Her faith and trust are clear for all to see even in deepest grief.

**Q3:** Martha has just been reassured and confirmed in her knowledge of the resurrection. Jesus' words are enough for her and she wants to bring comfort to her sister. The rest of the household then follow Mary. Believing faith has a ripple effect and its effects are far-reaching.

**Q4:** Jesus shows us that being able to give thanks in all circumstances is a great strength. Generous faith sees it all: the rain and the rainbow; death, pain and the promise of resurrection to come.

**Q5:** I am... the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way the truth and the life; the true vine.

**Q6:** *'The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.'* (John 11:26 NIV) Take some time to explore this promise of eternal life with the group.

**Q7:** Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. He fully understands the pain of grief and shares in the tragedy of human suffering.

**Q8:** As with the previous signs, John the gospel writer is helping us to understand who Jesus is, rather than what he can do. Jesus' words of thanks to God were to show that God hears him and is at work through him, so that people will give glory to God the Father.

**Q9:** Clearly, 'there are none so blind, as those who will not see'. John points out that many did believe who saw Lazarus alive again. However, others did not and went to tell Jesus' enemies who were working to try to destroy him.

### Application activity

**Preparation for activity: Prepare in advance some pens, slips of paper, long matches and some kind of container you are happy to have small amounts of paper burnt in.**

Ask each participant to write down something they want to remove from their lives – the burdens that are weighing them down. This will be a personal moment and no one will share with the item written down. The pieces of paper are then placed in the container. Light a match and gently burn the slips of paper. In the same way resurrection extinguished death for Lazarus, and the power of Christ can release us from our burdens, sins and anxieties. We can begin afresh, renewed.

## Week seven: generous with forgiveness

### Objectives for this session

- To look at contemporary examples of forgiveness.
- To consider the final sign from the four gospels: Jesus on the cross.
- To reflect on forgiveness as an act of generosity and generous love.
- To draw together thoughts from the course overall on Who Jesus Is – what this means for us and how this changes us.

### Icebreaker

Stories of forgiveness – see leader’s section for instructions.

### Bible feature: Jesus forgives from the cross

Read John 19:28-35 together.

*Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

*Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. (NIV)*

Read Luke 23:34.

*Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. (NIV)*

### Reflection

This is the final sign in our studies and in this session we will look not only from John’s perspective this time, but also at how the scene is described by each of the four gospel writers. The accounts of Jesus on the cross spell out for us the complete sacrifice that Jesus was prepared to make on behalf of humankind. True forgiveness, as modelled by Jesus in Luke’s gospel, is the supreme act of generosity, reaching out not just to those who ask for forgiveness, but also to His enemies and those who seek to harm and destroy. It is worth pointing out too that Jesus also brings about cosmic salvation of a broken world, as recorded by Paul in Colossians 1:15-20.

### Initial discussion

**Q1:** What effect is the gospel writer John aiming to achieve?

**Q2:** What does John report of Jesus’ words from the cross?

**Q3:** What words does the gospel writer, Luke, add to this?

**Q4:** Talk about the transformation implied in these words of Jesus.

### Looking at the vital question: Who is Jesus?

**Q5:** Reflect together on Matthew 27:51-54. What testimony do the centurion and the guards offer on who Jesus is?

**Q6:** Look also at Mark 15:33-41. What aspects do all four passages reveal about Jesus on the cross?

**Q7:** Look back at the group journal on 'Who is Jesus?' What have the various signs of John had to teach us about Jesus? Add to this the aspects of Jesus that Paul points to in Colossians 1:15-20.

**Q8:** What difference does this knowledge of who Jesus is and of his generous love make to our lives? And what do they promise for tomorrow?

### Focus and application: Forgiveness is a gift we have been given, and can continue to give

- What do we make of today's statement?
- If Jesus can forgive from the cross, what does that mean for us? Is there anyone, or anything that cannot be forgiven?
- Forgiveness is air; we die without it. Jesus on the cross, struggling for breath, uses the last of his remaining strength to speak. The only thing he can do is breathe, and forgive. What would life be like if we could forgive as naturally as we can breathe?

### Application activity

Create a recipe card [see leader's section for instructions]

### Key worship

**Song:** Brother, sister, let me serve you – Richard A M Gillard.

This week considers what it means to truly be forgiven, and therefore generously forgive. Say this prayer together:

Father eternal, giver of light and grace,  
we have sinned against you and against our neighbour,  
in what we have thought,  
in what we have said and done,  
through ignorance, through weakness,  
through our own deliberate fault.  
We have wounded your love  
and marred your image in us.  
We are sorry and ashamed,  
and repent of all our sins.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
who died for us,  
forgive us all that is past;  
help us to forgive others as you have forgiven us,  
and lead us out from darkness  
to walk as children of light.  
Help us live as you, without limits.

## Week seven: Leader's notes and preparation suggestions

### Preparation for icebreaker:

Research and collect a few images that are helpful for the retelling of the Eric Lomax story. Suggestions of other forgiveness stories might be Corrie Ten Boom or the reconciliation programme after the Rwandan genocides between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

Ask the group to share any experiences they have had or know about forgiveness.

Tell the story of Eric Lomax who forgave his torturer, (another suggestion: organise a social evening and watch *The Railway Man*).

Recently, Eric Lomax died (October 2012). During WWII he served with the World Corps Signal. The Japanese captured him during the surrender of Singapore in 1942. The story of his torture as he was forced to build the Burma railway over the bridge of the River Kwai has been made into a BBC television drama and a feature film called *The Railway Man*. A subtitle on his obituary was "A Man Who Forgave."

After a radio receiver was found during his captivity, Mr Lomax was repeatedly beaten, had multiple bones broken and was water tortured. One of his constant torturers stood out: Nagase Takashi, an interpreter. Mr Lomax told the NY times in 1995 when his book *The Railway Man* was published, "At the end of the war, I would have been happy to murder him."

Both men came with shattered lives at their meeting. The torturer was wracked with guilt; the victim was consumed with desire for bitter revenge. Mr Nagase and Mr Lomax met through the Forgiveness Project. At that meeting, Mr Nagase - after having his hand taken in greeting by Mr Lomax - said, "I'm sorry, I'm so very sorry," over and over again. How could he forgive him? And yet amazingly that is what Mr Lomax did. How was Mr Lomax able to forgive? How is deep forgiveness possible? Where do we get the power to love and forgive deeply? If we look at Mr Lomax, we see three deep acts of forgiveness. We see deep love. We see deep action. We see a

deep generosity that goes beyond human experience. Mr Lomax's act of forgiveness comes in principle from Jesus' death on the cross: deep love; deep action; deep generosity.

### Question guidance

**Q1:** John's intention is to give a truthful testimony that Jesus did in fact die, and that there was not magic trickery or false evidence. His testimony is such that he wants people who read his words to believe in Jesus just as he did.

**Q2:** *'I am thirsty,' 'It is finished.'*  
Jesus was human. He was thirsty and died a human death. Yet he was also God and his death was part of salvation's plan.

**Q3:** *'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.'*  
Forgiveness is a hard thing to offer. When we are wounded and in pain, when others have mistreated and abused us, it is not easy to put aside bitterness and resentment. There is no sign that the soldiers made any apology before Jesus utters his final words. Instead they are busy scavenging his possessions. Still he forgives them: the soldiers, the priests; Pilate; us.

**Q4:** One of the final miracles of Jesus is delivered out of the blood and agony of the darkest moments of His life. In His words requesting God's forgiveness for His killers, Jesus reminds us of His first ever miracle, saving the best wine to be served last. Forgiveness can transform even the darkest night. Forgiveness can make miracle workers of us all. You may wish to remind the group of the words of Absolution that are often given after confessional liturgies.

May the God of love and power  
forgive you and free you from your sins,  
heal and strengthen you by his Spirit,  
and raise you to new life in Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Q5:** The centurion and the guards were terrified by the supernatural events surrounding Jesus' death. They exclaimed, 'Surely he was the Son of God!'

**Q6:** All four gospel accounts of Jesus' death reveal Jesus' love and generosity. He was prepared to take on an agonising death and to be separated from God for the sake of all humankind. As the ancient hymn reminds us: 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in'

**Q7:** The group journals will most likely show up a number of different thoughts in response to 'Who is Jesus?' These might include: Saviour, Redeemer, Lord of All, God's Son or Son of God, Healer, Revealer of God's Heart, Prophet, Messiah, Judge, Transformer, Living Water, Bread of Life, Light of the World, Gate, Good Shepherd, Resurrection and the Life, The Way, The Truth and the Life, The True Vine.

The early hymn in praise of 'The Supremacy of Christ' in Colossians 1:15-20 reveals his role in God's cosmic salvation plan. He is Lord of all creation, and Head of the Church. Enjoy using the superlatives about Christ in joining in this passage together.

**Q8:** Just as the people who experienced Jesus for themselves in the First Century reacted to Him differently, this is still the case today. Jesus still offers forgiveness and hope and He continues to offer generous love and the possibility of transformation. How we choose to respond to the Good News and the Kingdom is our choice.

### Application activity

**Preparation for activity:**  
**Prepare in advance pieces of good quality card, colouring pens, gluesticks and shiny decorations.**

Encourage the group to think about what might be included in a forgiveness recipe. Ask each participant to write out a recipe card on how to forgive. This recipe might include: two cups of understanding, a pinch of compassion and a bucket load of love. They can then take the opportunity to decorate the card as they wish.

Alternatively, participants might wish to make an Easter card giving thanks for Who Jesus Is.



## Acknowledgements

### About Stewardship

We help people give. Since 1906 Stewardship has provided advice, guidance, inspiration and practical tools to make it easy for people to give easily and tax effectively.

Stewardship giving accounts are currently used by over 25,000 people in the UK with more than £53 million distributed to charitable causes from Stewardship accounts every year. Over 19,000 registered churches, secular and Christian charities and full-time Christian workers are currently supported with Stewardship.

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