



seven week  
full resource  
for church leaders



For use during Lent 2014: March 5<sup>th</sup> until April 19<sup>th</sup> 2014

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## Introduction

### what is 40acts?

40acts is a generosity challenge which 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 which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2014.

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.

### how to use this resource

These seven sermon outlines - each one looking at a different sign of generosity taken from Jesus' life - are designed to help your church explore generosity by sharing with you ideas and Biblical principles that underpin the Easter message.

Because we know that churches come from a wide range of denominations we've chosen not to provide you with fully scripted sermons. Instead, we have given you the key ingredients and added in some essential questions, allowing you to add in the anecdotes and take the detours that will work best for your congregation.

For your convenience, we've also included the prayer resource in this pack, should you wish you use it.

### about this series

'Signs of generosity: the book of John' is the 40acts Together 2014 seven-week sermon series for pastors and church leaders.

These seven studies of the miraculous signs in the book of John, chapters 2-11, can be used in a series for a church or as standalone individual messages.

Thematically, the studies focus on generosity, God's 'incredible gift' (2 Corinthians 9:15) to us.

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 those who executed him from the cross.

John places these signs in the beginning of his narrative so the reader can begin to ask and answer two questions: First, who is Jesus and second, what did he come to do? The cross is the last sign pointing to who Jesus is and what he came to do. This is his last sign as the Son of God pointing to His death and forgiveness from the cross and his resurrection from the grave.

Lent is a period of seven weeks before Easter where people are especially sensitive to spiritual values and are asking these and other questions. 'Signs of generosity' sermon notes can also be used alongside the 40acts Together small group resources (tell your small group leaders to sign up at [www.40acts.org.uk](http://www.40acts.org.uk)) where people can begin to meditate on Christ; reflect on the significance of the cross; and celebrate His resurrection. Here, in a small group setting, people can examine each sign with some study questions that build to a recurring essential or vital question: What do these signs say about Jesus? This question is the summary prompt at the end of each study.

## week one: generous on purpose

### key idea -

Sometimes being generous requires us to change

#### John 2:1-11

*On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.*

### The essence

As well as being a Sunday school favourite, this passage also throws up a seemingly tricky question for older readers. Why does Jesus do it? Why does Jesus - the physical manifestation of the unchanging, ever-constant God who placed stars into space and who measures out the rhythm of the planets - allow his mother to make him change His mind? Does she not hear him when he says "my hour has not yet come"? Or does she simply choose to ignore him? Was Jesus being in some way disobedient by his initial reluctance to act?

They're all reasonable questions, but they risk missing the wood for the trees. Why does Jesus appear to change his mind? Because generosity puts people first.

We serve a God who is willing to change plans in order to offer a practical, tangible demonstration of compassion to others.

## What this could mean for us...

If God would change for us, are we to change for Him?

- Are we held back by fear, insecurity or doubt? What would Mary say about that? Surely we'd get the same treatment as she gives in verses 4 and 5 and be thrown in at the deep end?
- Are we willing to believe that God can change us? Do we need to rethink some of our notions about what God can and cannot do through us? What do we need to let go of in order to be transformed? Do we allow others to encourage us to act generously, and do we reciprocate?

Water can be turned into wine and wedding parties can become real-time sermon illustrations.

- Remember that his was "the first of his signs", implying there were more to follow. If we're concerned that there's a lack of transformation going on around us, perhaps we need to make the first move, trusting that more will follow.
- What situations will people face within the next few days where they could be used by God to pour out His loving generosity to others?

Church isn't made up of some who are water and others who are wine. We're all valued and viable.

- Perhaps it is time for some of us to challenge the notion that God works through pastors, church leaders and other 'professional' Christians more than He does through the rest of the congregation. All of us are tools to be used by God; all of us have the potential to express His love and generous care for others.
- What dreams and hopes of serving God have people buried? Do some of them need to be resurrected?

## Explore this further...

Romans 8:28 reminds us of the truth about God's love for us:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

Let's worry less about the amount of time we've spent procrastinating, and instead let's focus on the ways in which God can use our attempts at generosity to bring people into contact with His love.

## prayer

### 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.

## week two: generous with our actions

### key idea -

Generosity requires us to act, not just observe

#### John 5:1-18

##### *The Healing at the Pool*

*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 lie—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.*

#### *The Authority of the Son*

*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.*

### The Essence

The invalid had spent the best part of forty years waiting to make it to the healing waters. Why did Jesus ask whether he wanted to be well? Because when we spend a lifetime experiencing disappointment, it's not uncommon for people to assume that it's their lot in life. In order to receive Jesus' full generosity, the man had to actively respond, not just get up and walk but to stop sinning.

Sometimes generosity is a profoundly disturbing thing and we're not just talking about those on the receiving end either. Remember the widow's mite? Generosity is relative, not absolute; a fact that goes against the grain for many. We'd rather know just how far we have to go (so that we can stop), than be involved in a continual cycle of giving.

And yet that's precisely what 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.

### What this could mean for us...

Are we able to see how our wrong actions have consequences?

All of us sin and many are guilty of sin that we have been repeating for years. What would it take for us to change? What are we waiting for? Sin leaves its mark on all our lives, just as it did for the man beside the pool. The instruction to us is the same as it was to him: "Stop sinning..." (v14)

How much potential for good are we sitting on?

Generosity can also send ripples out far and wide. Common expressions like 'what goes around comes around' and films like *Pay It Forward* all resonate with this truth. What are the people in your community paying forward? Jesus' miracle at the pool led to him talking about being God's son which led ultimately to the most radical act of generosity in action ever witnessed: the cross. Perhaps this would be a good time to remind people of the vision for your church community and help them see the part that they can each play.

### Explore this further...

James 2:14-17 is a great passage to read alongside this:

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*

Christians have occasionally been criticised for being 'too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good'. It's good to remember that our actions are valued by God. We were made with free will and when we choose to put our beliefs into action, we give life to faith.

### prayer

#### 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 three: generous with our possessions

### key idea -

#### Being generous will cost us

##### John 6:5-14

*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.'*

#### The Essence

When John D Rockefeller was asked "how much would be enough?" he famously replied "just a little bit more". And while the quote speaks to our insatiable consumer appetites, it can also be applied to the fact that generosity should cost us. How much is enough? Just a little bit more.

None of us own any of these resources at our fingertips. Our money, our time, our talent are all just on loan. Our reputation, our sense of security, our desire to take a risk for God – all these things which can be so powerfully used by God are resources with which we are trusted. The question is, what are we going to do with them?

The unnamed boy gives his food, empties his basket into Jesus' hands. He holds nothing back and serves as a model for us all. We never know his name and we don't know what happens to him afterwards, but can you really imagine his life being given over to hoarding or withholding? Once you've seen Jesus work a miracle with your tiny offering, wouldn't you be hungry for more?

That same offer is available to us: empty what we have into Jesus' hands and watch Him work wonders with the offering. All we have to do is be willing to say yes to meet the needs around us.

## What this could mean for us...

Do we see the bigger picture?

The disciples could only see things practically. They could see only the economic, logistical and practical problems. They forgot about the power of generosity. They forgot that God's not looking for heroes, just willing servants. Are we like the disciples - overwhelmed by the scale of the problem, anxious about our lack of resources? What would it look like if we chose to be generous, to trust God and watch and wait for Him to act?

We can probably all relate to the boy in the story - aware that what we have is no match for the need. But the most significant thing about the boy's offering was not the quantity; it was the fact that he kept nothing back for himself. 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. Are we willing to take that same risk and be, as Jesus said in Matthew 18:1-3, childlike in our trust of Him?

This is worship.

We talk a lot about worship these days, and sometimes it can almost appear as if we think that true worship happens when we sing the loudest. The truth is that we worship what we give our hearts to. Of course songs have a part to play in that—helping inspire us to follow God more closely—but the true test of our worship is to be found in our actions. What are we prepared to make a sacrifice for? What are we willing to go hungry for? What are we prepared to make a fool of ourselves for? The more we can answer 'God' to those questions, the greater sense of freedom we will enjoy.

## Explore this further...

Look at 2 King's 5: 1-19 to remind yourself of the story of Naaman's little servant girl and how she is generous with her words. It cost her to help him as she did, given that Naaman probably led an army that killed her parents.

Generosity is an incredibly powerful force. What problems in our own lives and those of our local community really need fixing? Could our forgiveness and grace be tools for generosity?

## prayer

Our Lord, Generosity is an incredibly powerful force. You created us, our world, your relationships, our possessions in generosity; you sent your Son to us with generosity; He died on a cross in love for us. He emptied himself for us.

Sometimes we can become too comfortable with ourselves; we become our own baggage, our possession. Help us not to hold on to baggage Lord. Help us to empty our loves and our hurts today to You. Jesus transform me. Make me yours, your own, each and everyday. In every possible way. Lead me to your emptiness Lord.

Make me your basket.

Amen.

## week four: generous with our words

### key idea -

**Our words are just as valuable as our money**

**John 9:9-41; words from the man healed born blind**

*Some claimed that he was.*

*Others said, 'No, he only looks like him.'*

*But he himself insisted, 'I am the man.'*

*'How then were your eyes opened?' they asked.*

*He replied, 'The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.'*

*'Where is this man?' they asked him.*

*'I don't know,' he said.*

*The Pharisees investigate the healing*

*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.*

*Spiritual blindness*

*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.'*

## The Essence

This is the first record within John's gospel of someone acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God, and it is a telling passage. In a different context the silence of the once-blind boy's parents could be a sign that they are giving their son the opportunity to share his own testimony. Yet in this case we read that they refuse to explain about his healing because they are afraid of losing their status within the synagogue. Fear holds them back. But not their son. He refuses to hold on to his words even though end up costing him.

Our words matter. This is the first of the miraculous signs in the book of John where the person healed **did not ask** Jesus for healing. The expression of faith comes **after** his healing, not before. After his healing, from the overflow of his heart, the man born blind confesses Jesus as Saviour. He worships. Our words are just as much as tool for generosity as our bank balances and homes. Who are we more like in this passage? Are like the parents, afraid of losing our place in society? Or are we like the man who knows that if not for Jesus' grace and mercy, his life would still be in darkness? When we have the opportunity to be generous with our words, they should always point to Jesus.

## What this could mean for us...

What words are we listening to?

- What or whose words are we really listening to?

The disciples are listening to their own preconceived judgments, the Pharisees are listening to their own spite, and the parents are listening to their fears.

- Are we like the man whom Jesus healed? Do our words point people to Jesus or do they reveal more about our insecurities and fears? Perhaps this is a challenge that many of us need to hear: can we learn to become better listeners, to reflect on others' words well, giving them time and thought, attention and love. Once we have waited, will we choose to speak

few well chosen words - positive, brave, God-focused words? Could we become the sort of people whose words point in all ways, directly and indirectly, to Jesus?

## Explore this further...

Writing in Ecclesiastes 6:11, Solomon reminds us that 'the more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?'

Years later, Paul makes clear "that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

In these days of easy social media, our words travel faster and further than they did when we were all younger. That means there's plenty of risk, but so much potential as well. Are all our words—those we speak as well as those we type—honest, bold and true?

## prayer

### Psalm 51: A David Psalm, After He Was Confronted by Nathan About the Affair with Bathsheba

Generous in love—God, give grace!  
 Huge in mercy—wipe out my bad record.  
 Scrub away my guilt,  
 soak out my sins in your laundry.  
 I know how bad I've been;  
 my sins are staring me down.

You're the One I've violated, and you've seen it all, seen the full extent of my evil.  
 You have all the facts before you;  
 whatever you decide about me is fair.  
 I've been out of step with you for a long time,  
 in the wrong since before I was born.  
 What you're after is truth from the inside out.  
 Enter me, then; conceive a new, true life.

Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean,  
scrub me and I'll have a snow-white life.  
Tune me in to foot-tapping songs,  
set these once-broken bones to dancing.  
Don't look too close for blemishes,  
give me a clean bill of health.  
God, make a fresh start in me,  
shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.  
Don't throw me out with the trash,  
or fail to breathe holiness in me.  
Bring me back from gray exile,  
put a fresh wind in my sails!  
Give me a job teaching rebels your ways  
so the lost can find their way home.  
Commute my death sentence, God, my salvation  
God, and I'll sing anthems to your life-giving ways.  
Unbutton my lips, dear God;  
I'll let loose with your praise.

Going through the motions doesn't please you,  
a flawless performance is nothing to you.  
I learned God-worship  
when my pride was shattered.  
Heart-shattered lives ready for love  
don't for a moment escape God's notice.

Make Zion the place you delight in,  
repair Jerusalem's broken-down walls.  
Then you'll get real worship from us,  
acts of worship small and large,  
Including all the bulls  
they can heave onto your altar!

## week five: generous with our hearts

### key idea -

**Being generous should lead us into contact with people who are struggling**

#### John 4:43-54 / Luke 15: 11-32

*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.*

*Then he said, "There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, 'Father, I want right now what's coming to me.' So the father divided the property between them. It wasn't long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one*

*would give him any.*

*"That brought him to his senses. He said, 'All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I'm going back to my father. I'll say to him, Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.' He got right up and went home to his father.*

*When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: 'Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.'*

*But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, 'Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.*

*"All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day's work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, 'Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.'*

*The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, 'Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!'*

*His father said, 'Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!'"*

## The Essence

Good parents will do anything to protect their children. They will beg and sprint and abandon themselves to the sole task of getting help for their loved ones. Stories like these point to the Father's love for us, His people.

Jesus' compass swings towards those in need; towards those whose hearts are broken. Our world today is broken. We become ill, we all sin and death is part of our experience and Jesus is ready to meet us in each of those situations. None of them are off limits for Him. His generous love rescues us from guilt and shame. He robes us in his love. His love points to a complete and total healing.

He lays down the path for us to follow.

## What this could mean for us...

It takes one to know one:

Belief 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. If we are to show God's love to those in need, we must first be aware of our own need for healing and hope.

We should be quick to love, to forgive and embrace those who are hurting or who have hurt us. Like the royal official and the prodigal son's father, we should allow ourselves to be moved, disturbed and inconvenienced by the hurting and the broken.

Where is the need?

Often we wonder about what it is that God has called us to. Should we apply ourselves to this particular ministry or grasp that particular opportunity? Too often we tie ourselves in knots, when the answer can be incredibly simple. What's the need? Where are there people who

are hurting? Where is there suffering or injustice? Seek them and you'll find the places and the people that Jesus would have spent time with.

## Explore this further...

Take a look at Isaiah 25 and Revelation 21 where we are reminded that 'The Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces...'

Think about how that happens. How has that taken place in the life of your community? Hasn't God nearly always chosen to use other people in order to deliver His healing and comfort? Doesn't He love partnering with us to demonstrate His love?

What needs and broken hearts are there around you that God could be calling you to?

## prayer

After song, 'Bridge over Troubled Waters', by  
Paul Simon

When I am weary  
Feeling small  
When tears are in my eyes  
Lord will dry them all

Be on my side

When times get rough  
And friends just can't be found  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
Lord, you will lay yourself down  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
You will lay yourself down

When I am down and out  
When I am on the street  
When evening falls so hard  
Jesus will comfort me

You will take my part  
When darkness comes  
And pain is all around  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
You will lay yourself down  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
You will lay yourself down

If I need a friend  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
You will ease my mind  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
You will ease my mind

## week six: generous with our faith

### key idea -

**faith is a gift we have been given, and can continue to give**

#### John 11:17- 46

*On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles[a] 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. 22 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 raises Lazarus from the dead*

*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.'*

*The plot to kill Jesus*

*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.*

## The Essence

Not all giving is an act of generosity. There are times for each of us when we can be tempted to give because we want to assuage our guilt or get through an awkward situation. We give to make something unpleasant go away.

True generosity—the sort that Jesus modelled—is different. It is always sacrificial, sometimes painful and constantly personal. Why embrace generosity? Because we are designed for relationship. We give to demonstrate how we feel about the other person, who often the recipient but sometimes God himself. We give because a generous God first gave to us.

For the Christian, the most important thing we can ever give is our faith. By trusting God and doing what He says, we move closer to Him and closer to the plans He has for us. When we start to make life choices with this as our foundation, some interesting things happen. 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.

### What this could mean for us...

It is often in our hardest times that we feel as though our faith is being tested. Does it have to be that way?

By any measure, Christianity stands and falls on this one single point: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything in scripture points to this, from the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham to the death and resurrection of Lazarus. And the impact of the cross continues to affect us today. Not only does it deal with sin and make a way for us to approach our Father, it also deals in an instant with the fear that can cripple so many of us. Death, as the poet reminds us, has finally lost its sting. Our hardest times are no longer our defining moments. Our failures are not our destiny.

Yet that does not mean that we live with a permanent smile upon our faces, unable to acknowledge the struggles on life. Jesus weeps at

Lazarus' death even though he is just minutes away from being reunited from his alive-again friend. He weeps because as fully God and fully man Jesus knows that there is deep pain in the reality of death. It is good to weep over the pain.

Generous faith is easy to spot

A generous faith sees both the realities of life and death and the unseen hopeful promise of resurrected life. Generous faith sees it all: the rain and the rainbow. And it is seen in action when life is running well and suffering seems distant. We don't just trust God when things are difficult. We learn to trust Him long before that.

### Explore this further...

Remember Romans 4:18-21?

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be". Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Abraham, as Jesus was with Lazarus' death, sees the reality that his body is 'as good as dead' but doesn't weaken in his faith. In hope, against faith, he believes. Are there people in your community who need support as they struggle with suffering? Are there people whose faith has grown cold? Are there people within your community who just need to see for themselves what it looks like to trust God?

### prayer

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

## week seven: generous with forgiveness

### key idea -

**forgiveness is a gift we have been given, and can continue to give**

**Luke 23:24 / John 19:30**

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

*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

### The Essence

One of the final miracles of Jesus is delivered out of the blood and agony of the darkest moment of his life. By forgiving his killers, Jesus reminds 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.

However, 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, accept the offered apology and forgive.

There is no apology from the soldiers here. Ignorant of who He was or what they were doing, did they believe that they were in fact doing a good thing? Did they believe they were right? Rather than offering an apology, they're busy scavenging his final possessions. Forgiveness is a truly revolutionary thing, especially when offered to those who do not seek it or deserve it. After all, it changed everything for us, didn't it? Why shouldn't we offer it to others?

### What this could mean for us...

If Jesus can forgive His killers, what does that mean for us?

What can we not do when it comes to forgiving? There's something wonderful about this, but also

a little daunting. So how do we forgive? We can only follow in His steps, follow His model. All forgiveness begins at the cross and we can only forgive another if we have experienced His deep forgiveness. To put it another way, if we want to be able to show Christ's love and mercy to others, we have to experience it for ourselves. We all live with shame; we all know what it is to feel guilty. Let's never forget the importance of confessing our sins to God, asking for help from others if we need it and to accept without question God's forgiveness.

If we were generous forgivers, what would life be like?

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 breathe? We would lay down the hurts that hold us, release people from our expectations, judgements and painful memories. We would be quicker to give and receive; gentler to give and receive; more loving in giving and receiving forgiveness. Doesn't that sound like the kind of church that might be worthy of such a momentous sacrifice as Christ's?

### Explore this further...

Take a look at Matthew 18: 21-35 - the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness. In response, Jesus talks about money. First he tells Peter that he needs to forgive "seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22, NIV). That bit of coded language would have been understood by any Jew; since seven is the number linked with godly perfection, seventy-seven (or seventy times seven, as some translations have it) stands for infinity. In other words, there should be no standby button for the mercy we hand out to others.

How would your community be different if you lived this way?

## prayer

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;  
and lead us out from darkness  
to walk as children of light.

Amen.

## 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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