



Opening Doors

**A Lent course to help the people of the Diocese of Chichester
in knowing, loving and following Jesus**

**Session 1 – written by Anthony Cane
and edited by Rebecca Swyer**

Theme for session 1: Opening doors of mercy

In the first session of this five-session course we explore our own experience of God's mercy, and the theme of 'opening doors'. It's a step towards placing the Chichester diocesan strategy within the wider context of God's mercy and love as seen in Jesus Christ. We shall also be thinking about making two visits: one to a 'holy place' (sometime between now and session 3), and one to a place outside our 'comfort zone' (sometime before the final session).

Suggested opening prayers (10 minutes)

Prayers and psalms can either be said 'responsorially' (i.e. a leader leads and others respond), or 'antiphonally' (i.e. two groups of voices, each saying alternate verses). Music / hymn / song suggestions are made, but whether or not to include them, and at which stage, is entirely up to you.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you
and also with you

Glory to you, Father, who forgives our faults
and heals our infirmities.

Your mercy endures forever

Glory to you, Lord, merciful and kind,
slow to anger and abounding in mercy

Your mercy endures forever

Glory to you, Lord; you who are a
tender Father toward your children.

Your mercy endures forever

Verses from Psalm 118 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures for ever.

Let Israel now proclaim, 'His mercy endures for ever.'

Let the house of Aaron now proclaim, 'His mercy endures for ever.'

Let those who fear the Lord proclaim, 'His mercy endures for ever.'

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

I will give thanks to you, for you have answered me and have become my salvation.

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

You are my God and I will thank you; you are my God and I will exalt you.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures for ever.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;

as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

A prayer

Blessed are you, O Lord, God of Mercy.

You sent your Son Jesus,

who showed mercy to tax collectors and sinners,

converted the Samaritan woman,

and forgave the repentant thief.

Christ is the Door to our salvation,

the Sheep Gate to your wandering flock,

the Key to the Kingdom,

and the doorway to eternal peace.

Help us and our parishes as we seek to grow in knowing, loving and following Jesus,

for the glory of your name and the building of your Kingdom.

We ask this through the same Jesus Christ our Lord,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God forever and ever.

Amen

Hymn/song suggestions: Be still, for the presence of the Lord / God of mercy, God of grace

Introduction (5 minutes)

This Lent course has been specifically designed to help the people of the Diocese of Chichester in knowing, loving and following Jesus, and to encourage prayerful discernment and action relating to the Diocesan 'Vision for Growth' strategy. In so doing, it is also responding to one of the recommendations which emerged from Bishop Martin's Visitation Charge: that as a diocese we should join with other Christians in responding to the initiative of Pope Francis to celebrate 2016 as a 'Year of Mercy'. We begin in this first session, therefore, by placing our diocesan strategy within the wider context of God's mercy and love as seen in Jesus Christ. In so doing we will also keep in mind the encouragement to churches to designate a 'door of mercy' or 'holy door'.

Each week we will be reflecting on a passage of Scripture that explores different facets of the mercy of God, praying that 'God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ' (Colossians 4.3). Today we are considering a passage from the gospel of Mark which contrasts two very different responses to the same question from Jesus. First we hear from two disciples, members of 'the twelve' (James and John) and then from Bartimaeus, a blind beggar.

Bible Reading (10 minutes)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers' lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."

So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."

Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Mark 10:35-52

'Lectio Divina' – a way of approaching scripture (slightly modified for this course):

First, have somebody read out the passage. Next, keep silence so that each can ponder. Then, take turns to read out the sections, with each person highlighting one word of their section. Keep a little silence after each. Finally, have the passage read again by another voice. Those listening may wish to close their eyes.

First reflection (10 minutes)

Just before these encounters with James and John, and then Bartimaeus, Jesus has told his disciples for the third time that they are going up to Jerusalem, where he will be flogged and killed, but then will rise again. In the passage we see Jesus undertaking a kind of intensive training session on the meaning of discipleship, by the end of which he will be on the threshold of Jerusalem and the final days of his earthly ministry.

If the disciples had been taking notes in earlier 'sessions' on the true meaning of following Jesus, they might have looked something like this:

- We are to deny ourselves for Jesus' sake and the sake of the Gospel (8.34-38)

- We are to be focussed on Jesus and his words above all else (9.7)
- We are in humility to remain dependent on God's power and not our own (9.14-29)
- We are not to seek glory for ourselves, but rather to be servants of all (9.33-37)
- We are to keep children at the heart of what we do (9.36-37, 9.42-48, 10.13-16)
- We are not the only ones through whom God is working (10.38-41)
- We are not to let possessions or anything else get in the way of discipleship (10.17-31)

In the reading, James and John have the opportunity to show how much they have taken on board these lessons, and how much they share in Jesus' vision of kingdom, discipleship and leadership. In failing to do so, and asking to sit in glory at Jesus' side, they show how hard it is to genuinely let go of the wish for personal influence and power. They also show they have not really understood Jesus' words about what will shortly happen to him. It is unlikely they would be so keen to share in his 'cup' and his 'baptism' if they had a true sense of the harsh reality they are all about to be immersed in. Jesus reiterates his earlier teaching about servanthood (9.33-37) and if anything strengthens it: his disciples, he now says must be the 'slave' of all. James and John have asked for the wrong thing, and their response to Jesus' 'what do you want me to do for you?' shows ignorance and blindness – not least because the one they follow, as Jesus goes on to say, 'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

If their Lord's correction has not already shamed James and John into self-knowledge and repentance, the immediate discovery of ideal discipleship in a blind beggar sitting by the roadside serves to emphasize Jesus' message. Bartimaeus twice interrupts Jesus' onward march by calling out (despite the efforts of some to stop him) and asking for mercy. Jesus stops, and calls Bartimaeus to him. Bartimaeus, throwing off his cloak (a rather risky thing to do) immediately responds. Jesus then asks him exactly the same question that he put to James and John (who were perhaps rather sheepish at this point): 'What do you want me to do for you?' Bartimaeus responds, 'Teacher, let me see again.'

This is perhaps what Jesus most wants to hear from a disciple – the wish to 'see'. In the Gospels 'seeing' frequently has a double aspect, meaning both 'sight' and 'insight'. Jesus wants his disciples to see who he really is, and display the kind of humility, riskiness and courage seen in Bartimaeus. The blind beggar seems to have understood more than the disciples; first asking for mercy, and then knowing that sight (both physical and spiritual) is a gift of Jesus. In Bartimaeus we are shown what it is to have 'ears that hear' and 'eyes that see'. No wonder Jesus says, 'Go; your faith has made you well' and Bartimaeus' physical sight is restored. Bartimaeus' response continues to model what it is to be a faithful disciple, for he immediately 'followed him on the way' – a way that will shortly lead first to crucifixion, and then resurrection.

Questions for group discussion (20 minutes)

Draw on the words and phrases you identified earlier in considering the following questions:

1. Bartimaeus asked for mercy and received it. Identify a time in your life when you have experienced the mercy and grace of God.
2. It has been suggested that the church must be an 'oasis of mercy' because the practice of mercy is waning in our culture. Are you able to identify aspects of our society that might bear this out? How might the church, in practical terms, become an 'oasis of mercy'?
3. What would you like Jesus to do for you today? As an individual? As a parish community? And what do you think Jesus would most like you to ask him to do?

Second reflection (5 minutes)

As part of the 'Year of Mercy', Bishop Martin is encouraging pilgrimage to places where a 'holy door' has been designated, such as the door he blessed on Sunday 6 December 2015 at Chichester Cathedral (St Richard's door, from the western arm of the cloister into the nave). On that occasion he prayed, 'This is the Lord's gate: let us enter through it and obtain mercy and forgiveness. Let it be a reminder to all who pass through it that Jesus is the way to salvation. Let it serve as a symbol of God's everlasting mercy and his constant invitation to us to return home to him.'

About the author of these reflections:

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This practical opening of a door is a many layered symbol. One aspect of its meaning is that the opening of the doors of our hearts and minds is key to recognising the mercy and grace of God. Closed hearts and minds, and a 'fortress mentality' are the opposite of what God requires, and yet there are few who are exemplary in this regard.

Part of the spiritual importance of pilgrimage to a 'holy place' lies in the capacity of a journey to 'open the doors of our hearts and minds'. Such 'holy places' have been part of the Christian tradition from the earliest times, and it can be argued that all churches should be treated as 'shrines' – as memorials to the saving events of Christian history. All churches are 'holy places' in the sense of that they are where the Christian community come together to celebrate the presence of Christ in word and in sacrament. Holy places, as well as the communities connected with them, are a witness to the world and play a part in God's mission. This applies to every parish church in the diocese.

Questions for group discussion (20 minutes)

4. Identity examples of the 'fortress mentality', and ways of 'opening doors', in:
 - The lives of individual Christians
 - The life and work of your parish church
 - The life of this nation
 - The international community of nations
5. Identify a 'holy place' that you will visit before session three, individually or as a group. If it is a place that has designated a 'holy door', so much the better.

When you get there, note down what this pilgrimage is like, and how it makes you feel – there will be opportunity to reflect on this in a later session. There may be prayer resources available at your chosen place; or you could use the following prayer:

Heavenly Father,
 as we celebrate this year of mercy: open the doors of our hearts and minds
 that we may show forth in our lives the mercy and compassion
 that we see in the face of your Son Jesus Christ
 who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
 one God forever and ever. Amen.

Also begin to think about a 'stretching place', outside your comfort zone, that you might visit before the last session of this course: a betting shop? a factory? a food bank? There may be arrangements that have to be made to visit.

Concluding worship (10 minutes)

Lord God, our maker and our redeemer,
 this is your world and we are your people:
 come among us and save us.

We have wilfully misused your gifts of creation;
 Lord, be merciful:
forgive us our sin.

We have seen the ill-treatment of others
 and have not gone to their aid;
 Lord, be merciful:
forgive us our sin.

We have condoned evil and dishonesty
 and failed to strive for justice;
 Lord, be merciful:
forgive us our sin.

We have heard the good news of Christ,
but have failed to share it with others;
Lord, be merciful:
forgive us our sin.

We have not loved you with all our heart,
nor our neighbours as ourselves;
Lord, be merciful:
forgive us our sin.

Grant that we may be freed from our sins,
and, like the Prodigal Son, come home to you, merciful Father,
and to your loving embrace.
May the doors of our hearts be wide open to your call.
And may the doors of all our parishes
be open to all who seek the living God.
We ask this through that same Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God forever and ever.
Amen

As a group, offer prayers of intercession for the church and for the world. In preparing to do this, participants are encouraged to reflect in silence, and then write down their petitions. Each person should then have an opportunity to offer their prayer aloud, each time ending with:

Lord, in your mercy
Hear our prayer

The prayers of intercession may be concluded as follows:

Merciful Father
Accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

A prayer

**Heavenly Father,
as we celebrate this year of mercy
open the doors of our hearts and minds
that we may show forth in our lives the mercy and compassion
that we see in the face of your Son Jesus Christ
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit
one God now and for ever. Amen.**

The grace

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore.
Amen.**

*Optionally, close with a hymn or song, such as 'I will enter his gates' or
'There's a Wideness in God's Mercy'*

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