



Opening Doors

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

**Session 3 – written by Jonny Gumbel
and edited by Rebecca Swyer**

Theme for session 3: Opening doors of witness

This week we are going to think about the relationship between mercy and mission, between compassion and evangelism, in the context of the overall course theme of 'opening doors'.

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

Part of Psalm 19 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):

The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
One day pours out its song to another and one night unfolds knowledge to another.

They have neither speech nor language and their voices are not heard, yet their sound has gone out into all lands and their words to the ends of the world.

In them has he set a tabernacle for the sun, that comes forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber and rejoices as a champion to run his course.

It goes forth from the end of the heavens and runs to the very end again, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom to the simple.

The statutes of the Lord are right and rejoice the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure and gives light to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever; the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, more than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, dripping from the honeycomb.

By them also is your servant taught and in keeping them there is great reward.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

**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

Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
who is immortal, all powerful and invisible,
we bless your name, and pray that what is lacking you would supply,
what is amiss you would correct,
and what is cold you enflame with the power of your undying love.
Amen

Hymn/song suggestions: As pants the heart / Purify my heart

Introduction / Recap (15 minutes)

- What difference have you noticed in your prayer life in the past week?
- What has it taught you about prayer?
- Have you discovered any new ways of praying?
- How did you feel when you went to your 'holy place'? (maybe this could be discussed later)

This week we are going to think about the relationship between mercy and mission, between compassion and evangelism. We have been using the imagery of doorways, and so this week we are going to meditate on a passage taking place at a doorway – the story of Peter and John and a paralysed man, by the Beautiful Gate in Acts 3.

Bible reading (5 minutes)

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in.

People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms.

Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.

But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.

Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Acts 3:1-10

'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)

Here is a story about a man unable to get through a particular doorway; someone stuck, excluded because of his condition, and in desperate need. But through his encounter with Peter and John, and through them the gospel, he is no longer stuck – he walks, he is no longer excluded – he enters the temple with them, and he moves from being in great need, to receiving great blessing. Through mercy and evangelism working together, he walks through the doorway that has been closed to him.

We now consider a number of dimensions of how evangelism and mercy play out in this story.

Evangelism and mercy through Service

Here we see evangelism and service working together in service. Peter and John see his real physical needs. They are not so focussed on his spiritual life that they neglect his physical needs. They don't give him exactly what he wants (money), but they do consider his material needs, and they help him practically by taking him by the right hand to help him up.

Evangelism cannot be simply a matter of appealing to the mind or to the spirit. It must also involve serving people by addressing their real, material needs.

Evangelism and mercy through Relationship

Peter and John see this man, and they allow themselves to be seen by him. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. They saw him.

Mercy involves seeing people for who they are, not putting them in a category or giving them a label. Labels create distance, because we see the label instead of the person.

But loving means seeing not the homeless, but the person who is experiencing homelessness, not the addict, but the person who is struggling with an addiction, not the migrant, but the person far from home, not the refugee, but the person who is fleeing for their lives.

It means seeing, and also *being seen*. Peter said, 'Look at us.'

The message of hope isn't separated from the one who gives the message. Peter doesn't just say, 'listen to what we have to say' but 'look at us.' He is establishing a genuine human relationship. Karl Barth described genuine human relationships as starting with 'looking one another in the eye.'¹ For when you look someone in the eye, you see them, but also allow them to see you. It suggests a vulnerability on our part – we see them and allow ourselves to be seen by them. And it suggests a genuine relationship and it means that we relate as people on an equal level.

As Pema Chödrön (the Buddhist nun) writes, 'Compassion is not a relationship between wounded and healer, but between equals. Compassion becomes real when we recognise our shared humanity.'²

The relationship continues. Because Peter and John love this man they both serve him and proclaim the name of Jesus. And they continue the relationship. He goes with them into the temple. He is included in their community.

One of the most effective ways of engaging in evangelism and mercy is through inclusion and welcome, bringing people into the life of the local church, even when they might have no faith.

It is out of relationship that we desire to help those in need, addressing their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

Evangelism and mercy through Proclamation

Evangelism and mercy also work together in proclamation. Peter says, 'Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' The proclamation is not an afterthought, nor is it something separate from their act of mercy. It is inextricable.

And the proclamation is very simple: it is not complex theology. There is a declaration of Jesus as Messiah (Christ), and there is a clarity that the work they do is in his name. Our proclamation does not need to be complicated. There is often a great simplicity to the proclamation of the gospel that we see in the Bible: 'The kingdom of God is at hand.' It almost always requires courage, but it doesn't require complexity.

There is a personal dimension to it. Peter says, 'What I have I give you.' He is sharing what he has experienced. Our proclamation does not have to be complicated, but it does need to be genuine. It is a sharing of what we ourselves have experienced from Jesus Christ. That is why telling our story or testimony is so powerful.

St Paul writes, 'My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power.' (1 Corinthians 2:4)

It is not mercy in order to do evangelism, nor is it mercy detached from evangelism. It is evangelism and mercy working together, inseparably and indivisibly.

Questions for group discussion (15 minutes)

1. How comfortable do you feel in sharing your faith with people without faith?
2. How would you describe the difference that Jesus Christ makes to your life?

Second reflection (10 minutes)

The disciples are excellent examples of how to live lives of mercy and evangelism, because they are open to interruption and they are aware of their weakness.

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (1948)

² Pema Chödrön *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (2007)

Interruption

One of the characteristics of the modern world is rush, and when we rush we become uninterruptable. But mercy and evangelism often happen in the interruptions of our lives.

Poverty and need often come to us in the form of interruptions, whether on a small scale, like someone on the pavement asking for money, or on a larger scale, like when we face a refugee crisis.

A seminary in the USA did an experiment to see what factors meant that people stopped to help people in need. They got a group of students who were training to be pastors, and first of all got them to fill in a questionnaire about their core beliefs and their motivations for being pastors, particularly whether they became pastors to win converts, or to help people in need. Then they sent them across the campus to another building, but they had set up an actor to lie in an alleyway in between the two buildings, playing someone hurt and in distress, the condition unknown. And they wanted to see which factors meant that people stopped to help him. There was no correlation between what answers the students gave as to whether they helped him. Neither their core beliefs nor their motivations were a factor.

Then they got one group to study the parable of the Good Samaritan just before going across the campus, and the other group to study something unrelated to helping people. Again, there was no correlation. Whether or not the students had been studying the parable of the Good Samaritan immediately prior to crossing the campus apparently had no impact on whether they stopped to help someone in need.

Finally, they divided the group in two and told one half that they needed to cross the campus to give a talk on the Good Samaritan, but they were late, and the other group that they had plenty of time but might as well get going. This was the key factor. The people who had time tended to stop. The people in a rush didn't.

They concluded that people in a hurry are much less likely to stop and help someone in trouble, even if they were on their way to teach about the parable of the Good Samaritan. There were cases of people literally stepping over this man so that they wouldn't be late preaching about helping those in need.

The disciples allow themselves to be interrupted by this man. They are on their way to do something, and something very important – prayer. And they had a deadline – 3pm. But they allow themselves to be interrupted by this man.

About the author of these reflections:

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Weakness

When engaging in the work of mercy and evangelism we often become more aware of our weaknesses.

Peter says, 'Silver and Gold I do not have.' He is aware of everything he lacks.

We may also feel like we do not have the resources, the time, the money, the expertise, the experience, to help those in need or to share the gospel. But this is an important place from which to start.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities, said, 'People join our communities in order to help the poor, but only stay when they realise that they are the poor.'

It is through weakness that God works.

There is a story from the 12th century of Pope Innocent II after a big papal tax, saying to the theologian, Thomas Aquinas, 'No longer do we need to say, 'Silver and gold have I none.' And Thomas Aquinas replied, 'then neither will we be able to say, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.'

It is important to recognise our poverty and our weakness, our fears and insecurities, not pretending to be something that we are not. It is precisely because we are weak that God works through us in power.

Conclusion: 'Upserving'

Many companies practise 'upselling', which is the technique of trying to persuade a customer to purchase more expensive items, or upgrades, or other add-ons, in addition to the items that they wish to buy. However, in the gospels you get what you might call 'upserving', which is where people receive from Jesus, or the disciples, far more than they were asking. People who were blind, or sick, or paralysed were asking for healing, and received not only healing but also salvation. The people of Israel were looking for a political Messiah who would rid them

of the Roman occupation, and received the Saviour of the world who would give them eternal life. Here in the book of Acts a man is asking for money, and receives healing and reconnection with God.

The task of the Christian is to serve people, not only by addressing their conscious needs – company, food, shelter, but also offering something much greater, forgiveness, salvation, eternal life.

Questions for group discussion (15 minutes)

3. How do you respond to interruptions?
4. How do you feel when confronted by needs that are beyond your capacity to help?
5. How did you feel when you went to your 'holy place'? (if not already covered earlier)

Optional exercises for the week ahead

When you pass someone in need this week (whether they are homeless, or struggling with shopping) stop and talk to them. Try the practice of 'up-serving', giving to them more than they've asked for, or think that they need.

Also, pray this simple prayer every morning between now and the next session, "Lord, please use me today to share your love with someone who doesn't know you yet."

Concluding worship (15 minutes)

Three things to ponder in silence:

- 'Silver and gold I do not have' – Bring before God your weaknesses and the things you lack – your fears and your struggles.
- 'But what I have...' – Consider what you have in Christ – forgiveness, reconciliation, salvation, peace, etc. And thank him for these things.
- '... I give you.' - Offer to God what you have for the sake of those in need.

As a group, offer prayers of intercession for the church and for the world, 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

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