

DIOCESE OF CHICHESTER

TO KNOW · LOVE · FOLLOW JESUS



YEAR OF THE BIBLE 2017

Hear the Word of the Lord

A Lent course for the Diocese of Chichester's
Year of the Bible

Session 6 – The NT Letters

written by James Dunn and Rory Graham
and edited by Rebecca Swyer

Session introduction (5 minutes)

This is the last session of this course. Participants are encouraged to continue their studies next term, and to think about whether your local church may want to adopt one of the courses recommended at www.chichester.anglican.org/bible

Welcome everyone to the group and open with a short prayer asking for God's help and encouragement as we meet together for the final time this Lent.

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). One way of splitting a group is by birth month – Jan-Jun and Jul-Dec. Music / hymn / song suggestions are made, but whether or not to include them, accompanied or not, and at which stage, is entirely up to you.

O Lord, open thou our lips.
And our mouth shall proclaim your praise.

O God, make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

Hymn/song suggestion: Speak O Lord as we come to you (available on youtube and Getty Music – search online)

Psalm 119 verses 65 to 80 (this translation is from the Common Worship psalter):

You have dealt graciously with your servant,
according to your word, O Lord.

O teach me true understanding and knowledge,
for I have trusted in your commandments.

Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.

You are gracious and do good;
O Lord, teach me your statutes.

The proud have smeared me with lies,
but I will keep your commandments with my whole heart.

Their heart has become gross with fat,
but my delight is in your law.

It is good for me that I have been afflicted,
that I may learn your statutes.

The law of your mouth is dearer to me
than a hoard of gold and silver.

Your hands have made me and fashioned me;
give me understanding, that I may learn your commandments.

Those who fear you will be glad when they see me,
because I have hoped in your word.

I know, O Lord, that your judgements are right,
and that in very faithfulness you caused me to be troubled.

Let your faithful love be my comfort,
according to your promise to your servant.

Let your tender mercies come to me, that I may live,
for your law is my delight.

Let the proud be put to shame, for they wrong me with lies;
but I will meditate on your commandments.

Let those who fear you turn to me,
even those who know your testimonies.

Let my heart be sound in your statutes,
that I may not be put to shame.

**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.**

Leave some silence, then encourage people to express their personal prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

The Prayer of Saint Richard of Chichester

**Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ
 For all the benefits Thou hast given me,
 For all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me.**

**O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,
 May I know Thee more clearly,
 Love Thee more dearly,
 Follow Thee more nearly.**

Amen.

Professor Dunn's introduction (10 minutes)

The account of Paul's missionary endeavours (Acts) is followed naturally by Paul's letters. They all have the pattern of exposition followed by personal greetings and concerns. They were obviously valued by the churches to which they were sent, and evidently these churches soon shared them with other churches established by Paul.

They begin with **Romans**, where Paul provides a full account of his theology to prepare for his planned visit to the capital of the Roman Empire. It is notable for its exposition of the power of sin, the greater power of God's Spirit, and God's enduring love for his people Israel. **1 Corinthians** gives a full and fascinating account of the challenges and tensions which racked one of Paul's churches, and of Paul's skill in handling them. Very valuable is the summary of his preaching and the importance of Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor. 15). **2 Corinthians** may be a combination of three or four letters. Notable is the anxiety Paul felt for the Corinthian believers (2 Cor. 1.15-2.11), his determination that his churches should contribute to the collection he was making for the saints in Jerusalem (8-9), and his angry self-apology (10-13). **Galatians** shows Paul at his fiercest, rebuking those who would hear his letter read out for being misled by Jewish Christian interlopers who were insisting that believers in Jesus must be circumcised. These are the four most important letters of Paul.

Ephesians may be a slightly later summary of Paul's teaching. Many prefer **Philippians**, written from prison (Rome?), as the warmest of Paul's letters, notable for what may have functioned as a hymn affirming the significance of Christ (Phil. 2.6-11). **Colossians**, also written from prison to a church in Asia Minor, also has one of the great early poems or hymns praising Christ (Col. 1.15-20). **1 Thessalonians** was probably the earliest of Paul's letters, followed by **2 Thessalonians**, though some scholars think that the latter was crafted out of Paul's known teaching.

1 Timothy, **2 Timothy** and **Titus** are letters written to two of the principal members of Paul's mission team. They seem to reflect a more developed churchmanship, with bishops and deacons more established (1 Tim. 3.1-13), somewhat distant from the church structure and worship reflected in 1 Cor. 12, 14). **Philemon** is the shortest of the Pauline letters, so warming in its plea on behalf of the runaway slave (Onesimus) to his master.

Hebrews used to be attributed to Paul, but its author is unknown. It envisages a Church where the only priest is Christ (Heb. 7.3), whose sacrifice (of himself!) is lastingly effective on behalf of those who come to God through him (10.19-22). Notable is the chapter in praise of faith (11). The letter of **James** was probably written by Jesus' own brother, leader of the church in Jerusalem. The letter is the most conservative document in the NT, preserving the Jewish character of Christianity. **1 Peter** is very Pauline in character but is attributed to Jesus'

About the author of this reflection:

James D. G. "Jimmy" Dunn FBA was for many years the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham. He coined the phrase "A New Perspective on Paul".

principal disciple. **2 Peter** is the latest item in the NT. Its attribution to Peter is usually questioned, but nevertheless attests the status of Peter.

1-3 John are close in character to the Gospel of John. 1 John 2.19 suggests that a schism has occurred, apparently occasioned by a dispute over the incarnation (4.2-3). Notable are the 'tests of life' which he offers (e.g. 2.3-6; 4.13; 5.2). **Jude** claims to be brother of James (cf. Mark 6.3); his letter overlaps with 2 Peter (cf. Jude 6-18 with 2 Pet.2.4-3.3) and reads like a sermon topped and tailed to make it a letter. **Revelation**, the Apocalypse of John, also contains letters to churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3). It represents a substantial apocalyptic (revelatory) literature which at the end of the first century saw the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) as foreshadowing the end of history. Revelation has prompted millennial and end-time expectations ever since.

Group discussion (15 minutes)

1. One of the great teachings of St Paul is that non-Jewish converts to Christianity do not need to keep the whole Jewish Law as set out in the Torah. Why not?
2. Why was the Book of Revelation written and why was it such a source of hope and comfort for Christians undergoing persecution?

Bible passage (5 minutes)

The New Life in Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12: 1-2

Rory Graham's reflection (10 minutes)

So What? What difference should any of this make? We've got to week six in our Lent Course and I hope you have been as thrilled as I have been as you have seen the great unfolding plan of God throughout the Scriptures.

But I want to ask 'So what?' How should I live in the light of all this? Should what I believe about Jesus make any difference to how I bring up my children, care for my mother, relate to my boss or even drive my car?

St. Paul's answer is an emphatic 'Yes!' At the end of Eleven chapters of meaty theology in the book of Romans he says 'here then is the difference all of this makes'.

The early church needed guidance and encouragement, so while the apostles travelled widely around the Middle East, they also wrote letters. Twenty One of the Twenty Seven New Testament books are letters making up about Thirty Five percent of the text of the whole New Testament.

St. Paul wrote thirteen of them, but St. James, St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude also chose to communicate like this. So we are going to spend some time looking at the answer to the question 'what difference does Christian discipleship make?'

St. Paul says it changes everything and the challenge for us is to worship God with every breath that he gives you.

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.

Worship God with every breath that he gives you. The idea of worship here is not what Christians do when they gather together on a Sunday, as vital as this is but this is a magnificent picture of a whole life lived in the service of God, where there are no insignificant acts, no unimportant people. A vision of life where we realise that every part of our lives is lived before the face of God, and we resolve to live all of it for his Glory.

This picture changes everything,

But like all magnificent pictures it has a frame, and the frame is the first part of v. 1

I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters by the mercies of God.

About the author of this reflection:

Rory Graham is an associate vicar in Hailsham, East Sussex.

St. Paul is saying because of the mercies of God, in the light of all the things that God has done for us. His rescue of us, his giving us a new name, a new family, God declaring us in right standing with him despite our sins. Why? Because of his many and manifold mercies.

The frame of this picture is the kindness and the compassion of God – seen most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord. Felt by us most keenly in the forgiveness of our sins by Jesus' death in our place on the cross.

It is this frame which empowers us to worship God with every breath that he gives us – as living sacrifices.

As people who are always ready to obey – like a sheep dog sitting at heel waiting for the shepherd's word to go and round up the sheep, we are to go through our days with our ears cocked ready to obey God's words to us.

And always ready to be thankful for what God sends. People with a spirit of quietness and contentment that recognise that our God is in control and is working out his purposes for the good of his people, even if that isn't always for our comfort. We can snatch quick prayers of thanks for family, food and fun as we go through our days. We cry out for help as we deal with disappointments and when we find ourselves tempted.

St. Paul warns us that this doesn't just happen – we don't just happen to worship God with every breath that he gives any more that we just happen to be fit enough to run a mile.

He spells out the danger for us.

Do not be conformed to this world.

We love to fit in. We don't want to stand out. We feel so embarrassed if we turn up at a party and we are wearing the wrong kind of clothes. Or we go into work in our suit and tie forgetting it is Christmas Jumper Friday. The world around us is trying to mould us into a people who don't worship God with every breath that he gives.

Preferring others over ourselves is seen as weakness. Honesty viewed as being a little old fashioned. Conviction is deemed dangerous, and forgiving someone who hurts you is almost unimaginable.

The great pressure God's people face is to be conformed, to blend in, to adopt the lifestyle and attitudes of those around us. St Paul warns us against this and offers a way in which we can continue to worship God with every breath that he gives.

But be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

The giving over of every part of our lives to God as worship – the understanding that because of what God has done for us we are to offer everything to him begins by the renewal of our minds. This is a process – so it is more like a kettle than a light switch.

Like a kettle boiling the renewal of our minds will take time and some effort. Christian people have been made new, re-born, brought from death to life but we continue to struggle to live in the light of these truths. So we need our minds to be renewed.

The headquarters of our being needs to keep on being upgraded by God's truth. St. Paul wants us to give our heads a healthy diet of truth and as our minds are renewed, as our hearts are transformed we won't be conformed to the world around us, but will worship God with every breath that he gives us.

What difference does following Jesus make? – It should change everything.

Group discussion (20 minutes)

1. How should we, as a group of believers live differently from our unbelieving family and friends? In what areas are we most like them?
2. Think ahead to the things that are in your diary tomorrow; share with the group one thing you are really looking forward to and one thing you are concerned about. As a group talk about ways in which you might be able to 'worship God with every breath' in the midst of those things.
3. What resources help you in the daily act of renewing your mind? Could some further course help you, later in the year? (see www.chichester.anglican.org/bible for recommendations)

Concluding prayer/worship (10 minutes)

Let us give thanks for the gift of the Bible and pray for all who enable it to be studied, understood, and loved.

Almighty God, in your goodness you have given us the Scriptures to equip us for every kind of good deed.

We give thanks for all who translate the Bible, and pray that, through their work and skill, your word may go forth to the ends of the earth.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

We give thanks for all who distribute the Scriptures, and pray that, through the written text, your people may be built up in faith and love.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

We give thanks for all whose learning interprets the Scriptures, and pray for biblical scholars and theologians, that more light and truth may break forth from your word.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

We give thanks for all preachers and teachers, and pray that, through the word proclaimed and shared, your Church may grow in holiness and discipleship.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

We give thanks for all who read the Bible in public worship, for all study groups and training courses, and pray that, through the study of the Scriptures, your word may find a home in the hearts of your people.

Lord, hear us. **Lord, graciously hear us.**

**Gracious Lord,
grant to us that loving your holy word,
we may adorn it with obedient and Christlike lives;
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

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

A prayer (the collect for Bible Sunday)

**Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of 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.**

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