

Experiences of Jesus

Introduction

These resources are offered to Uniting Church congregations in Queensland for study and reflection during Lent or at some other time during the year. The sessions link some biblical texts, passages from the Uniting Church *Basis of Union* and other writings, with a series of questions designed to focus the participants on their own and other's experiences of Jesus in the time leading up to Easter.

Each person's experience of Jesus is unique and different, and together the biblical story and our stories build up a tapestry of how Jesus meets and speaks to people in our church and community. These small group sessions emphasise that Jesus brings change to people's lives, heals people's hurts, gives freedom to those who feel trapped, brings forgiveness to those who feel guilty, and gives a future to those who feel hopeless.

There are some underlying assumptions in these resources about how God speaks to us. *The Basis of Union* acknowledges 'that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated'. It also refers to foundational documents and God's continuing revelation to the church. *The Basis of Union* is itself a foundational document for the Uniting Church. We are indeed people on the way, but not without guidance

These are not leaders' notes as such. The resources are designed in a way that does not necessitate the group having a leader, simply a person who facilitates the conversation and encourages all to participate in the discussions. This is also a reason for the suggestion that a different person speak the blessing each week. The role of ministry in the Uniting Church is a shared responsibility.

The sessions will work best for small groups but may be used by individuals. Please feel free to provide photocopies for each member of your congregation or group. It is suggested that you copy each session onto one sheet, back-to-back. Copies can be enlarged to A3 size for older eyes.

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The sessions

There are five sessions in this Lenten series for 2005:

- Week one – Experiencing change
- Week two – Experiencing healing
- Week three – Experiencing freedom
- Week four – Experiencing a second chance
- Week five – Experiencing real purpose

The format

The sessions follow a standard format but differ in content and emphasis. Each session will have:

Prayer – an opening litany which is written by Maureen Walker and taken from *Colours True & Splendid: the decade of churches in solidarity with women*. The same opening litany is used for each session.

Read – a passage or story from the Bible in the *Contemporary English Version* translation. As this is not a 'Bible study' as such, it is preferable for people to use the simple translation provided on the sheets rather than rely on various versions. There is also a short extract from *The Basis of Union* (1992) and quotes from other writers relating to the theme.

Reflection - a brief reflection on the theme for the week.

Talk about – some questions for group discussion or individual reflection. The purpose is to explore the scripture, the understandings of the people of faith and the theme for the session.

So what? – one question to focus people on some practical outcomes or application of the theme in their daily life.

Good news – an optional further question based on a scenario which asks where is the good news in this story for this particular person or group facing this particular issue.

Prayer – people are invited to participate in a shared prayer but please feel free to use other prayers or an open prayer time in this place.

Blessing – the same blessing is used for each session. It is recommended that a different person offers the blessing to the group each week.

There will probably be more questions than some groups can use or have time to talk about. Feel free to pick and choose those questions which are most helpful to the group process for your people.

Textual notes

All scripture quotations in these resources are from the *Contemporary English Version* copyright © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, used by Permission. The CEV is an American Bible Society translation and is readily available from bookshops or the Bible Society. The text is easily read by school age children, second language readers and those who prefer the more contemporary form. The CEV is not a paraphrase. It is an accurate and faithful translation of the original manuscripts.

The original text of *The Basis of Union* was the document around which the union of three older traditions, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian, came into being in 1977. While the original text was finalised in 1971, where it is quoted in these resources the 1992 edition is used. *The Basis of Union* was prepared at a time when the desire for gender-inclusive language was only just emerging. By the 1990s some people were finding aspects of the language of the Basis to be rather curious, and at certain points jarring and even alienating. The Assembly Standing Committee therefore approved the publication of the 1992 edition, which incorporates relatively conservative changes to the language of the Basis, while seeking to retain its meaning.

Experiencing Change

Jesus meets the yearning to be changed

Prayer

Mysterious God, how awe-inspiring it is to acknowledge your greatness to be lost in your wonder and grace. We pray for the strength to live in faith Waiting for your Spirit to touch our human hearts Enabling us to be the people living your way Open to listening for your call, Touch us O God, Break through our blinkered and limiting imagery.

(Maureen Walker from Colours True & Splendid: the decade of churches in solidarity with women.)

Read

- By this time the boat was a long way from the shore. It was going against the wind and was being tossed around by the waves. A little while before morning, Jesus came walking on the water toward his disciples. When they saw him, they thought he was a ghost. They were terrified and started screaming.

At once, Jesus said to them, 'Don't worry! I am Jesus. Don't be afraid.' Peter replied, 'Lord, if it is really you, tell me to come to you on the water.' 'Come on!' Jesus said. Peter then got out of the boat and started walking on the water toward him.

But when Peter saw how strong the wind was, he was afraid and started sinking. 'Save me, Lord!' he

shouted. Right away, Jesus reached out his hand. He helped Peter up and said, 'You surely don't have much faith. Why do you doubt?' When Jesus and Peter got into the boat, the wind died down. The men in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, 'You really are the Son of God!'

(Matthew 14:24-33 CEV)

- Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist.

(The Basis of Union, Paragraph 4)

- In water we dive, and cannot draw breath, then surface alive rebounding from death. Our old self goes under, in Christ dead and drowned. We rise, washed in wonder, by love clad and crowned.

(Brian Wren, Hymn 494, Together in Song).

Reflection

The Bible reading comes at a time when the disciples had been travelling with Jesus for some time. They had witnessed miracles and healings, and had observed the intellectual rigour that Jesus had exercised in discussions with religious leaders. They were devoted followers of their teacher.

At the time of this story the disciples were without their leader on a boat in stormy seas. Their lives were threatened by the elements, uncontrolled and

frightening. Across this sea of danger they saw the figure of Jesus who somehow was able to walk across the water. The disciples were astonished and even more terrified.

Despite this, through the chaos of the unknown and the unimaginable, Peter heard Jesus' voice. In response he asked to become part of this amazing event, to participate in the impossible. Peter cast aside all he knew and understood to walk in the path of faith; he took a deep breath and asked to be part of a transformed world, a world where he could walk on water. He stepped out of the boat.

Suddenly, trying to accommodate the impossibility of his situation hit home. Peter wobbled. He stumbled. He sank and he called out in fear. The longing for transformation was not enough. But Jesus was immediately there and lifted him up.

This is a story about the longing for change and transformation, and the faltering frail steps that we take on the path through change and uncertainty. The words of Wren's hymn remind us that even if we do sink beneath the waves, we are still safe. When we start to sink Jesus is there, reminding us that, with faith, we can be transformed and become transformers in the world. When Jesus called Peter, he said, 'Do not be afraid.' If we heed this call, if we acknowledge that faith grows out of a relationship with the person of Jesus, miracles happen. The tempestuous nature of the world around us fades into insignificance in the light of that relationship.

Talk about

What do Peter's actions reveal about his personality and his faith? What do Jesus' actions reveal about him?

What is it that allows Peter to cast aside all that is known, all that is real and tangible, and to step out of the boat? What is it that allows him to enter the unknown, the storming water?

What might this story have to say to you as a person who lives in faith and struggles with faith? What might this story have to say to the church as a whole?

Would you be more likely to step out of the boat or stay in it? What would give you the courage to 'take the risk'?

So what?

'Christ...gives life to the dead and...brings into being what otherwise could not exist.' Where does your church step out of the boat in faith? Where does it choose to stay safely in the boat? What would the Uniting Church look like if it allowed itself to step out of the boat?

Good news

Westmore Downs Uniting Church congregation has decided to sell all its property, meet in the local school hall and give its spare money to build churches in the Solomon Islands. Several members were disgusted at the decision and left to join the Baptist Church down the road. In the light of your conversation around this session, what is the good news for the Westmore Downs Uniting Church congregation? What is the good news for the Westmore Downs community?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you answered Peter's shortest prayer when he called out, 'Save me, Lord'. Reach out your hand to us to lift us up, awaken our energy and help us to use it in new and refreshing ways. May our lives become fuller and happier because we have the courage to step out of the safety of our little boats and go where you wait to strengthen us. Amen.

Blessing

May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times, and in all ways. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all, evermore. Amen.

Prayer

Mysterious God, how awe-inspiring it is to acknowledge your greatness to be lost in your wonder and grace. We pray for the strength to live in faith Waiting for your Spirit to touch our human hearts Enabling us to be the people living your way Open to listening for your call, Touch us O God, Break through our blinkered and limiting imagery.

(Maureen Walker from
Colours True & Splendid: the decade of churches in solidarity with women.)

Read

● One Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in a Jewish meeting place, and a woman was there who had been crippled by an evil spirit for eighteen years. She was completely bent over and could not straighten up. When Jesus saw the woman, he called her over and said, 'You are now well.' He placed his hands on her, and right away she stood up straight and praised God.

The man in charge of the meeting place was angry because Jesus had healed someone on the Sabbath. So he said to the people, 'Each week has six days when we can work. Come and be healed on one of those days, but not on the Sabbath.'

The Lord replied, 'Are you trying to fool someone? Won't any one of you untie your ox or donkey and lead

it out to drink on a Sabbath? This woman belongs to the family of Abraham, but Satan has kept her bound for eighteen years. Isn't it right to set her free on the Sabbath?' Jesus' words made his enemies ashamed. But everyone else in the crowd was happy about the wonderful things he was doing. (Luke 13:10-17 CEV)

● As a Christian church, born out of the struggles of Australian Christians to live in obedience to God in Australia, we find hope in Jesus Christ. We recognise that we Australian people are of diverse faiths and cultures, and our desire is that we live together here in one community in justice, peace and mutual respect. (Uniting Church Statement to the Nation, Australian Bicentennial Year, 1988)

● Only mouths are we. Who sings the distant heart which safely exists in the centre of all things? His giant heartbeat is diverted in us into little pulses. And his giant grief is, like his giant jubilation, far too great for us. And so we tear ourselves away from him time after time, remaining only mouths. But unexpectedly and secretly the giant heartbeat enters our being, so that we scream ----, and are transformed in being and in countenance.

(From *Heartbeat* by German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, 1875 - 1926)

Reflection

She was a woman bent over, unable to stand straight, to look another in the eye, to hold her head high. She walked, crippled, into a synagogue on the Sabbath, and was noticed by Jesus. Not unusual that Jesus noticed her – he had felt the woman touch the hem of his robe, looked up as they let a man through the roof

of a house in which he spoke, turned his attention to Zacchaeus hiding in the tree, and recognized the enormity of the widow's gift. Noticing people, their need and their potential, was something that was part of who Jesus was.

She was a woman bent over, and Jesus called to her, touched her and healed her. There was no hesitation, no asking who she was, no consideration of whether she deserved to be healed. Jesus' willingness to be part of people's lives did not discriminate, or ask for anything in return. Healing involved the whole person – the woman stood straight (physically whole) and began praising God (spiritually whole). Jesus set her free to realise the fullness of life.

She was a woman bent over, but one said she should have stayed that way – or be healed on another day. He questioned Jesus and his loyalty to the law. He didn't understand that this was the 'boundary-crossing Jesus', the one who saw God's love defying the rules, unseating the old ways and offering new ways – of compassion and justice. In doing this, Jesus risked everything – he unsettled those in power, questioned the status quo. With his actions, Jesus made the sacred (the law, the Sabbath, the place of worship) into the ordinary – a state of being available to all and at all times.

She was a woman walking tall, rejoicing with the entire crowd in the love and actions of Jesus. What else was there to do? What other response could there be?

Talk about

Are you the kind of person who believes in 'bending the rules' or do you prefer to 'play it by the book'? Why?

Jesus was not indifferent to the hurting and pain of this woman, and risked his own reputation and safety without her even asking for help. What can we learn from the way Jesus responded to the woman in the story?

Jesus didn't just offer the woman compassion, he gave her genuine healing. What does this say about Jesus and about his authority?

While the woman was crippled by her deformity, the ruler of the synagogue was crippled by a spirit of legalism. Jesus offered the woman healing. What did he offer the ruler of the synagogue?

So what?

There would be severe implications for this woman if Jesus had adhered to the church leader's interpretation of the Sabbath law. What tension is there between the 'rules' of your church and the opportunity to care for other people? Which one tends to win out? What needs to be looked at again?

Good news

Smithville Uniting Church meets for worship at 10.00am every Sunday. They also participate in the Smithville Australia Day parade each year and have won best non-commercial float prize for four years in a row. This year Australia Day falls on a Sunday and will require people to be at the parade from 8.00am till noon. The new minister, Revd S. Warm, is not happy and insists that people should attend worship at the usual time. The Chair of Church Council and the Secretary have suggested that people attend the parade. What is the good news for the Smithville congregation? What is the good news for Revd Warm?

Prayer

We believe you are with us, Jesus Christ, because now and then, we find ourselves more brave, more free and more hopeful than we might ever have imagined we could be.

We believe you are with your church, Jesus Christ, because just when we fear and doubt, we are given gifts of new life, new ideas, new faith for the next day.

We believe you are with us, Jesus Christ, because at times when we are low with feelings of inadequacy and guilt or woundedness, we are given gifts of healing, energy and grace which lift our hearts and send us out with joy.

Amen.

(Mission Prayer Handbook, 1996)

Blessing

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope; and may almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer

Mysterious God, how awe-inspiring it
is to acknowledge your greatness
to be lost in your wonder and grace.
We pray for the strength to live in faith
Waiting for your Spirit to touch our human hearts
Enabling us to be the people living your way
Open to listening for your call,
Touch us O God,
Break through our blinkered and limiting imagery.

(Maureen Walker from
Colours True & Splendid: the decade of churches in solidarity with women.)

Read

● When Jesus saw that Mary and the people with her were crying, he was terribly upset and asked, 'Where have you put his body?' They replied, 'Lord, come and you will see.' Jesus started crying, and the people said, 'See how much he loved Lazarus.' Some of them said, 'He gives sight to the blind. Why couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?' Jesus was still terribly upset. So he went to the tomb, which was a cave with a stone rolled against the entrance. Then he told the people to roll the stone away. But Martha said, 'Lord, you know that Lazarus has been dead four days, and there will be a bad smell.' Jesus replied, 'Didn't I tell you that if you had faith, you would see the glory of God?'

After the stone had been rolled aside, Jesus looked up toward heaven and prayed, 'Father, I thank you for answering my prayer. I know that you always answer my prayers. But I said this, so that the people here would believe that you sent me.'

When Jesus had finished praying, he shouted, 'Lazarus, come out!' The man who had been dead came out. His hands and feet were wrapped with strips of burial cloth, and a cloth covered his face. Jesus then told the people, 'Untie him and let him go.'

(John 11: 33-44 CEV)

● It is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions (of baptism and communion) promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.

(The Basis of Union, Paragraph 6)

● Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

(Charles Wesley, Hymn 209, *Together in Song*)

Reflection

Lazarus was considered beyond redemption. He had been dead for days by the time Jesus arrived, his body placed in a rock tomb. Despite the finality of the situation, Jesus calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb. The appearance of Lazarus, living again, is a metaphor for the new life given to people who have been caught in the deadly effects of addiction. Jesus calls the stunned spectators to undo the bandages that had been used to wrap Lazarus. In the same way, he invites us to take part in the liberation of recovering addicts.

The intervention of Jesus in our lives makes it possible to say 'no' to patterns of behaviour and thought that may lead to death. For many people their experience of Jesus is linked to rescue from addiction – whether that be alcohol or drug abuse, smoking, gambling, eating disorders, workaholism, TV or internet addiction, or sexual addictions. Subtle forms may include the compulsive collection of assets, and co-dependent relationships in which we must say 'yes' to others despite the emotional and physical cost. It can be found in the need to be in control of others, or in the need to follow rigid rules.

The addicted person generally needs more of the object of their addiction in order to meet their needs. This growing tolerance (I need more) goes together with self deception, loss of willpower, distortion of attention, low self esteem and damaged relationships.

Experiencing Freedom

Recovering addicts in the Christian community have found that Jesus models for us an authentic life without addiction. Jesus does not allow himself to be controlled by the desires of other people. He is free to express his honest grief and compassion, without looking for a quick fix. He has a sense of perspective that allows him to respond with poise to the needs of those around him.

Jesus, the higher power, breaks the chains that tie people to past behaviours and shames. His replacement of pretence with honesty leads to our healing. His replacement of shame with graceful acceptance of our vulnerability leads to our humble recognition of our own needs. Jesus walks with us on a difficult life-long journey to wholeness, without expecting instant, easy results.

Talk about

How do you understand addiction? What experience have you had with people's addictions? What impact does the addiction have on the addict and those around him/her?

The death of Lazarus came at the end of a sickness. It was at this point that Jesus intervened. People with addiction often are not prepared to accept intervention or help until they have hit 'rock bottom'. What examples can you give of 'rock bottom' related to the kinds of addiction listed above?

In what ways does Jesus show an addiction-free approach to the death and revival of Lazarus?

Jesus tells the disciples to unwrap the newly-living Lazarus. The grave clothes would have been similar to a mummy in that they would have totally covered his body. Lazarus would not have been able to free himself. In what ways are recovering addicts restricted by 'grave clothes' today? What can followers of Jesus do to help unwrap someone who has been given a new lease of life by Jesus?

So what?

In Galatians, chapter five, Paul challenges his readers to live a lifestyle of freedom from selfish compulsion. His challenge is directed to whole communities as much as individuals. In what ways is your group or Church demonstrating good news for people who are caught in addiction? In what ways do you as a community need to be set free by Jesus?

Good news

When Janet came to church on Sunday morning for the first time she had been sober for almost a year. After 25 years of chronic alcohol abuse, she had come to the end of her resources and now spoke of a powerful experience of God as a higher power. It was time, she thought, to make an effort to reconnect with the faith of her childhood – she knew that her 'higher power' had a name. But she did not feel comfortable

Jesus meets the yearning to be free

at church. She did not know how to be politically correct in the social context of the church.

(A scenario from Dale & Juanita Ryan's study, *Recovery from Spiritual Abuse*, InterVarsity Press, 1992)

What is the good news for Janet? What is the good news for the congregation?

Prayer

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.
Amen (Richard Neibuhr)

Blessing

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always.
Amen.

Experiencing a second chance

Jesus meets the yearning for forgiveness

Prayer

Mysterious God, how awe-inspiring it
is to acknowledge your greatness
to be lost in your wonder and grace.
We pray for the strength to live in faith
Waiting for your Spirit to touch our human hearts
Enabling us to be the people living your way
Open to listening for your call,
Touch us O God,
Break through our blinkered and limiting imagery.

(Maureen Walker from
Colours True & Splendid: the decade of churches in solidarity with women.)

Read

- The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses brought in a woman who had been caught in bed with a man who wasn't her husband. They made her stand in the middle of the crowd. Then they said, 'Teacher, this woman was caught sleeping with a man who isn't her husband. The Law of Moses teaches that a woman like this should be stoned to death! What do you say?' They asked Jesus this question, because they wanted to test him and bring some charge against him. But Jesus simply bent over and started writing on the ground with his finger.

They kept on asking Jesus about the woman. Finally, he stood up and said, 'If any of you have never sinned, then go ahead and throw the first stone at her!' Once again he bent over and began writing on the ground.

The people left one by one, beginning with the oldest. Finally, Jesus and the woman were there alone.

Jesus stood up and asked her, 'Where is everyone? Isn't there anyone left to accuse you?' 'No sir,' the woman answered. Then Jesus told her, 'I am not going to accuse you either. You may go now, but don't sin anymore.'

(John 8:3-11)

- Christ himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.

(The Basis of Union Paragraph 6)

- Thomas A. Edison was working on a crazy contraption called a 'light bulb' and it took a whole team of men 24 straight hours to put just one together. The story goes that when Edison was finished with one light bulb, he gave it to a young boy helper, who nervously carried it up the stairs. Step by step he cautiously watched his hands, obviously frightened of dropping such a priceless piece of work. You've probably guessed what happened by now; the poor young fellow dropped the bulb at the top of the stairs. It took the entire team of men twenty-four more hours to make another bulb. Finally, tired and ready for a break, Edison was ready to have his bulb carried up the stairs. He gave it to the same young boy who dropped the first one.

(James Newton, *Life with Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, Alexis Carrel, and Charles Lindbergh*, Harvest/HBJ Book, 1989)

Reflection

With the turn of events in the Gospel story it would have been really easy for Jesus to take on the role of judge. But he doesn't. He avoids that option. The Pharisees never really understood that the central message of Jesus was about 'love' not 'law'. His brilliant response threw them into confusion.

But Jesus didn't abandon the traditional Jewish morality. He didn't say that what the woman had done was right. He said 'Go and sin no more.' His focus was future-oriented not judgement-oriented. He didn't concentrate on the act of adultery or give her a lecture about her sin; he said, 'You are forgiven, now go and act like it.'

Jesus offered the woman a new life, a new identity, and the strength to overcome her sin. He demonstrated that he is much less interested in what people have done and much more in what they can become. Jesus loves us too much to let us keep living the way we have been.

The lesson for us from these stories is that we can be confident that whatever wrong we have done, no matter what it is, or what people think, we can be forgiven. We can know that God is willing to let the past be the past and that gives us the freedom to become what we are intended to be. These stories also suggest that, once we have experienced grace ourselves, we can become the bearers of grace, treating each person the way Jesus does, by offering unconditional love and acceptance.

Talk about

What do you think Jesus was writing in the sand while the Pharisees were badgering him for a response?

How do you think the woman would have felt at the beginning of this story? In the middle? At the end?

It has been said that more people confess their sins to the bartender than to a priest. Would you think that is true and, if so, why would that be the case?

What would be the hardest sin for you to forgive? Why? Would that sin be more difficult for God to forgive?

So what?

John Stott tells the story of Marghanita Laski, a well-known secular humanist and novelist who, not long before she died in 1988, said in a moment of surprising candor, 'What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me.' From your conversations in this session, what are the implications of Jesus' attitude to forgiveness for your church and the way it relates to people in your community?

Good news

John had been the church organist at St Matthew's for 16 years, his wife, Samantha, was secretary of the Ladies Fellowship and his children were members of the church youth group. John disclosed to his small group that he never been married to his partner Samantha. His congregation had traditionally been staunchly conservative on this issue but now a solid member of the church and close friend was one of those who they felt was 'living in sin'.

What is the good news for the congregation at St Matthew's? What is the good news for John?

Prayer

(Close with this prayer of forgiveness. It was reportedly found in the clothing of a dead child at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp.)

O Lord, remember not only the men and woman of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us: instead remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering, our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble. When our persecutors come to be judged by you, let all of these fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.

Blessing

May God keep you from falling and present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy. May the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always. Amen.

Prayer

Mysterious God, how awe-inspiring it is to acknowledge your greatness to be lost in your wonder and grace. We pray for the strength to live in faith Waiting for your Spirit to touch our human hearts Enabling us to be the people living your way Open to listening for your call, Touch us O God, Break through our blinkered and limiting imagery.

(Maureen Walker from
Colours True & Splendid: the decade of churches in solidarity with women.)

Read

- As Jesus was leaving, he saw a tax-collector named Matthew sitting at the place for paying taxes. Jesus said to him, 'Come with me.' Matthew got up and went with him.

Later, Jesus and his disciples were having dinner at Matthew's house. Many tax collectors and other sinners were also there. Some Pharisees asked his disciples 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and other sinners?'

Jesus heard them and answered, 'Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and learn what the Scriptures mean when they say, 'Instead of

offering sacrifices to me, I want you to be merciful to others.' I didn't come to invite good people to be my followers. I came to invite sinners. (Matthew 9: 9-13 CEV)

- The Uniting Church recognises the responsibility and freedom which belong to councils to acknowledge gifts among members for the fulfilment of particular functions. The Uniting Church sees in pastoral care exercised personally on behalf of the Church an expression of the fact that God always deals personally with people, would have God's loving care known among people, and would have individual members take upon themselves the form of a servant'.

(The Basis of Union, Paragraph 16)

- Indeed it occurs quite frequently that the common work of serving man or maid is more acceptable than all the fasts and other works of monks or priests where faith is lacking.

(Martin Luther 1483-1546)

- It would be contrary to our humanity to lie down in inactivity and idleness. We should apply to use whatever God has conferred on us.

(John Calvin 1509-1564)

- Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

(Frederick Beuchner,
Wishful thinking: A Theological ABC, New York: Harper & Row, 1973)

Reflection

Like Jesus, Martin Luther refused to distinguish between an elite way of salvation and ordinary life; between priests and the laity. He reclaimed the word 'vocation', which had previously been used primarily in monasticism, and applied it to people's ordinary, everyday lives in the world. Luther said God calls each person within the context of the life in which they find themselves. The Christian vocation can be fulfilled whatever one's 'station' in life. The vows of a monk or priest are not superior to a farmer labouring in the field, or a woman looking after the home. Rather, said Luther, all are measured by God by faith alone.

Although John Calvin believed that God has sovereignly assigned people their particular places or roles in life, he also acknowledged that a person might be called to make changes either to their own life circumstances or to the existing structures. Such changes were to be in obedience to God and not out of mere self-interest.

Calvin seems to have accepted that some choice was possible, but cautioned against undue restlessness in life. He also stressed the importance of useful activity. He emphasised God's energy, always at work within creation. He believed that faith was also full of energy; it was the recovery of those energies with which humanity was originally endowed by creation in God's image.

Today many people are longing for purpose and meaning for their lives - to feel that they are part of something larger than themselves, part of God's deep purposes for the world and that their life will somehow 'count'. At the same time many people are exhausted by the demands of trying to be successful in their work lives, and in their community and family involvements.

The antidote to exhaustion is not always rest. The antidote to exhaustion will often be wholeheartedness; a wholeheartedness that comes from seeking God in what we are doing, by discerning God's purposes for our lives and having the courage to explore ways of exercising our God-given powers and gifts. We become worn out when too much of our activity has nothing to do with a deep sense of purpose or when we neglect to invite God into what we are doing.

Talk about

In the story of the call of Matthew we are not told what was said in his conversation with Jesus. What do you think they talked about? When the tax-collector considered Jesus' call on his life what kinds of changes might he have anticipated and why?

Tax collectors were amongst the most despised people in Jesus' society. Who are the 'Matthews' in your community? How would Jesus respond to them?

How might your life be different if Jesus had come to call 'good people' to be his followers rather than 'sinners'?

Frederick Buechner says: 'The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.' What do you long to do that connects with the world's deep hunger? What ways have you found to do these things? (Share your responses as you feel comfortable and be aware that this question may evoke a deep sense of vulnerability in you and others.)

So what?

Pastoral care means more than taking care of people who may not be in good physical health. It includes the personal challenge, encouragement and assistance offered to people who seek to discern the deep call of God in their lives. Pastoral care can be the vehicle by which God personally reaches out to a person, helping him/her to discover and live out their meaningful destiny. How might your congregation reshape its understanding and practice of pastoral care to include issues of calling and vocation?

Good News

A working couple have two children and a large mortgage. They both work hard and are usually tired when they get home. If you asked them whether they enjoyed their jobs they would say, 'It's OK'. Weekends are taken up with household chores, ferrying children to sporting activities and catching up with additional paperwork. They say they might be able to manage coming to church for an hour or so for worship but are concerned that they will be asked to do more.

What is the good news for this family? What is the good news for the church?

Prayer

O God,
Jesus calls us to abide in him
like branches on a vine
that we might bear abundant fruit
in your new creation.

Help us to so grow in longing
for your love and purposes
to find expression in us,
that all that we do
blossoms into your own fruitful outpouring
in the world.

May our lives be for others
a foretaste of your rich banquet
of reconciliation and renewal
which is the end in view
for the whole creation.

Amen

Blessing

May the God of hope fill you with all joy in peace and believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope; and may almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.