INTRODUCTION & GUIDE


[Note: to avoid copyright problems, fresh translations from the Greek text are used in these studies. Occasionally, alternative translations are given for particular words (eg. release/forgiveness), to help enrich our understanding of the text. Compare these translations as you read with the range of meanings offered in the various published Bibles.]
Reading the Bible Together

A living word . . .

God’s word is a living word (2 Cor 3:6) to be heard, read, discussed and applied in community. The earliest followers of Jesus included many who could not even read, but they would regularly hear the Psalms and other Jewish Scriptures, the Gospels and Paul’s letters read to them by visiting teachers moving between the house churches. Whatever else you might do in your Bible Study and Cell Groups, make sure you read big slabs of Luke together out loud. Make it lively. Assign parts to each other and read with passion. The Word of God will not return empty!

. . . not a dead letter

Too often we try to reduce our Bible study to simple, one-dimensional answers. Too often we are afraid to ask the hard questions, as if we are scared we might not know the answers. Good Bible study is fearless and leaves some questions open. How can the Spirit move if we think we already know what the text ought to say? In a loving, supportive group we are empowered to ask ‘the dumb question’, ‘the doubting question’ and even make ‘the heretical suggestion’. Perfect love casts out fear, and God’s Spirit moves when we speak openly and honestly with each other. These studies will not always leave you with neat, clear answers to every question — the truth (Lk 1:4) is far more wonderful than that!

Bible study for all ages!

Five of the seven studies integrate with the Sample Services from the previous section of this resource, so that your Church can plan activities and studies involving ALL ages. The ‘5 C’ method

connect  context  content  consider  consequences

we use here follows Beth Barnett’s method used earlier so you can mix and match activities and ideas to suit YOUR Church community. Be creative! At least one of your studies/activity days should involve a meal for everyone, since Luke is a Gospel that emphasises the importance of eating together.
Readings in Luke for Hope and Mission

• written by someone who grew up in Palestine.
• full of insights into the culture of the Mediterranean world and how this informs our Bible reading.

• written by local Jesuit scholar of international renown.
• a wonderful overview of Luke’s Gospel and the theme of hospitality.

• written by a NT Professor at Fuller Seminary.
• a very clear and insightful commentary on Luke.

• a reading of Luke focussing on the meal scenes through the Gospel.

• There are more named women in Luke than any other Gospel — but are all the stories liberating?
• This book explores the Gospel from a feminist perspective — challenging reading!

• a very helpful collection of articles exploring the social and cultural background to Luke-Acts.

• A more user friendly approach to the women in Luke’s Gospel.

• written by a well-known Adelaide scholar.
• explores the pastoral dimensions of Luke’s concerns for his hearers/readers.
LUKE 4: 16 - 30

Connect:

Imagine you are invited back to your ‘home Church’ (or your community of origin) and have the chance to read a short reading and say ONE sentence to them. Go around the group and introduce each other by name, identifying your home community or Church (your ‘village of origin’), and saying what reading you would choose and what words you would speak.

Context:

Nazareth is Jesus’ ‘home town’. In the first century it was a small village less than an hour’s walk from Sepphoris. Together with Tiberius, Sepphoris was one of the capital cities of Galilee, and had a Greco-Roman theatre and a large Greek-speaking Jewish community. In comparison, Nazareth was ‘nowheresville’ — it was never mentioned anywhere in writing until the Gospel accounts of Jesus. But that is where Jesus goes, and, as was his practice, he enters the Synagogue where he grew up. He is handed the scroll of Isaiah (probably in Aramaic), and Jesus chooses the text that he is about to read . . .

Q: Why is it that Sepphoris is never mentioned in the New Testament and Tiberias occurs only 3 times in John?

Nazareth: a small village between two capital cities.
Read the passage out aloud, and interactively, by assigning these parts:

[N] = narrator; [J] = Jesus; [A] = Everyone

Luke 4: 16 - 30

[N] 16 And he came into Nazareth, where he was fed/raised, and entered into the synagogue on the day of the Sabbath according to his custom, and stood up to read. 17 And a scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and opening the scroll he found the place where it has been written:

[J] 18 the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me to announce good news to the poor/destitute he has sent me to proclaim to the prisoners/captives release/forgiveness and to the blind restored sight to set free the oppressed/downtrodden by release/forgiveness to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour/acceptance.

[N] 20 And closing the scroll, giving it back to the assistant, he sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were staring at him. 21 He began to say to them,

[J] “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears.”

[N] 22 And all were testifying/witnessing to/against him and were amazed at the words of grace coming out of his mouth and were saying:*

[A] “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?”

[N] 23 and he said to them:

[J] “No doubt you will say to me this parable: ‘Doctor, heal yourself! As many things as we heard you did in Capernaum, do also here in your own homeland.’”

[N] 24 And he said,

[J] “Truly, I am saying to you that no prophet is acceptable in his own homeland.25 In truth I am saying to you, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was shut for three and a half years, when a great famine occurred upon all the earth, 26 and Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow in Zarephath of Sidon. 27 And many lepers were in Israel at the time of Elijah the prophet, and none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”
Consider:

**Choose some questions to discuss that interest you — and ask some of your own.**

1. A manifesto is a program of action, a statement of intent. How well does this ‘Nazareth manifesto’ express the mission and ministry of Jesus as described in the rest of Luke’s Gospel? Can you add to these lists of references . . .
   - The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (3:22, baptism . . .)
   - because he anointed me (2:40; 3:22 . . .)
   - to announce good news to the poor/desolate (6:20; 7:22; 14:13; 16:20 . . .)
   - release to the captives (8:26–39 . . .)
   - sight to the blind (7:21–22; 18:35–43 . . .)
   - proclaiming Jubilee (year of the Lord’s favour) (1:46–55; 68–79; 2:29–32 . . .)

2. What did Jesus read and what did he leave out? Why would he sit down halfway through a sentence?

   **Isaiah 61** reads as follows: 1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. (NRSV, from the Hebrew; the Septuagint, the Greek OT, includes “giving sight to the blind” in this passage, perhaps from an earlier Hebrew text. We don’t know which version Jesus would have had access to.)
3. So did Jesus do a good job of the Bible reading (“all spoke well . . . gracious words”, see also Lk 4:15), or did he offend his hometown by leaving out the bit about the “day of vengeance” and comfort for Zion (Is 61:2b–3)? When he said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled” did he mean exactly what he read and no more?

4. Things go from bad to worse for Jesus when he points out that instead of vengeance on foreigners, God’s grace seems to seek them out for special signs and wonders (as in the stories about Elijah and Naaman). Is the Gospel always Good News for everyone, or is it sometimes bad news and a word of judgment? Have you ever felt cross with God for being too gracious and generous with people who don’t deserve it?

5. Matthew (13:53–58) and Mark (6:1–6a) have short and simple accounts of Jesus’ return to his hometown and his rejection there. Why does Luke preach this story differently, do you think?

Consequence:

This is where together we wrestle with what the Living Word of God is saying to us today out of our reading and discussions. The questions that follow here may not help — so it would be good to be ready to share some of our own.

Does your Church or Bible Study Group have a mission statement? Is it expressed in terms of things you hope will happen one day, or does it (like Jesus) describe those things that are already being fulfilled today?!

In what ways is your Church Good News for your wider community, and especially the destitute, the sick, the imprisoned, the foreigner . . . ?

What is the balance between proclaiming the Good News and enacting it; between evangelism and social action; between hope for the future and reality today?

What are the traditions/stories from the past that still challenge your Church, and which are the ones that hold you back? For Jesus, the prophet Isaiah’s words are an inspiration . . . but not all of them (traditions always need to be interpreted afresh).
LUKE 5: 27 - 32

Connect:

S hare with each other the various occupations and jobs (paid and unpaid) that you have undertaken in your lives — and the perceptions of those jobs by the wider society. Which work has been most life-giving for you? Which has earned the most money? How does our society value (or under-value) work? Do we share the burden of funding community services fairly through our various taxation systems? (Vigorous argument is permitted at this stage — but no fisticuffs and no hijacking the whole evening!)

Context:

T axation in the Roman Empire was not collected for the benefit of the wider community, but for the enrichment of a tiny and powerful elite. The infrastructure that existed served their needs also: Roman roads were made for the army to move about quickly; aqueducts and city squares were funded by wealthy people seeking high office; schools and health services were funded privately by, and for, those who could afford them. The lives of the vast majority were ‘nasty, brutish and short’, and the task of the tax-farmers was to relieve the populace of as much of their meager income as possible for the benefit of their own superiors, and to keep themselves as comfortable as possible. Tax had to be paid using Roman silver currency (with ‘graven images’ on it) — not local bronze money, and ultimately it found its way through the pyramid taxation network to Rome.

S o Levi (and even moreso, chief taxman Zacchaeus in Lk 19) does not just have the sort of occupation that people might make fun of or look down on — he was despised and feared as one who had permission from Rome to make money out of making other people’s lives miserable. It is difficult to find equivalents to his position in our society today — perhaps those who run brothels that exploit visa-dependant women or those who make money out of people-smuggling come closest, although they don’t have the power of the State and the army behind them. Can there be any hope for someone embedded in such a corrupt and brutal system as this?

[Note: Those who have a more benign picture of the glories of the Roman Empire in their mind should read the recent evaluations by Rodney Stark, Jennifer Glancy and Justin Meggitt, or perhaps even some of the historical novels by Colleen McCullough or Lindsey Davis. Earlier scholarship on the history of Rome owes much to the written records of the upper classes; more recent scholarship considers the perspectives of those who could not write their own version of history, but which are found nonetheless in the archaeological remains, the inscriptions and the graffiti.]
LUKE 5: 27 - 32

Content:

Read the passage out aloud, and interactively, by assigning these parts:
[N] = narrator; [J] = Jesus; [PS] = Pharisees and their Scribes

[N] 27 After these things, he went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him,

[J] “Follow (and keep on following) me.”

[N] 28 And forsaking all and getting up, he began to follow him.

And Levi made a great feast for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others reclining with them at the table. 30 And the Pharisees and their scribes were grumbling to his disciples, saying,

[PS] “Why are you all eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?”

[N] 31 And by way of reply, Jesus said to them,

[J] “The healthy have no need of a healer, but those in a bad way do; 32 I have not come to call the righteous/just but the sinners/irreligious to repentance/turning about.”

Words & Phrases

v. 27: The sense here seems to be something like a toll-booth or customs revenue collection point (rather than the poll tax or head tax) — possibly collecting the sales tax or customs duties for goods near Capernaum moving between Galilee and the Tetrarchy of Philip. (So it’s GST or Customs Duty rather than Income Tax; — ).

v. 27: Jesus’ call is in the present imperative tense: that is, ‘Follow and keep on following me.’ It’s not just an invitation for that day.

v. 28: The word here for ‘leaving’ suggests ‘forsaking’ (leaving for good), rather than just a temporary departure.

v. 29: Yet despite this ‘forsaking’, here we have Levi in his house, which was presumably big enough for the great banquet, and with lots of his old friends present. Was this a farewell party — or has Levi ‘forsaken everything’ in another sense (his career, his position, his old way of life)? We’d love to know more!

v. 30: The question from the Pharisees and their scribes implies some kind of ongoing eating and drinking. Either this was a very long party, or it refers to ongoing activity and some kind of new community forming around Jesus and his followers.
Consider:

Choose some questions to discuss that interest you — and ask some of your own.

1. The response to Jesus’ call is instant, absolute and ongoing: v.28 And forsaking all and getting up, he began to follow him. Yet it seems that Levi (and also Peter of Capernaum, in other Gospel stories), kept their houses and their connection with their family and the wider community — and even to their old profession, to some extent. What then does it mean to forsake all and follow Jesus? What is left behind and what is embraced? How great is the change of direction (mind and deeds) required?

2. How can Jesus possibly justify eating, drinking and sharing in the ill-gotten gains of Levi’s sordid past? Surely Jesus compromised the purity and integrity of his mission once he entered Levi’s house? Don’t we have some sympathy with the position of the Pharisees and their scribes? Would we accept funding or sponsorship from Crown, Tatts, or the local brothel today?

3. Can you sense the sheer joy and inclusiveness of Levi’s party? In our ministry and outreach to the marginalised and the strugglers of our community, do we also allow time for celebration, for banquets, for parties? As followers of Jesus, do we model how to feast joyfully to those around us in life-affirming ways — or are we known rather as wowsers, party-poopers and killjoys?

4. We sometimes hear Jesus’ stated focus on those who need the most help as a rejection of the ‘Pharisees’ as being those who think they are (self)righteous and just. Is that necessarily what this story is about? How can we hear and obey Jesus’ call to transformative mission, and care for and teach the ‘just and righteous’ in our Churches (including our own children, for example, whose metanoia, or ‘turning about’ may not be as dramatic as some others)? What happens to second-generation followers — to Levi and Peter’s children?
Matthew (13:53–58) and Mark (6:1–6a) have short and simple accounts of Jesus’ return to his hometown and his rejection there. Why does Luke preach this story differently, do you think?

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What are the traditions/stories from the past that still challenge your Church, and which are the ones that hold you back? For Jesus, the prophet Isaiah’s words are an inspiration . . . but not all of them (traditions always need to be interpreted afresh).
LUKE 16: 19 - 31

Connect:

We've probably all heard jokes and stories that begin with something like: “A lawyer and a businessman die and find themselves at the Pearly Gates. The businessman says to St Peter . . .

Share some of these jokes together and reflect on what is the spark of truth (or unexpected revelation) that makes the story funny or meaningful.

These stories often depend on stereotypes (of lawyers, accountants, blondes, politicians) and unexpected twists for their humour. Note that in this kind of story (we might call it the ‘Pearly Gates’ genre, as distinct from the ‘changing light bulbs’ genre or the ‘chicken crossing the road’ genre), the basic pattern remains the same and it’s the dialogue that provides the point of the story. We are not meant to analyse whether St Peter really does stand at the Pearly Gates (or lawyers change light bulbs, or chickens cross roads), but rather to enjoy the unexpected part of the story.

Did Jesus have a sense of humour? Did Jesus use fixed story forms like this and give them a twist? Did Jesus use colorful and graphic language to make a point? Share some examples that you can think of, where we need to take Jesus seriously (with humour!), but not literally. (If you’re struggling to find some, try the following taken just from Luke: 6:41–42; 17:1–4; 18:25; and many of the parables — see ch.13).

Context:

Stories of the afterlife genre were also common in the Ancient World. This story in Luke seems to be a mixture of Roman symbols (purple robes are reserved for the highest ranks in the Empire), Greek concepts (hades, the place of the dead, is the closest Greek equivalent to sheol in Hebrew) and Jewish motifs (‘Father Abraham’). Some of the non-canonical apocalyptic literature contains detailed accounts of vengeance where the ‘righteous’ in heaven view the suffering of their oppressors in the fires of ‘hell’ (gehenna, hades, lake of fire or the abyss) — and we have all probably been influenced by Dante’s Inferno, whether we know it or not. But the canonical books of the Bible do not go into detail about the afterlife. It is enough for us to know that we dwell with God, in God’s “many rooms” (Jn 14:2).

So this story of Jesus is not meant to provide us with a description of what happens after death — it simply adopts the ‘bosom of Abraham’ genre to make other points, involving unexpected reversals of fortune and the exchange of dialogue. In parabolic form, this story anticipates the saying of Jesus two chapters later: “How hard it is for the wealthy to enter the Empire of God” (Lk 18:24), even if they have the Law and the Prophets and the Risen One (Lk 16:31)! This is a message that is hard for us to hear — but at least let us try to hear what is being said before we begin to justify ourselves.
Read the passage out aloud, and interactively, by assigning these parts:

[J] = Jesus (the narrator); [A] = Abraham; [R] = the rich man

Luke 16: 19-31

[J] 19 “There was a certain wealthy man who was wearing purple and fine linen and who celebrated luxuriously every day. 20 A certain destitute man named Lazarus lay collapsed on his doorstep, covered with sores. 21 He longed to fill himself with what fell from the rich man’s table, but instead the dogs came and licked his ulcers. 22 It happened that the destitute man died and was carried by the angels into the bosom of Abraham; the wealthy man also died and was buried. 23 And in hades, suffering torture, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham from far off with Lazarus beside him. 24 And he called out and said,

[R] ‘Father Abraham, show mercy to me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool off my tongue, because I am in agony in these flames.’

[J] 25 And Abraham said,

[A] ‘Child, remember that you received your good things in your life, and Lazarus in the same way the bad things; but now he is comforted and you are in agony. 26 And with all these things, between us and you a great chasm has been established, so that those who wish to cross over from here to you are not able to, nor from there to us can they cross over.’

[J] 27 He said,

[R] ‘I am asking you, therefore father, that you might send him into my father’s house, 28 for I have five brothers, so that he might testify to them, in order that they might not also come into this place of torture.’

[J] 29 And Abraham says,

[A] ‘They have Moses and the prophets — let them listen to them.’

[J] 30 He said,

[R] ‘No, father Abraham; rather, if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent/ change direction.’

[J] 31 But he said to him,

[A] ‘If they are not hearing Moses and the prophets, nor will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’”
Consider:

Choose some questions to discuss that interest you — and ask some of your own.

1. Note the continuing assumption of the rich man that Lazarus should somehow still serve his needs — so that the man who wouldn’t lift a finger for Lazarus, now expects Lazarus to ‘lift a finger’ for him to cool his tongue. Do we have inbuilt assumptions of class, wealth or privilege in our society? In our church? In our world?

2. There are still some commentators who argue that this story is not a parable about wealth and poverty, but

(a) an actual account by Jesus of what happens after death;

(b) an allegory explaining why the Jews (as the rich man) have not accepted the Gospel (or the Gentiles, as the poor man), despite having the Law, the Prophets, and now a Messiah who has risen from the dead (v.31).

What arguments can you find supporting and opposing these views? Are there any other parables where a character is actually named? Why might it be so in this one?

3. Chapter 16 of Luke contains some of the most difficult texts to interpret in the whole Gospel. It begins with the parable of the ‘Dishonest Steward’ (or ‘Shrewd Manager’?), moves to the very difficult verse 16 and then to the toughest of all the NT texts on divorce (v.18), before this parable about Lazarus and the rich man. Money and ‘true riches’ (v.11, and vv.1,14,19) are clearly a recurring theme, as are the ‘up-side-down’ values of the Empire of God (vv.15–16). Under God’s reign, money is not the measure of everything (vv.9,13–15); men are held accountable for adultery, not just women (v.18 — this text is about the abuse of the divorce laws by men, rather than divorce as such); and those who are wealthy at the expense of others are not assumed to be blessed by God (vv.19–31). The challenging and transforming values of the Empire of God (particularly in relation to wealth and poverty) are a recurring theme through Luke-Acts, to the extent that the followers of Jesus are accused of being those people “who are turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Are we still turning the world upside down today, or since we live in a ‘Christian country’ is our task rather to defend ‘our Christian values’ against those who would seek to change them?
Words & Phrases

v. 19: The purple colour and fine linen are reserved for Roman citizens of Equestrian rank (thin stripe) or Senatorial rank (broad stripe) or higher (the Imperial family). It signifies a member of the tiny but powerful ruling elite, especially in the provinces, who could afford sumptuous banquets every day.

v. 20: The word here means not just relatively ‘poor’, but destitute/impoverished, and it is a particular theme in Luke (see also 6:20; 7:22; 14:13,21; 16:20,22; 19:8; 21:3). Only the poor man is named in the earliest Greek texts (Lazarus can mean ‘without help’ or ‘helped by God’, depending on linguistic interpretations). The name ‘Dives’ for the rich man came from the Middle Ages when the Latin adjective dives (= rich) was assumed to be his name.

v. 21: The word for ‘sores’ implies infected, weeping sores and ulcers.

v. 22: The picture here is of Abraham as host, having Lazarus reclining at a banquet in the place of honour on his right side — close to his chest.

v. 23: Hades is usually used (as is Sheol) as the neutral place of all the dead (good and bad) awaiting the resurrection. This is the only place in the NT where it is associated directly with torture and torment, in keeping with the heightened story genre. In the first century, the torture chambers in the dungeons beneath the fortresses of the Emperor and his Governors provided the gory details for these stories.

v. 25: The response of Abraham is very gentle and matter of fact: “Child — you’ve had your share of the good things! It’s Lazarus’s turn!” There is an assumption of a ‘fair go’ and of justice in these words — and no mention of who was good or bad, or who had faith or not — apart from the rich man’s obvious neglect of Lazarus.

v. 26: The Greek words are chasma mega — a big ditch.

v. 29: Such as Deuteronomy 15:11 — often quoted as ‘the poor you always have with you’ (and so don’t worry too much about them) — but which actually commands us always to ‘open our hand to the poor and needy’.

If this story is not mainly about ‘heaven and hell’ and life after death, where do we get our understanding about such matters? Note that the story itself rejects the idea of using ‘heaven and hell’ to scare people into God’s reign. Reflect also on how our understanding of the universe today might give us the idea that ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ are very far apart indeed — and not related in any way to earth. But we do well in thinking about these matters to keep Revelation 21:1–4 firmly in mind: in the renewed heaven and earth, the new Jerusalem comes down with God to earth, and we dwell with God. We don’t go to some faraway heaven when we die; we die into the God who renews heaven and earth, and against whom not even the gates of hell can prevail.
2. “It’s not our fault we’re born rich!” Is it wealth alone that is the problem — that corrupts our values? Or is it wealth-at-the-expense-of-others (wealth that ignores others) that is the focus of this story? What then should be the response of the wealthy while they/we are still alive?

3. In Luke, the first beatitude is: “Blessed are the poor/destitute.” (Lk 6:20). For Jesus, this is a present reality (“for yours is the empire of God”), and not just a future hope. How and why are the poor blessed?

4. We know that the vast majority of us are wealthy compared with the rest of the world. We also live with the guilt that our wealth has developed to some extent at the expense of others — the indigenous peoples whose land we mine; the sweatshops of Asia whose products we buy; the child labourers of Africa whose coffee and chocolate we enjoy. What can we do about this that is meaningful and transforming for the ‘destitute on our doorstep’? Is the global economy just too complex for us to sort it all out? Do the aid and development agencies really make a difference, or are they just acting to ease our guilt a little?

Some of these agencies have excellent study material that your group could work through together, leading to action and projects that they are passionate about and that they can demonstrate are making a difference. Contact Baptist World Aid Australia (50:50, a 5 week program), TEAR, and World Vision for more details. However we might interpret this story, it is at least a plea for us not to ignore those who are struggling on our doorstep!
LUKE 23: 26 - 49

Connect:

To prepare for this passage, we need to share frankly with one another about death. This we must do with great sensitivity, love and respect — allowing some to remain silent if they wish. If you are able, share your ideas about a ‘good death’ — is it one that is sudden and quick, or one that is expected and therefore allows time for good-byes? Is it one surrounded by family and friends, or one that spares them that agony? Is it possible that we can be grateful to God (looking back) for different experiences involving death? Have you had the experience of hearing differing accounts of the same death?

The death of Jesus in the four Gospels is told from different perspectives, because one simple account is not enough to contain all the truth that is found in this transforming event.

Context:

The death of Socrates is seen as the model of a ‘good death’ in Greek literature. He calmly dialogues with his disciples on the immortality of the soul before drinking the cup of hemlock and gently passing away in the presence of his friends — an innocent man condemned unjustly, whose death has a powerful impact on his followers.

Contrast the death of Jesus in Matthew and Mark — dying with a loud cry of God-forsakenness on his lips (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34) and deserted by his friends (Mt 26:56; Mk 14:50), except for a group of women looking on from afar (Mt 27:55-6; Mk 15:40-1). But what about Luke’s perspective on these events? What are Jesus’ final words (Lk 23:46) and who is present to hear them (23:49)? What does the centurion witnessing these things say (23:47)?

Of course, the story doesn’t end here! But we mustn’t rush on too quickly to the amazing events that follow. Sit for a while with the stark reality of Jesus’ brutal death (and the four Gospel perspectives that we have of it), for the hope and power of the Gospel is found in this story — not by avoiding it. So pause in silence after reading the story that follows below for at least 2 minutes, and choose in advance a ‘centurion’ in your group to break that silence and begin your reflection and discussion by repeating the words of the centurion.
Read the passage out aloud, and interactively, by assigning these parts:


Luke 23: 26 - 49

[N] 26 And as they led him away, they grabbed Simon, a man of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and they put the cross on him to carry it behind Jesus. 27 A large number of people were following him, including women who were mourning and wailing for him. 28 Turning towards them Jesus said,

[J] “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, rather weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 Because, look!, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Deeply joyful are the barren, and the wombs that have not generated, and the breasts that have not nursed.’ 30 Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall upon us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ 31 For if they do these things when the sap is running in the tree, what will happen when it is withered?”

[N] 32 Others also, were led away with him to be killed — two evil-doers/criminals. 33 And when they came to the place called Skull, there they crucified him and the evil-doers, one on the right and one on the left. 34 [[But Jesus was saying,

[J] “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]]

[N] Dividing his clothing, they cast lots. 35 And the people were watching, standing there, but the leaders were even taunting him, saying,

[L] “Others he saved; let him save himself — if this one is the Christ of God, the elect one!”

[N] 36 The soldiers also came up and made a fool of him, bringing sour wine to him, 37 and saying,

[S] “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”

[N] 38 There was also an inscription above him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

[N] 39 While he was hanging there, one of the evil-doers/criminals was blaspheming him, saying,

[E1] “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”
[N] 40 But the other answered by rebuking him, saying,

[E2] “Aren’t you afraid of God, since you are under the same judgment? — and we at least justly so, for we are deserving what we are getting, but this one has done nothing untoward.”

[N] 42 And he was saying,

[E2] “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom/empire.”

[N] 43 And he said to him, [J] “Truly I am saying to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

[N] 44 And it was already around the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, as the sun failed, and the veil of the shrine was split down the middle.

46 And shouting with a loud voice, Jesus said,

[J] “Father, into your hands I offer my spirit.”

[N] After saying this, he expired. 47 After seeing what had happened, the centurion was glorifying God, saying,

[C] “This man was innocent/just/righteous indeed.”

[N] 48 And when all the crowds assembled for this sight saw what happened, they began to return, beating their breasts. 49 But all his friends were standing at a distance, and women following him from Galilee were watching these things.

Consider:

Choose some questions to discuss that interest you — and ask some of your own.

1. There have been many reflections (musical, artistic and theological) throughout history on the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross — three of them being found here in Luke (plus three in John, and the cry of God-forsakenness in Matthew/Mark). What do these sayings in Luke tell us about the life and death of the ‘righteous/innocent’ One? How does this compare with the other Gospels? Which Gospel perspective speaks most to your own understandings of God, life and death?

2. Jesus is mocked as ‘King/Emperor of the Jews’, yet also recognised by the second criminal as being about to enter his ‘kingdom/empire’. What might this kind of language mean in the context of the powerful Roman Empire? In what sense do we praise Jesus as ‘King of kings’ today?
3. What does ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’ mean? Some traditions (including maybe 1 Peter 3:18–20) have Jesus entering hell or hades after his death to preach to the captives there. So how can Jesus be ‘in Paradise’ and ‘in hell’ at the same time? This sort of question is only a problem if we read the text ‘literally’ rather than ‘contextually’. If we read it ‘literally’, then our cosmology becomes very complicated — with hades, sheol, gehenna, hell, a bottomless pit, the abyss and an outer darkness — over against Paradise, heaven, the heavens, the third heaven, the Father’s house, a Throne room, and a messianic banquetting table! If we read the text contextually and appreciate the colourful and symbolic nature of Hebrew and Greek language, we understand that the ‘descent into hell’ (as in some of the Creeds) is a way of saying that ‘nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ’ (Rom 8:38–9) — not even the gates of hell (Mt 16:18) — and that (like the second ‘thief’ or ‘evil-doer’) we die ‘into God’, to be ‘with Christ’ — and that is heaven/Paradise enough for us! See N. T. Wright’s book, Surprised by Hope, for a vigorous challenge to literalistic understandings of heaven (or ‘heavenism’, as he calls it).

4. Do you think Luke’s Gospel portrays Jesus’ death as a sacrifice for our sin, or does he suggest other ways of understanding its significance for us?

**Words & Phrases**

**vv. 28–31:** In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is remembered as being particularly concerned for the terrible fate of Jerusalem. As he writes, Luke looks back on the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE and the awful things that happened during the siege by Titus and his army, and remembers that Jesus foretold these events — as did some other Jewish prophets of that time (see also Lk 19:41–44; 21:20–24).

**v. 34:** Some significant early Greek manuscripts don’t include this saying, so it appears in brackets in many translations. The words are similar to Stephen’s (Acts 7:60b), but are consistent with Luke’s portrayal of a noble death.

**v. 36:** The sour wine was part of the soldiers’ game to torture the victim by keeping them alive and in agony as long as possible — sometimes up to seven days!

**v. 42:** The word for ‘kingdom’ is the same one that is translated ‘empire’ when it is used of Rome. We miss the political implications of the ‘Empire of God’ when we translate the same word differently.

**v. 43:** This is one of only 3 mentions of ‘paradise’ (rather than ‘heaven/s’) in the New Testament (for the others, see 2 Cor 12:4 and Rev 2:7 — sometimes translated ‘garden of God’). It comes from a Persian term meaning ‘enclosed garden’ or ‘park’.
Consequence:

This is where together we wrestle with what the Living Word of God is saying to us today out of our reading and discussions. The questions that follow here may not help — so it would be good to be ready to share some of our own.

1. The early followers of Jesus were remarkable in the ancient world for their willingness to face death (even awful deaths) for the sake of the Good News, and for their lack of fear of the dead (some of them even living in the catacombs with the dead). What about our attitudes to death today? How well do our funerals and memorial services convey both the reality of death and the hope that transcends death? Do they provide space for lament (note that the lament Psalm 22 underlies all the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death), and for sharing the deep joy of the communion of the saints, living and dead? Share with each other some accounts of the most helpful funerals you have been part of.

2. Does the death of Jesus itself generate hope for us, or is it only the resurrection that gives us reason to hope?

3. Sometimes we can get caught up in trying to ‘explain away’ the differences in detail between the Gospel accounts of Jesus, and miss the significance of what those details point to. The Gospel writers make it plain (Luke 1:1–4 and John 20:30-1) that they are not interested in just providing a chronology of ‘facts’ about Jesus (as if that is all that truth means), but that they want us to have assurance of truth by ‘faithing’ (‘believing’) and living in Jesus’ name. Does this make sense — or do you have ongoing concerns to share with each other about these issues?

4. Why should this crucifixion be seen as any different to the thousands of other crucifixions carried out by the Romans?
LUKE 7: 36 - 50

Connect:

This story raises all sorts of deep questions regarding the cultural assumptions we have about relationships between men and women. According to the culture of his day, Jesus was put in a painfully embarrassing position — but still not so painful as the position of the ‘shameless’ woman herself! Everyone in Simon’s dining room saw the woman — but they didn’t want to look at her. Everyone was looking at Jesus to see how he would respond. Could he preserve his honour and integrity in such a shameful situation — or was that not his main concern?

It is often difficult to share our experiences of these types of issues — and not always helpful to do so in a group. But can you think of situations in our church life where we have (perhaps unthinkingly) made things very awkward for single people (whether never married, divorced, or widowed), or where our assumptions about (or attitudes to) obvious ‘sinners’ have limited God’s transforming work? Have you ever found yourself caught between the expectations of ‘respectable Christianity’ and what you think Jesus might have done?

If it is possible to do so sensitively, share some of these stories with each other.

Context:

The first century Mediterranean world was dominated by men. In Roman and Greek society, the father (pater familias) had complete authority over his household and everyone and everything in it. It was expected that wives would stay at home and exercise authority over domestic arrangements involving food and children, thus preserving the honour of their husbands. It was understood that men might have relationships with courtesans, mistresses and even prostitutes, but that their wives would remain faithful and preserve the family line. Provided a woman remained under her male protector (her father when she was a girl, her husband as a wife, her son as a widow), she retained her dignity — and her husband’s inheritance, until her son came of age. Women without a male protector of any kind (the divorced and widowed) were in serious danger of being regarded as ‘loose’ or ‘shameless’ women. Respectable religious men would avoid public contact with such women for fear of harming their own reputation and honour. The care of such widows was a particular concern for Jewish and Christian communities (see Acts 6:1; 1 Tim 5:3f; James 1:27).
Then (as indeed now, in many places in the Middle East), it was only women who were caught in adultery and punished (Jn 7:53–8:11), as if men weren’t also involved. If a marriage was not blessed with children it was always the woman’s fault — she was barren or infertile — since it was assumed that the man’s seed was enough to produce a baby in ‘fertile ground’. Apart from some wealthy Roman women, it was not normally possible for women to initiate divorce proceedings, whereas it was relatively easy for men to divorce their wives for a range of reasons. Women literally could not ‘let their hair down in public’ — that was something they would only do with their husband in the privacy of the bedroom.

On the other hand, it seems that the most significant relationship a man had in the first century world was with his mother — closer even than wife or father or child. Women without sons had very little opportunity to exercise influence.

We have been speaking mainly of the dominant Greco-Roman culture of the first century, the wider culture that Luke addresses. Jewish culture was also influenced by these values to some extent, but those who followed the Torah did not turn a blind eye to adultery by men, and Jewish law still provides the ethical basis to many of our understandings of family and community life today. So there is a strong tension in this story between the moral assumptions of Simon the Pharisee and those of the wider Greco-Roman world — and Jesus is caught right in the middle!

If there are women present in your study group, wait silently at the end of the reading below until all the women have had a chance to speak about this story.

Read the passage out aloud, and interactively, by assigning these parts:

[N] = narrator; [J] = Jesus; [S] = Simon the Pharisee; [G] = Guests (all the rest)

Luke 7:36–50

[N] 36 A certain Pharisee asked him if he might dine with him, and entering into the Pharisee’s house, he reclined to eat. 37 And look!, a woman who was in the city, a sinner, knowing that he was reclining to eat in the Pharisee’s house, brought to him an alabaster bottle of essential oil. 38 And standing behind him at his feet, weeping tears like rain, she began to shower his feet and to wipe them with her hair. And she was kissing his feet and massaging them with the fragrant oil. 39 But seeing this, the Pharisee who invited him said to himself,

[S] “If this man were a prophet, he would discern who and what kind of woman is touching him, that she is a sinner.”
And Jesus responded and said to him,

“Simon, I have something to say to you.”

Teacher,” he said, “Start speaking.”

There were two men in debt to a certain moneylender; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they didn’t have the means to repay him, he showed grace/gave to both. Therefore, which of them will love him more?”

Responding, Simon said,

“I suppose the one to whom was given the most.”

And he said to him,

“You have judged rightly.”

And turning to the woman, to Simon he said,

“You see this woman? On entering into your house, you did not give water for my feet; but she has showered my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give a kiss to me, but since entering, she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with olive oil, but she has anointed my feet with fragrant oil. Because of which, I am saying to you, her many sins have been forgiven, because she has loved greatly. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

He said to her,

“Your sins have been forgiven.”

And the fellow guests began to say amongst themselves,

“Who is this who even forgives/releases sins?”

And he said to the woman,

“Your faith has saved you; go (and keep on going) into peace.”
Luke 8:1–3

1 And it followed soon after that he travelled through city and village, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the empire of God. And the twelve were with him, 2 as well as certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s administrator Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who served/ministered to them out of their resources.

It is perhaps the naming of Mary Magdalene here, combined with the naming of the anointing woman as Mary in John 12:1–8 (but there as the sister of Martha and Lazarus), that has led to the popular understanding that it was Mary Magdalene who anointed Jesus, though none of the Gospel accounts actually say this. It is, however, entirely plausible that the woman who anoints Jesus in Luke becomes one of the travelling women disciples who minister to Jesus (diakoneo in 8:3). Wives with supportive husbands and widows with grown sons would be able to travel and do this out of their own resources — joined by those less fortunate who were healed/saved by Jesus.

Words & Phrases

v. 37: This is an alabaster bottle of very expensive essential oil/s (fragrant/perfumed oil/s); in 7:46 it is contrasted with the much more common olive oil. The usual translation ‘ointment’ sounds like a rubbing medicine, rather than this concentrated essential oil, probably of spikenard or lavender.

v. 38: The picture Luke draws is of the Greco-Roman dining room (triclinium), with the guests reclining to eat and the woman standing behind Jesus at his feet.

v. 41: A denarii was worth around a day’s wages for a labourer.

v. 44: Jesus looks at the woman, but speaks to Simon. Previously, the men (women would not normally recline to eat with men) would have been conscientiously ignoring the woman, but muttering about her. Jesus forces all in the room to notice her and actually consider her as a person.

v. 47: Does she love greatly because she has been forgiven much, or is she forgiven much because she loves greatly? The latter seems to be the case with the woman (though our translators often resist it), but not in the parable!
Consider:

Choose some questions to discuss that interest you — and ask some of your own.

1. We often think of the Pharisees as being Jesus’ main opponents, whereas they too were concerned to renew Israel and to lead people closer to God. Ultimately, it was the wealthy priestly groups in Jerusalem who were most threatened by Jesus and who turned him over to the Romans. Do you think Simon’s invitation to Jesus was genuine? What might he have been hoping to achieve, and how might he have been feeling after this dinner party?

2. The verses following (8:1–3), suggest that Jesus didn’t engage in ‘hit and run’ mission — leaving people behind to struggle on their own — but that already a wider community of followers was forming as he ministered. In turn, they also began to minister (to serve, or to ‘deacon’, v.3). What striking features do you notice about this community?

3. The unnamed woman, who has no male to protect her or to make her ‘respectable’, risks everything in what she does. She is both shameless, and shameful — acknowledging her in public will only bring shame to respectable men. Culturally, for Jesus, this is a lose-lose situation — one best avoided at the outset before reputations are damaged. Yet Jesus seems to allow it to continue as he eats . . . and as he tells stories . . . and as he debates with the host and other guests. The unbearable tension is not released until the very last line (v.50), when the woman is sent in peace. Just what point is Jesus making? Why does he take so long to make it? What might have been the responses of the host and guests after v.50?

4. There are four Gospel accounts of this anointing story (or stories; see Mt 26:6–13; Mk 14:3–9; Lk 7:36–50; Jn 12:1–8), and it is very difficult to reconcile them as one, or even two stories. They occur in different houses, at different places in the Gospel narrative (especially in Luke), and involve anointing the head and/or feet, over the protests of Judas, or the disciples, or Simon the Pharisee . . .

If you have time, explore and discuss the similarities and the differences (even photocopy the stories side by side for comparison). Remember that the Jews anoint future Kings/High Priests on the head, but the Greeks and Romans don’t. Has this story been told/preached in different ways for different contexts? How should we preach it today in our context?
This is where together we wrestle with what the Living Word of God is saying to us today out of our reading and discussions. The questions that follow here may not help — so it would be good to be ready to share some of our own.

1. Again, Jesus seems very willing to eat with whoever invites him! Although he was an invited guest, he doesn’t seem to have been welcomed with much warmth by the host. Are there limits to which invitations we should accept, or to the hospitality we should provide?

2. In the culture of the day, this is a painfully embarrassing story. Honour and shame are central values in ancient Mediterranean society, and Jesus here seems to turn them upside down in a way that publicly affirms a woman known to be sinful by everybody. How equipped are we as followers of Jesus to respond creatively and affirmatively like this to situations of great embarrassment and shame? Are we unshockable in the way we show the love of God?

3. In all four Gospel accounts of this anointing story (or stories; see Mt 26:6–13; Mk 14:3–9; Lk 7:36–50; Jn 12:1–8), the woman never has the chance to speak. Is this still the case for abused women in our churches today? How might the church be able to lead the way in showing how to deal with these issues today?

4. We can often be quite dogmatic about how people should express their faith before they can be saved — by praying this prayer of repentance, or believing this doctrine of atonement, or by confessing this set of doctrines. How has this woman shown the faith that has saved her (Lk 7:50)? What does this suggest to us when we are wrestling with issues about evangelism and salvation?
LUKE 15: 11 - 32

Connect:

This story comes in the middle of a series of ‘lost and found’ parables and stories about feasting and celebrating (Lk 14–15). Share with each other some stories of finding something that made you really happy — whether something small (a coin or collectable item, a pet) or something big (a house, a friend). How did you — and how do you still — celebrate such moments of grace and joy?

Context:

This is one of Jesus’ most outrageous stories. We are so familiar with it that we can miss the dramatic impact this story has. There is a point in this story when the first hearers would have shaken their heads, gasped or lapsed into embarrassed giggles. Remember that this story is set in a patriarchal world (much more so than ours is today), where a son’s obligation to his father — and especially to ensure his proper burial when he dies — was paramount. For a son (even a younger son) to ask for his inheritance ahead of time, before his father died, was a gross breach of respect and honour. For a father to welcome such a son back would have made matters even worse in the eyes of the public. It might be expected that a mother would still love her wayward son, given the especially close relationship between mothers and sons in the ancient world — but she would have to be very careful how she showed it so as not to bring dishonour on the household. It was the father’s responsibility to uphold the honour and values of his family and village, even if it meant showing a dignified aloofness to his own children in public. This man has a position in society to uphold, with sons, slaves, and hired workers depending on him. Yet somehow this father, this respectable village patriarch, seems to be waiting and watching for his prodigal son, and when he spots him in the distance.

Content:

Read the passage out aloud, and interactively, by assigning these parts:

Luke 15:11 - 32

[N] 11 And he said,

[J] “A certain man had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to the father,
by Dr Keith Dyer, New Testament Professor

[Y] ‘Father, give to me the accrued part of the estate.’

[J] So he apportioned the property between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered together everything and travelled towards a distant country, where he wasted his wealth with wild living. 14 After he spent everything, a severe drought occurred throughout that country, and he began to lack the basics. 15 And he went and bonded himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was lusting to fill himself from the carob pods that the pigs were eating; and nobody was giving anything to him. 17 But after coming to himself he said,

[Y] ‘How many of my father’s hired labourers have plenty of bread, but here I am destroyed by drought! 18 After rising up I will go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in front of you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; work me like one of your hired labourers.” ’

[J] 20 And after rising up, he came to his own father. But while he was still at a distance, his father saw him and was deeply moved — and running, fell upon his neck and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him,

[Y] ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in front of you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

[J] 22 But the father said to his slaves,

[F] ‘Quickly, bring out the best long robe and dress him, and give a ring for his hand and sandals for his feet, 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and after feasting, let’s celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found!’

[J] And they began to celebrate.

[J] 25 Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing, 26 and calling one of the slaves he was inquiring what these things might indicate. 27 He said to him,

[S] ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has welcomed him back safe and sound.’

[J] 28 But he became angry and did not want to enter in, so his father came out to console him. 29 He answered and said to his father,

[O] ‘Look! I have been slaving away for you for so many years, and have never let a command of yours pass by, yet for me you have never even given a young goat in order to celebrate with my friends. 30 Now when this son of yours comes back, who has consumed your property with prostitutes, you kill for him the fattened calf!’

[J] 31 Then he said to him,

[F] ‘Child, you are always with me, and everything that is mine is yours. 32 But it was necessary to celebrate and also to rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and now lives; he was lost and has been found.’"
Consider:

Choose some questions to discuss that interest you — and ask some of your own.

1. This is a story (over)filled with irony, humour and pathos. It is the Home and Away of the first century — over-stated and melodramatic, yet still charged with emotion and unexpected twists. Reflect together on how the story affects you, and on the dramatic shifts and contrasts.

2. Notice how the relational language changes throughout the story: ‘father’, ‘younger son’, ‘my father’, ‘my son’, ‘elder son’, ‘your son’, ‘your brother’, ‘slave’, ‘child’. The language is exclusively masculine and patriarchal (as if there were no mother or sisters also suffering in the background), yet the story challenges the tough patriarchal assumptions of the first century Mediterranean world. How about today? Have we grasped the radical redefinition of fatherhood that Jesus continually confronts us with (see also Matthew 23:9)?

3. Often this parable has been allegorised, so that the younger brother is seen as representing Gentiles who become Christians, and the older brother as the Jews. We should be very careful here. Luke 15:1–2 does suggest that some Jews were not happy with Jesus’ focus on ‘lost’ sinners (hence the ‘lost and found’ parables that follow), but remember that Jesus and everyone else in these stories is Jewish. We shouldn’t read the later split between ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ back onto these Gospel stories. Of course, we can’t help turning parables into allegories to some extent — that’s part of wrestling with what the text means for us today — but we shouldn’t ever think that we have ‘solved’ a parable by doing that (especially if we have ignored the first century context). So . . . who do we identify with in this story: father, younger son or older brother . . . or maybe the silently suffering womenfolk? Is Jesus trying to get us to empathise with the older brother’s feelings? Why?

4. So what was the point in the story where ‘the first hearers would have shaken their heads, gasped or lapsed into embarrassed giggles’, do you think? Kenneth Bailey (see the list of resource books) suggests it is the point where the father, rather than waiting for the son at the back door (or perhaps even sending a slave to escort him off the property), picks up his robes and runs down the road to meet his wayward son — embracing and kissing him! In full public view! This is not how a dignified and honourable patriarch should behave. This is a shameless public display of misplaced affection for an undeserving wretch who should never have dared to darken his father’s door again! So what is Jesus telling us about the love of this God-who-runs?
Words & Phrases

v. 16: Carob pods or husks were used to fatten pigs and were the food of last resort for the very poor. The son had a ‘consuming desire’ to fill himself with them.

v. 18: The word used for ‘rising up’ (the verb form of anastasis) suggests a resurrection-like change of direction.

v. 20: The word usually translated ‘filled with compassion’ or ‘pity’ is a very strong word implying movement in the intestines/bowels, which were understood to be the seat of the emotions. This is a gut-wrenching story.

v. 22: The ‘long robe’ suggests honour and status, and the word for ‘best’ (protos), can mean also ‘first’ — not something a second son should really aspire to!

v. 28: The word for what the father tries to do can be translated as ‘console’, ‘encourage’, ‘beg’, ‘exhort’, ‘request’, or ‘plead’. It is the verb form of paraclete, the word John uses for the Holy Spirit.

v. 29: He does seem to have a point here — not even a kid (young goat) for a barbecue with his mates — and his worthless little brother gets a whole fattened calf!

v. 30: Big brother seems to have been watching little brother (or maybe he just assumes the worst) — this is the first explicit mention of prostitutes.

Consequence:

This is where together we wrestle with what the Living Word of God is saying to us today out of our reading and discussions. The questions that follow here may not help — so it would be good to be ready to share some of our own.

1. So what do we make of this ‘foolish and shameless’ God who runs to embrace the undeserving sinner? Culturally speaking, this is a God whose ‘fatherhood’ is more like ‘motherhood’ — who challenges the patriarchal values that ancient society was built on. This is a father who is not only ‘soft’ on the prodigal — giving in to his original request without a word, and welcoming him back with way too much enthusiasm — but who is also ‘soft’ on the grumpy older brother, promising him everything! Is this a model for human parenting? Should we love our children without limits? Unshockable. Unstoppable. Uninhibited by public expectations? Should the fathers amongst us get more in touch with our feminine side?
2. One of the saddest aspects of our church life can be the way that former members, our children, and our past ministers move on and seem to be forgotten. Is there any way we could occasionally invite them back to celebrate with us their contribution to our community life? Have you ever had a ‘Back to . . .’ event that welcomes your ‘prodigals’ with feasting, photos, music and dancing?

3. Are the words of the father to the elder son (v.31–2) sufficient to melt his heart? What do they say to those of us who might be called the ‘faithful righteous’ (the 99 sheep, Lk 15:7) today? Does this story (and the other stories in chapters 14–15) really imply that one conversion of a ‘prodigal’ is worth more than the ninety-nine faithful ‘slaves’ who never stray and work hard all their lives? Is evangelism (of those ‘outside’) really that much more important than Christian education (of those ‘inside’)? Should we be having more celebrations for the older siblings too?

4. This story of the prodigal son is often used as the paradigm for conversion, and preached on as if there is no second half to the story at all — as if the older brother didn’t exist. But we all tend to try to reduce the parables of Jesus to a straight-forward meaning, to ‘solve’ them and say ‘what they really mean’, rather than leave them as condensed human dramas that draw us in to wrestle with the values of God’s empire (see Lk 8:9–10). God’s Word is a Living Word, not a dead letter — and the parables especially make this plain to us. To illustrate the ‘polyvalence’ of this parable, how many profound statements of ‘what this parable really means’ can you compose together?
LUKE 24: 13 - 35

Connect:

Share stories of what it is like to live under a brutal occupying power. Maybe you have group members who have lived (or whose relatives have lived) in Burma, the Sudan, in Cambodia under Pol Pot, in Eastern Europe or China under the Communists. Or perhaps you can share your knowledge of what it must be like from what you have seen or read or heard. Reflect together on the nature of hope and hopelessness in such contexts.

[Alternatively, you could ask the question: “What have the Romans ever done for us?” and critically evaluate your answers from the perspective of the lower classes in first century Judea and Galilee.]

Context:

This story is about a long downhill walk to the West of Jerusalem. Emmaus (later called Nicopolis by the Romans, or ‘city of victory’, 160 stadia from Jerusalem), is mentioned by the first century Jewish historian Josephus as the village burnt to the ground at the orders of Quintilius Varius (Roman legate of Syria in 6-4 BCE) because of a rebellion, and near where 2000 were crucified (see, Jewish War 2.4.3; 2.5.1.71; 2.5.2.75; Antiquities 17.10.9.291; 17.10.10.295). This mass slaughter by the Romans was a generation earlier than the events of Jesus’ crucifixion, but it lurks in the background of this story and adds poignancy to the shattered hopes of the next generation as they walk past the ghosts of these memories: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:21). What good could crucifixion number 2001 possibly bring them?

A Roman road and the ghosts of past crucifixions.

Luke 24: 21 - “We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel.”

[**N**] 13 And so two of them, on that same day, were going towards a village thirty kilometres from Jerusalem named Emmaus, 14 and discussing with each other about all these things that had occurred. 15 And it happened that while they were discussing and arguing, Jesus himself drew near to walk with them, 16 but their eyes were held back from knowing him. 17 And he said to them,

*[J]* “What are these words that you are exchanging with each other as you walk along?”

[**N**] And they stood still, looking gloomy. 18 Then one named Cleopas answered and said to him,

*[C]* “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not yet know the things that have happened there in these days?”

[**N**] 19 And he said to them,

*[J]* “What things?”

[**N**] They said to him,

*[T]* “The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who became a prophet strong in work and word before God and all the people, 20 and how our chief priests and rulers handed him over to secure a death sentence and crucified him. 21 We were hoping that he was about to redeem Israel. But besides all these things, this is the third day since these things happened. 22 And even moreso, certain women from among us astonished us — having been at the tomb this morning 23 and not finding his body — they came telling us that they had seen a vision of angels who say that he is living! 24 And some of those with us went to the tomb and found it just so, exactly as the women said; but they did not see him.”

[**N**] 25 And he said to them,

*[J]* “Oh ignorant ones — and slow of heart to have faith in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and then to enter into his glory?”

[**N**] 27 Then beginning from Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them in all the Scriptures the things about himself.
Consider:

Choose some questions to discuss that interest you — and ask some of your own.

1. Just how far did these two walk? The Greek texts alternate between 60 and 160 stadia (7 miles/11 kilometres, or 18 miles/30 kilometres). Many recent commentators favour the shorter distance because they can’t imagine anyone walking the longer distance twice in one day. Obviously, such commentators haven’t lived in the ‘two-thirds world’ or experienced life without convenient personal or public transport. There are two other sites claiming to be Emmaus that are closer to Jerusalem, but we should be wary of taking short cuts! Calculate how long this journey might take at a good walking pace (three-quarters of a marathon!), and then reflect on doing it all again, at night and uphill all the way back to Jerusalem!!

2. The Gospel accounts of the resurrection show a variety of ways in which followers experience the reality of Jesus’ ongoing presence: through intuition (Lk 24:4–11; Jn 20:8); through ‘flesh and bone’ encounters (Lk 24:36–43; Jn 20:24–29); through visions (Lk 24:23); through mission (Mk 16:7; Mt 28:16–20); through ‘faithful doubt’ (Mt 28:16–20; Jn 20:24–29). Ultimately, in this wonderful story, it was not the warmth of the fellowship they experienced on the road (v.32); not the brilliant exegesis of Scripture by Jesus himself (v.32); but the breaking of bread together in table fellowship (v.30-1 and 35) that enabled them to see their risen Lord. Share with each other the occasions and experiences that have been ‘resurrection encounters’ for you.
3. In v. 34 — who is speaking? Is it the eleven and their friends in Jerusalem, or is it the two who have just returned from Emmaus? If it is the two speaking, does it imply that the companion of Cleopas is Simon? Some have argued for this reading to help clarify the mysterious verse 12. Most assume that Simon had shared his experience with the other ten before the two arrived back (since Simon seems to be numbered with the eleven), and they then tell Cleopas and friend the news. What do you think?

4. A better possibility for identifying the companion of Cleopas might be the suggestion that it was his (unnamed) wife. According to the custom of the day, the wife’s name was not usually given (out of respect) when the husband was named — unless she was of particular significance or higher social status (as some suggest for Prisca/Priscilla and Aquila, for example). What difference might this make to our reading of the story?

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**Words & Phrases**

v. 16: Their eyes were ‘grasped by lack of recognition’! How hard it is to see when we’re not sure what we’re looking for! It is sometimes said to men by their partners: “Have a girl’s look” (when they are struggling to find food in the pantry, socks in the drawer) But if Cleopas and friend are husband and wife, neither a boy’s look or a girl’s look saw this one coming!

v. 17: Were they just sad? The Greek word *sklythropos* does mean ‘serious- or sad-looking’, but with a range of nuances, such as sullenness, gloominess, solemnity, embitterment, depression, sorrow, or melancholy. Which fits best, do you think?

v. 21: Indeed, we are still asking the same question as this — having been told in the first chapters of Luke that this One indeed would redeem Israel! (Lk 1:68; 2:38). How will/did/does this happen? Is it still only a future hope?

vv. 26-7: If only we could have access to these Bible Study discussions! It’s not an easy thing to argue the suffering Messiah/Christ from the Scriptures, but there are some clues: the suffering servant songs, the rejected prophets, the rejection of Wisdom, the Son of Man traditions . . .

v. 30: How is it that the guest becomes the host, and breaks the bread . . . ? These actions (taking, blessing, breaking, giving) suggest the Lord’s Supper (the ‘Eucharist’ or ‘thanksgiving’) — but note that the promise of Lk 22:18 is not broken.
Consequence:

This is where together we wrestle with what the Living Word of God is saying to us today out of our reading and discussions. The questions that follow here may not help — so it would be good to be ready to share some of our own.

1. Our translations often soften the words for ‘discussing and arguing’ (v.15) and ‘exchanging words’ (v.17). Is there a place for ‘vigorous discussion’ in our Church life (and in our married life, if this is about Cleopas and his wife), and if so, how can we find a positive outcome to our ‘arguments’?

2. Have you ever made time for a long walk (for hours) with your partner or close friend to discuss your hopes and dreams — including those that have been shattered? Don’t forget to make time for ‘table fellowship’ before you turn around and walk back!

3. What is the nature of resurrection hope and reality? What is it that inspires these two to hurry back to Jerusalem — even though the shadow of Roman brutality remains for many years to come?

4. Some scholars argue over the nature of the simple meal shared in Emmaus. Can it be the Eucharist/Communion when there is no wine mentioned? Could all meals be regarded as ‘Communion’ or ‘Lord’s Suppers’ — rather than only those shared in worship services? What might we lose, if so? Do we have to use bread and wine — even in those cultures/places that can’t produce either? Reflect on your own community’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper — and on your family meal and ‘grace’ customs. Are there ways we can keep these traditions real and simple and powerful — and focused on the unseen guest/host?