

Beauty from Ashes - Small Group Series for Lent

Introduction.

This series is based on reflections on this passage from Isaiah:

Isa 61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for 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. and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.

These Small Group notes follow the themes in our Sunday services, except that the All Age services are not following this series. So some studies will come after the same theme in the service, and some the week before.

As a church together, we need to face up to the challenges we have had through the pandemic – the loss of connection, loneliness, the loss of members etc.. Lent seems a good time to do this – by taking time to grieve and recognise where we are, perhaps we will be in a better position to move forward positively, together, as a community of hope.

These themes may mean that more time needs to be given for reflection and prayer than perhaps you would normally.

Week 1 (following 6 March service) "A time for Ashes"

Theme: God may lead us into the wilderness – but He is there with us.

Bible reading 1

Deuteronomy 8.1-5, 15-18

Discussion points 1

- If we experience things that aren't nice we may think God is punishing us. Is this likely to be true?
- Why did the Israelites have to go through 40 years in the desert?
- How do we see God providing for them when it was very difficult, and what can we learn from this when times are tough?
- Do you have stories to share of how God provided during the Covid pandemic?

Bible reading 2

Mark 1.9-13

Discussion points 2

- We can even be led by the Spirit into difficulties like Jesus was. If you have experienced this, can you share what happened and what you learnt from it?
- If you do not feel this has happened to you, what do you think your reaction to it would be if it did?
- A thought from Nicky Gumbel: "Sometimes God calms the storm. Sometimes he lets the storm rage and He calms you." Discuss.

Reflections

God is with us, He never wants to see you suffer but He is passionate to see you trust in Him, and learn to pray and praise even when life isn't easy.

Pray that as we head into the rest of the week we can hold onto this.

Pray for those you know who are going through hard times.

Week 2 (following 13 March service) "Beauty within the Ashes"

Theme: In times of grief, wilderness experience, suffering, God is with us. Through Lent, we choose to make things difficult for ourselves – fasting from something, or doing something positive perhaps. In both situations we need to seek for God – hunger and thirst after Him.

Bible reading 1

Luke 4:1-13

Discussion points 1

- God is our comfort and our strength, whether we think he's brought us to a difficult point or whether it's just life. How is this reflected in the Bible passage we have read?
- Can we recognise any parallels between the temptations of Jesus, and how we might be tempted during difficult times, especially when God seems distant?
- What can we learn from Jesus' answers to Satan?

Bible reading 2

Ps 63.1-8

Discussion points 2

- David was also in the desert when he wrote this Psalm. What can we learn from his response to hardship?
- Share with each other how we could use the time of Lent to seek God's face, whether we feel He is there or not.
- Why might it be better if our worship looked very different in such times – more reflective, quieter, simpler, less wordy.

Reflections

Jesus often went away alone to pray, choosing solitude and quietness so He could focus on the Father.

Jesus chose simplicity of life – he owned nothing except the clothes he wore.

Can we make times without distractions to be with God? Can we choose to have times in the day when there is no background TV, radio, social media to distract our minds eg. when doing household chores?

During Lent this year, let us remember to seek God's face. Changing our routines slightly or worshipping more simply can help.

Week 3. (following 20 March service) "The Ashes of Lament"

Theme: We need to allow ourselves to lament, and accept that Christians suffer like everyone else. God cares about how we feel and wants us to be honest with Him, and be patient.

Bible reading 1

Exodus 3:7-10

Discussion points 1

- In these readings, we see God's concern. He rescues His people Israel, but it isn't quick and easy – it gets worse before it gets better. From our knowledge of the story of Israel trying to leave Egypt, what parallels are there with our situation in the pandemic? (eg. decisions made by authority which impact our lives; lack of control of our destiny; arguments over the best way forward...)
- As the people of Israel seek freedom, they have to really trust God (which they mostly fail to do). Are we able to admit this lack of faith in ourselves? Be honest about this with each other – we probably assume others are more faithful than ourselves!

Bible reading 2

John 11:20-29, 32-36

Discussion points 2

- Jesus waits before he goes to see Mary and Martha. Their pain is prolonged, they have no hope and believe Jesus could have saved the situation but didn't come... Did we ever feel like this in the current pandemic?
- There is no suggestion in the scriptures that it was wrong for the people of Israel to lament, or Mary and Martha to complain to Jesus that He had let them down. Why do we seem to feel that Christians shouldn't do this?
- Jesus wept with Mary and Martha. God wants us to be honest with Him, and we need to be more honest with each other. Can we share with each other in ways we feel we have been let down recently?

Reflections

We are not good at talking about, or reflecting on, these kinds of difficult issues. We all experience struggles, fears, doubts, disappointments, anger and hurt. All of us will at some point be faced with the mortality of ourselves and our loved ones. And yet so often we brush these thoughts under the carpet. Can we resolve to be more open and honest with each other?

Be aware that we tend to assume that others are doing better, or riding above their storm, but that is rarely the case. We need empathy and support from each other – an understanding that bad circumstances happen to all of us, and it's not unspiritual to complain, or feel hard done by.

Week 4. (following 27 March service) "The Beauty of Sacrifice"

Theme: There are times when we may need to sacrifice, or accept rejection as Jesus did.

Bible reading

Isaiah 53:1-12

Discussion points

This reading is seen as a prophecy of the crucifixion. It emphasises that Jesus also walked the paths of pain; disconnection; loneliness; abandonment.

- Can you think of other occasions in the Gospels where Jesus had hard times?
- If Jesus himself went through these painful experiences, what does that mean for us?
- In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for the cup to be taken away from Him, but it wasn't. Share times and situations when it felt as though God wasn't answering your prayers.
- Jesus chose to be obedient and suffer. How prepared are we to do what God calls us to, even if it will be hard, or will cost us? Does anyone in the group feel they have done this, and can share about it?
- Should we expect God to ask us to make sacrifices sometimes?
- Have we made sacrifices for the period of Lent? Can we share how that is working out? (be prepared to find out that many of us have failed to keep up our good intentions!)
- Why do we try to make sacrifices during Lent, and what difference does it make?

Reflections

How far are we prepared to make sacrifices for God?

If we believe that He is asking us to make a significant sacrifice, we should test the calling by sharing it with those close to us.

Think about the things that are most precious to you. How much could you give up for God?

Do we have unconscious non-negotiables?

Week 5. (following 3 April service) "Bringing life to the Ashes"

Theme: With God there is always hope in the most hopeless situations

Bible reading 1

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Discussion points 1

- These people weren't just dead – they were dried up bones. What situations do we feel are a lost cause?
- We ourselves can have times when we feel dry, empty, perhaps a bit lost spiritually. Can we share about those times? Have we ever given up hope?
- What was the situation for Israel when this prophecy was given? What does the reading tell us about the plan God has for Israel?
- Most of the people didn't return to Israel for 2 generations. What can that teach us about how long we may have to wait for God to act?
- If God had a plan for Israel, how would we feel in that situation, if God didn't appear to act until our children were old? What does that tell us about our lack of patience and faith?

Bible reading 2

Matthew 4.3-11

Discussion points 2

Jesus has been forty days in the desert fasting. How does He respond to temptation?

What scriptures could we use:

when we are tempted to give up on God?

To encourage us to hope and stay faithful?

This time of temptation in the desert occurred just after the Spirit had come upon Him, and prepared Jesus to start His ministry. What can we learn from this?

Reflections

God's time is not our time – He is outside of time. He can see the whole span of history, our past, present and future. Can we accept that His timing is perfect? This should give us hope for various situations and people we care about.

The pandemic and its aftermath may have damaged various areas of our lives but God can even bring life from the dead. This must give us real hope.

Being without a vicar can make us feel that the church itself is a bit lost, without direction; let's pray for His Spirit to revive us and give us hope.

You may like to listen to the Casting Crowns song "Spirit Wind" which is a great song applying this scripture to our lives.

Here it is on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBJhf1jfEyA>

Week 6. (following 10 April service) "A Crown of Beauty from the Ashes"

Theme: Jesus was the fulfilment of the hope of Israel, and He is our hope now and always

Bible reading 1

Hebrews 11.32-40

Discussion points 1

- The heroes of the Old Testament we read about in Hebrews never saw the day Jesus rode into Jerusalem. They did not know how God's salvation plan for "all the nations" would be fulfilled; they just trusted Him despite the terrible things that happened to them. What can this tell us about trusting God in difficult situations?
- We often think that because God loves us, He will keep us safe and even give us wealth and happiness. Discuss this in the light of the Hebrews passage.

Bible reading 2

Matthew 21.1-11

Discussion points 2

- Jesus must have been aware of the irony of the situation, that He was being praised and honoured just before He would be given up to be crucified. What does this tell us about Jesus?
- How would we have reacted differently in that situation?
- This was God's plan – not that He would be crowned as an earthly King, but through sacrifice would be shown to be King of Heaven. How often do we look at situations from only an earthly viewpoint. How different may our responses be if we see them from God's viewpoint?
- We as His children identify with the crucified Jesus and the risen Jesus. He is the manifestation of Hope, our hope, all hope. As we end this series, discuss how the hope of Jesus makes a difference to our wilderness situations.

Reflections

"Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break." — William Shakespeare, [Macbeth](#)

The purpose of this series has been to give us an opportunity to grieve for the losses and difficulties of the Covid pandemic era, so that we can put them behind us and look forward to the future with hope and resolve to go forward with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

What have you learnt from this series? And how will it make you think differently about Jesus, the church and your circumstances?

In 2 Corinthians 4:8, Paul says this: *"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."*, and in 4:16 *"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. (17) For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (18) So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."*