

Last year Bishop Jeremy Greaves reminded us that from the earliest days of Christianity, faithful people have been gathering to read and discuss the scriptures to try and make sense of them in the light of their experience of the world in which they live. For much of this time there were no experts and these small groups did not depend on the wisdom of a learned theologian or scholar. Each person simply brought their own particular experience and wisdom to the text and then together the faithful would work out the implications of their reading for how they would live.

My hope is, as Bishop Jeremy stated, that these studies can function in much the same way.

While each session has some commentary based on the Collect for the Sunday of each week of Lent, this commentary is not meant to provide the answers and is not to be seen as the only way to understand the text. My hope is that the commentary might be a starting point for reflecting on the Prayer of the Day and the readings, considering how the text might be speaking to each member of the group. These studies are not just about “head knowledge”, they aim to help people with the question, “How we live as Christians at this time and in this place?”

**Before you begin**

It is important that the group leader is familiar with the session before the group meets each week. Read through the material and note anything you might need to prepare in advance. It is OK to bring your own questions to the group or to prepare some extra resources if you think the group would benefit.

Let people know that they will need to bring a pen and some paper. It may be helpful to have a small note book so that insights and other ideas can be recorded. In short this booklet is like a journal. Alternately, people might use a device such as an iPad or phone if they are more familiar with this means of recording.

Make sure the space in which you meet is comfortable. Most sessions ask participants to do some writing. Some may find this easier if they have a table to sit at. Some of the practices might be better experienced if the lighting is dimmed.

COVID guidelines differ in each State and country. It is important that you enquire as to whether refreshments are allowed where you live. If it is OK to provide refreshments, think about how you will undertake this ministry. Sometimes people feel more relaxed with a tea or coffee in their hand at the start. Others like to keep chatting over a cuppa at the end of the session. Also it is important that people with dietary requirements are catered for in the group. People could take turns in bringing biscuits or cake (including simnel cake - See Lent 4).

As you start, ask yourself, “Are there things you can do to set the tone or the mood of the session?” Perhaps, once people have arrived you might play a short piece of music to help group members settle and focus the group in readiness for the “Let’s Kick Start”; the opening section for each week.

**Overview of the Structure of Each Session**

1. “**Let’s Kick Start”** (15 mins). People will be joining the group each week bringing all sorts of dynamics with them such the stress of work, the busyness of family, great joys or deep sorrows – they might be tired, excited, bored or frustrated. In days past this was referred to as the “hidden agenda”. People’s agenda and situation (e.g. being tired) is not the main agenda for the group, but it can impact on the participant’s involvement in the life of the group. “Let’s Kick Start” provides space for people to name some of these things to the rest of the group. I pray that the group is a safe place where things can be share, without judgment. From these sessions a prayer list could be established.
2. Groups are invited to have an empty chair, reminding people to invite others. There is a check list you could use on the grassroots web site – www.grassroots.com.au/lent2021.htm. You will also find a pdf to print off for the “Empty Chair” sign. Place this on the empty chair as a reminder to each participant to seek out another person to invite to the group. We must also remember that each new member of a group will change the nature of the group. You may recall how each new baby changed the nature of the family! The same is true for small groups.

Before anything, even before you pray, it is important to check in with everyone in the group. This is the only time when everyone is required to offer something. To assist people to share, the questions provided may be a helpful starting point. Another approach is to ask the group, “What are some words you could use to describe how you are feeling as we gather this evening/morning?” or “What is one thing that has brought you joy since we last met?” or “Has there been anything in the news that has been on your mind this last week?”

As each person checks in, the group listens without judgment and without commentary or advice. Perhaps the host will note anything that might be usefully added to the opening or closing prayers.

After we have shared using the questions or other issues raised by participants, we then move into “Making the most of Lent - a point to consider”. This includes exploring spiritual disciplines such as fasting or what to give up or take on this Lenten season. While we read the Scriptures, it is important to pray the Scriptures, along with reflecting on how to spend or what to do during Holy Saturday; to name a few spiritual disciplines or practices.

**2. Opening Prayers (5 mins):**

A short piece of music can be played to begin the prayers, so people can focus. Lighting a candle as a symbol of God’s presence or the light of Christ, might be a helpful way of focusing people’s attention. Each week there is short litany followed by the Collect or Prayer of the Week. Also, you might like to gather up some of the things from the “Let’s Kick Start”, during the opening prayer time.

**3. The Reading: (10 minutes)**

A member of the group can read the commentary, then another read Scripture passages. Some people find it helpful read/hear the Scripture text from a different translation.

**4. The Discussion: (40 minutes)**

Read the commentary and discuss a couple of the relevant questions. Please note, you will not have time to discuss all the questions. The questions are only a guide to ongoing discussion.

However, It is important to instigate the magic word ***“Pass”.*** During the discussion or when you are going around the group, it is important that any person can say “pass” if they would prefer not to make a response. The group must honour the person’s wishes. There should be no pressure for a person to respond to questions. This strategy helps people to be more comfortable in the group especially if it is their first time.

Unless the conversation is going wildly “off-track” do not worry too much. It is important to let the conversation go where it will and to be open to the leading of the Spirit. Some of the most valuable “nuggets” are sometimes found in those conversations that seem only tenuously connected to the focus of the study.

**5. Action Plan (15 mins)**

People will experience the sessions differently. For some people the Collect, or the Scripture readings, or a section of the commentary will have resonance. For others it might be making a palm cross, or reflecting on the anointing (page 39) or on the music that was played. Some may become bored or frustrated by what has transpired. The “Action Plan” at the end of the session is a chance to hear and honour all of those different experiences – perhaps there will be hints about how the session might work better the following week.

Similar to the “Let’s Kick Start” at the beginning, participants are invited to reflect on where the group has “travelled” during the session. One way of beginning this time of reflection might be to ask participants, “Is there one particular thought or phrase or word that struck you during the session?” or “Can you share one thing that you will take away from this session?”

**6. Closing Litany and Collect: (5 mins)**

Just as the session began with prayer, so it ends by gathering all that has been discussed and all that has been experienced, in prayer before God.

So may your Lent be a holy and blessed one. It is my prayer that this study will enable you to continue your growth in the Christian faith and at Easter you will be able to say or sing with joy in your hearts on Easter morn, “Christ is Risen; He is risen indeed”