

lentevent

BIBLE STUDY 2018: FAITH IN ACTION



Welcome to Faith in Action – a series of studies for Lent 2018

These studies were originally written by members of churches in the Southern Highlands and collated by Rev Michael Earl of Bowral Uniting Church. They've been adapted for you to use as part of your Lent Event journey this year and include stories about our work with partners who demonstrate these qualities in their own lives.

They may be used to complement the other Lent Event resources from UnitingWorld. The readings don't follow the lectionary readings for 2018, but they focus on different moments in Jesus's life, ending with the story of the crucifixion.

The themes and readings are:

Week 1 Justice	Luke 3: 1-14: John the Baptist prepares the way Justice for the Pacific
Week 2 Hope	Luke 4: 1-13 The temptation of Jesus Changing Climate
Week 3 Love	John 9:1-41 Healing of the blind man Potential amidst poverty
Week 4 Self-Awareness	Luke 22: 24-39: The disciples and Jesus on the mountain How do we stay true to our calling?
Week 5 Hospitality & Care	Luke 10: 38-42 Jesus, Mary and Martha Women, Equality and Family Violence
Week 6 Sacrifice	Matthew 27:11-61: Characters in the crucifixion narrative How do we respond alongside our partners?

Each study follows a slightly different format and has a different author. In general, you may like to ask people to read through the Bible passage before they arrive. You may wish to meet over a meal or simply meet in a home; you may have one leader or share the reading of the leadership notes; you may do the studies alone. However you use the notes, we hope you'll find them useful as a point for reflection and discussion.

Study 1: Justice

A Thought Experiment

You are a middle manager in a multi-national company which helps developing countries build necessary infrastructure. Your company has recently been contracted to build a dam in a poor South American country to increase the fresh water capacity for the capital. It is estimated that the dam will employ 10,000 people for the 5 years of construction and will service 100,000 more with fresh drinking water indefinitely, improving the living conditions across the board. In order for the dam to be built, a number of small villages (totalling around 1,000 people) will be displaced and relocated, causing significant disruption to the affected families and communities. You are also aware that, in order to keep costs as low as possible, your company will pay bottom dollar for the necessary acquisition of the homes and land. Your employer will expect you to tow the company line and publicly support the direction the company takes. You are not sure what the right thing is to do...

Initial Group Reflection

- What issues of 'justice' are raised in this case study?
- What would 'justice' look like in the aftermath of this event (think especially in relation to each person in the incident)?
- How does this situation sit with your sense of 'justice'?
- How might being a Christian influence how you picture justice in this situation?

Bible Focus

Read Luke 3: 10-14 and Luke 6: 27-36

Reflection

Justice for our world is an overwhelming problem and many of us struggle to come to terms with the multiplicity of complex issues that are affecting our world today. Many of us recognize the problems are too big for one person or even a small community to solve, but it does not stop us wanting to see justice established between peoples. This has been demonstrated by people who petitioned the Australian Government to provide aid to African nations suffering during the ongoing famine crisis. In response, governments worldwide – including Australia - did increase aid and South Sudan, in particular, was pulled out of famine in September 2017.

Justice is more than applying penalties and offering benefits for particular actions; it is about living righteously. Justice and righteousness have the same basic root meaning. You cannot have justice unless someone is acting righteously. The Old Testament is quite clear about how to show justice towards one another in our world. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and the Laws of God teach us how to live righteously and justly, encouraging fair actions and fair judgments (Exodus 23: 6, Leviticus 19: 15, Deuteronomy 16: 19). Justice is about loving God and loving your neighbour, not acting selfishly. (Matthew 23: 23) This has global implications.

We live in a world with a population of approximately seven billion people, and over one billion people are living in poverty for one reason or another. Where is the justice for people living on less than a dollar a day, especially when this small percentage of people are consuming less than 2% of

“Justice is more than applying penalties and offering benefits for particular actions.

It is about living righteously.

Justice and righteousness have the same basic root meaning. You cannot have justice unless someone is acting righteously.”

the world's resources? ¹ Justice is only possible if we consider that acts of social justice are about loving our neighbour as we love ourselves. During Lent, when we make our way to the foot of the cross, we might well ask: how does the justice of which the prophets spoke, 'roll down like rivers to the sea'? How does God's justice, forged in the self-emptying of Christ on the cross, become justice in and for the world in which we live?

During a time of political and religious oppression, there was a lone voice calling out in the desert, John the Baptist. John was calling people to repent and be baptized in the River Jordan. The Jewish community were longing for God to send his justice upon the opposing nation, to release the captive Israel. John's cry in the desert was not for the people to fight or rebel against the current government but for the Jews to be a people of justice and righteousness. This was to be by demonstrating a different kind of love as they awaited God's promised salvation. John taught the people to show compassion, mercy, peace, and the righteous love of God. John the Baptist instructed the people, as recorded in Luke 3, to: share your excess with people in need, to ensure you do not take advantage of people financially and to treat people with love, avoiding cruel and oppressive treatment of others. It is in these actions that we demonstrate God's justice, for it is not of the world.

Jesus continued teaching this radical justice (Luke 6: 27-37) by expanding on John's teachings. While we may meet the needs of people in our immediate community, Jesus pushes our actions beyond our comfort zone. Jesus brings to the attention of the listener that it is easy to respond with compassion and generosity towards people who are friendly, but what about those who are our enemies, alien to our culture and political/religious practices? To love the undeserving or unlovable in times of need is challenging. Jesus demonstrated through his actions and words that justice, God's justice, is offered to all people, the Jew and the Gentile.

Jesus engaged this world with a justice of grace, mercy and righteousness. His teaching of the Beatitudes was fresh and challenging, but also bringing hope and comfort to the people of God (Matthew 5). Jesus' teachings and actions demonstrated how the poor and the widow should be treated and supported by society. Jesus called to account those who were acting unjustly and revealed their false acts for what they were.

At the beginning of this study, we considered the famine crisis and the world's reaction. The responses have been mixed but generally a little slow to help, and for decades humanitarian crises responses have failed to recognize the underlying issues that could lead to a more just outcome. A world without justice leads us to a world without order. Fortunately, God has given us a just judge, a Saviour who would bring justice and righteousness into the world. His righteousness, justice, and peace, is matchless. Christ's death on the cross vindicated the existence of humanity. God's justice came at a great price.

The world in which we live is a challenging place and justice does not always prevail, people do not always act righteously. But in Christ we have a hope that moves beyond the here and now, that justice will sweep through this world and bring harmony and peace to all people. May we all be the hands of God's justice, bring hope and peace this Easter in the name of Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

- In what situation would you like to see justice prevail in our world today? What do you think justice looks like in that circumstance?
- What hope does John the Baptist bring to us in his proclamation in the desert?
- In what ways do the teaching and practices of Jesus help you to seek justice in our world?
- Has there been a time when you have acted with or without justice? If you are willing, please share with the group your experience.

¹ <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

Justice in the Pacific.

If you haven't already seen it with your congregation, now is the time to watch the [Week 1 video: 'Together we Change the World'](#) from the Lent Event series, which introduces you to the Lenten journey and our Pacific theme.

When we think of places in the world where people suffer from injustice and a lack of resources, we often think first of Africa, then of parts of Asia. Few of us think of our near neighbours in the Pacific. Yet our Pacific neighbours live with significant comparative disadvantage – small populations in remote islands with little economic power; vulnerable to environmental disasters and climate change; girls and women often denied equality and safety; and patchy access to safe drinking water, and health - particularly in parts of Papua New Guinea where rates of HIV and AIDS are sky high.

The Uniting Church in Australia has a long history of relationships with Pacific people. Our Pacific congregations are strong here in Australia; many of our members have worked there, supporting communities and sharing the love of Christ. Christians across Fiji, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tonga consider the UCA their 'big brother' and we are welcomed throughout the islands. Across the Pacific, 98% of people identify as Christian and faith is a central part of identity, culture. Because of the significance of the church to society and culture, the work and teachings of the Pacific churches are powerful agents of change. Across the Pacific, churches care for women, train advocates against violence, put clean water and sanitation into remote communities, and help protect against disease.

One of the greatest areas of injustice the Pacific faces is the impact of a changing climate. Pacific people use only a tiny percentage of the world's resources and because of relative poverty, have only a fraction of the capacity to protect themselves from the impact of natural disaster. Yet they're directly threatened by changes to water temperature, the rate and severity of cyclones, storms and drought patterns. While Australians and other westernised communities are shocked by the severity of bushfires, floods and other events, most have the ability to protect ourselves from the fall out – we have insurance, the ability to quickly rebuild, and the resilience to replace income. Pacific people, simply due to the lottery of their birthplace, are often literally wiped out by these events. Their ability to bounce back is often limited after their homes are destroyed or their fishing and farming livelihoods ruined. They're resilient people, but the depth of their resources simply doesn't match ours. We'll look at this matter of justice for the Pacific more in following weeks.

Please pray for our Pacific neighbours – for their strength of character, their commitment to their faith and our long legacy of relationship together.

Pray for each other as you begin this Lenten journey of discovery together. Pray for open minds, hearts and hands, and for the flame of justice to be lit.

Study 2: Hope in a Complex World

Take some time to share one surprising thing about yourself with another person.

Finish the conversation with this prayer shared together:

Loving God, entering this time of hopeful seeking, we pray you would make yourself known to us in powerful ways. In our living today, may we look to your glorious future and seek to share the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with all, so as to bring hope to the world. Amen.

• • •
**Luke shows us
Jesus at the
beginning of his
ministry,
confronted with
three clear facts:
the world's need
for food,
a value system to
guide the actions
of the world's
people and
for people to
exercise power
responsibly.**
• • •

Initial Group Reflection

- What do you hope to get out of this Lenten Studies journey?
- Would you say that you are a hopeful person? Why/not?
- How many of you have travelled to another country?
- Name some of the differences you experienced just being in another country.
- Was travelling easy?
- Did you know anyone in the country you visited before going there? What was encouraging to you about your experience and what gave you concern?
- As a group, name some of the aspects of life in the world which make it a complex place.

Bible Focus

Hope is about looking forward to something. By definition hope is future orientated in the sense that it anticipates a time and place where things will be different. For Christians, this hope has always been centred in Jesus Christ and the coming of God's Kingdom. Jesus has brought the future into the present by living and dying in our world at a particular point in history. We have seen the vision of God's ultimate hope in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Now, we begin to reflect on the Gospel passages which reveal what this hope we hold to is like. Of course, this entails thinking and reflecting on the person and work of Jesus and how our lives are caught up in what God is doing.

Read Luke 4: 1-13

Reflection

Chapters 1 – 3 of Luke's Gospel introduce the 'orderly account' of the ministry of Jesus. Luke traces the story from the birth of John, who introduces Jesus to the readers, from his birth up to his visit to Jerusalem at age 12. The story covers his baptism by John and the genealogy of Jesus from Joseph back to Adam. Much of this is complex in itself, but Luke wants us to understand that this Jesus did not just happen to start preaching! He comes as one, like no other, in whose life the Holy Spirit is at work forming who he is and who will introduce us to a new way of seeing people - turning the tables on the value systems of his day, and bringing the Good News of God's love for all people.

Now Chapter 4 shows us Jesus preparing for the ministry for which he has been sent. At its very beginning he is confronted with three clear facts: the world's need for food, the need for a value system to guide the actions of the world's people, and the world's need for people to exercise power responsibly. In each case the 'temptation' frames the picture for us: bread from stones, ethics in decision making verses 'the ends justify the means', and the use of power for the common good. In each case, Jesus declares that God's way is fundamental to his understanding of what he has come to do. No short cuts! No easy solutions! A new way has to be revealed for this world to work, a way that

God intended in the beginning but which has become distorted by human sin.

How simple it would have been to turn stones into bread! In a very shallow way that would have met the immediate needs of some people. When you consider the story of the feeding of the 5000 also told by Luke, it is not that Jesus is against meeting people's needs, but rather that he sees a longer span of time than the 'immediate' and the 'now'. He could not let short sighted, spectacular feats-feats which might impress on a short-term basis but which would have no eternal power- dictate how he would be. He was not a magician looking for easy tricks. In the same way no popularity demonstrations would ever achieve the work he had come to do. That would never provide the 'way' that he had come to reveal, nor achieve the new relationship with God that was to be the central focus of his ministry. In the story, the devil represents the forces of the world which continue to pull on us every day, seeking to pull Jesus away from his fundamental mission. Remembering that this all happens at the beginning of his ministry, imagine the consequences if Jesus had gone over to the devil's (and the world's) way of thinking? There is hope for us here both in seeing Jesus' different way of being and in recognizing that evil can be resisted. The rest of Jesus' ministry and most especially his death on the cross and resurrection will show us explicitly how evil is resisted and hope born. It is not through worldly power, but the divine power of sacrifice for others.

Discussion Questions

- How does this text speak of hope in a complex world for you?
- Reflect especially on the nature of Jesus' temptations in relation to food, ethical action, and the use of power. What makes finding hope in the world complex?
- What temptations remain for Christians?
- How does Jesus' example help us overcome them?
- How does hope relate to the bigger issues of our time like climate change, poverty, extremism, war, and migration?

Spiritual Action

Choose a particular thing you really enjoy (be it coffee or chocolate or eating out or buying books) and 'fast' from that practice for the next five weeks. Save the money you might have spent and decide in the group to put the money saved collectively to the work of UnitingWorld. Every time you 'miss' the thing you enjoy and save the money, say a prayer for a part of the world which is particularly in need.

The Church brings hope in Tuvalu.

[Watch the Week 2 video: 'Faith in a Changing Climate'](#)

The Uniting Church works with thousands of people throughout Tuvalu, Kiribati and Fiji who find themselves left vulnerable because of natural disaster, drought or inability to grow crops on land once fertile. Many of them face having to relocate or live in homes regularly flooded by king tides. No matter what your views on the causes of this situation worldwide, the fact remains that natural disaster strikes hardest those who are most vulnerable. In the midst of this, the church is a beacon of hope, providing not just a spiritual understanding of where God might be found in the midst of suffering, but practical resources - training of leaders, counselling, disaster planning and preparation, a physical shelter in the storm, advocacy and networking for future planning, and practical assistance in the event of disaster.

The church in the Pacific literally provides 'wrap around services' for people in need. When we visited the repair work underway in communities in remote parts of Fiji where Cyclone Winston made landfall last year, people told us that the church buildings were the first the community wanted to repair because the church was the 'light on the hill', which gave a community its sense of purpose, hope and dignity.

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways is your own congregation a 'light on the hill' in your community?
- Would your church be the first place your town rushed to repair in the event of a natural disaster?
- Why or why not? What are the differences in the ways that the church is regarded in Australian society as compared to Pacific society?
- How do you believe the church can regain its mantle in Australia as a beacon of hope, and what is your own community doing to regain that mantle?

Please pray for our Australian church and for our Pacific neighbours that we might find ways to be hope to our communities. Pray especially for those who face natural disaster both here and in the Pacific.

Study 3: Love and Consequences

Opening Worship Time

Take some time to gather and settle together.
A prayer is offered by a group member.

Opening Discussion

• • •
...love is so much more than feelings. It is about the worth, dignity, purpose and humanity of every person as seen through God's eyes. ...in his healing of the blind man, we catch a glimpse of the boundary crossing love of God... the deeper personhood of humanity in Jesus.
• • •

Have you reflected on what you shared last week? Have any new insights emerged in your reflection?

Read John 9: 1 - 41

What are your impressions of this text?
What unsettles you? What inspires you? What challenges you?

In our modern time, we are sometimes given the impression that love is really about sentimental feelings; a 'smoochy feeling that comes with buttered popcorn', as theologian Rick Lischer once lamented.² We get this impression from film and television particularly. In 1994 a quite famous movie called *Four Weddings and a Funeral* was almost entirely based on this idea and its theme song *Love is All Around* actually articulated it explicitly: 'I know I love you, I always will, my mind's made up by the way that I feel'. Even a little thought reveals just how problematic an idea this is. Our feelings fluctuate all the time. We don't always feel patient or kind to one another; sometimes indeed, it's exactly the opposite. If love is primarily a feeling, it's in big trouble, and so are we.

This is really quite a modern notion. The way the Bible speaks about love, it is seen much more as an act of the will. When, in his famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul speaks of love, he uses

the word (agape) which speaks of the deep, self-giving love of God – love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast.

This is the same root word John uses in chapter 3:16 where he writes, '*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*' And the same word used in the first letter of John chapter 4:18 which says, '*perfect love drives out all fear*'. In each of these contexts, love is pictured as something far removed from a 'feeling'. Rather it is seen more as commitment, an obedience, a hopeful covenant of care for others which is central to the life of God and the walk of faith.



² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bYzQhOr-o0&t=2638s

If we observe the nature of love in Jesus' going to the cross and remember that in the garden, seeing what was ahead he cried out to God, 'Take this cup from me.', but carried on, we get a glimpse of the steadfastness of true love which is way beyond fleeting feelings.

As we reflect on the story in John 9 of the man born blind, we see Jesus enacting the deep love of God in two distinct, though inseparable, ways. Love and healing are two signs of the Kingdom in John's Gospel. Here, the two are brought powerfully together, as they will be again later on in the story of Lazarus. The first act of love is the healing itself. The man has never seen; thus he has lived in a world of complete darkness all his life. Darkness is indeed all he knows. In the face of this tragedy Jesus declares again (see Ch 8:12), '*I am the light of the world.*' (v5), and brings sight to the man, thus opening him up to the world of light. Jesus liberates the man from his prison of darkness and literally gives him the gift of sight. On its own, this healing sign tells us what Jesus is like and so what God is like. In God's Kingdom no-one is left behind; the lame walk, and the blind see; such is God's great love for all.

But there is more to this story. Not only does Jesus override the physical impairment of the man, he completely overturns the social stigma to which the man has been subject all his life. The physical darkness he has lived in is mirrored by the darkness of social exclusion and isolation on account of his disability. In the ancient world (and indeed in many contexts still today) physical ailments were thought to reflect spiritual deficiencies or sinfulness. We can see this in the disciples' question to Jesus, '*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*' (v2). They assume that there's a link between physical impairment and moral impairment. Sometimes, of course, our choices do have consequences (think of the detrimental effects of smoking for instance), but Jesus rejects the assumption that underlies the disciples' question. This man is a child of God. And incredibly his blindness, long thought of as a punishment for some undisclosed sinfulness, will be the conduit through which God's glory will be displayed. The darkness that has surrounded him on every level will be shattered by the light of the world; such is God's love for him and for all.

So we see in this extraordinary healing story that love is so much more than feelings. It is about the worth, dignity, purpose, and humanity of every person as seen through God's eyes. The way the world felt towards the man born blind, even Jesus' closest followers- the disciples, could be characterized as dismissive and judgmental. Jesus sees it differently. And in his movement towards man, and his healing of him, we catch a glimpse of the boundary crossing love of God. God's covenant love for his people digs down underneath societal prejudices into the deeper personhood of humanity in Jesus. Jesus joins us on earth and walks with us on the way, bringing light into the darkness of our lives. The blind man is healed and can see physically, but more importantly, he sees Jesus for who he is, the deliverer of God's love to the world. This is John's purpose; and we are called also to see rightly in faith.

Discussion Questions

- What insights have you obtained about God and love from this session?
- How might it help you to grow in your faith and discipleship?
- What kind of person, and in what situation, do you find it most easy to overlook shared humanity, forget love and judge too harshly?

Love in action: behind the holiday romance

[Watch the video for Week 3: 'Education for Change'](#)

As one of Australia's favourite holiday destinations, many of us think of Fiji with great fondness. The people are incredibly warm and friendly; the atmosphere is warm, laid back and safe. In this context, it's hard to imagine that more than 30% of the population live in poverty. Poverty has many causes, but one is that so many families live in remote and rural areas – both on the main island and in outlying island areas – and the climate no longer supports them to live from the land as they once did. Housing is extremely basic and with the increase in major storms (Winston, Pam and Tomas have all devastated the Pacific in the last few years), more and more people end up in the regional and city areas hoping for a better life.

They find themselves instead living in 'squatter' or 'informal' settlements without access to good sanitation, electricity or other resources. Their children may attend primary school but few are able to go on to higher education or find reasonable employment. Fiji is a largely harmonious society, with Fijian Indians and indigenous Fijians living happily together, and the main religions split between Christianity (60%), Hinduism and Muslim. However political instability and corruption have held back progress for the country economically. Many jobs are found in the tourism industry, but profits go back offshore as most large resorts aren't locally owned. As a result, inequality is on the increase. In this context, the local church is about learning to see potential in all people, no matter who they are and where they're from, and to think strategically about how to create long term change.

In the settlement where Sivo and her local church team minister, for example, providing school resources is an important part of being a beacon of hope in the local community.

Without education, options for these families are seriously limited. Yet as one young woman who had been supported throughout her schooling and into university told us, the church was also there with love and encouragement, especially for her spiritual growth. "They always taught me to look to the Bible and to Jesus," Anisha told us. "My mum and my church were there for me always after my dad died. They were the biggest thing in helping me believe I could make it out of here, that university wasn't just for rich children."

The church in Fiji is walking the fine line between offering practical assistance as a concrete expression of the love of God and speaking directly about this love. It's not always a balance we find easy to get right – some would say especially so in the Uniting Church.

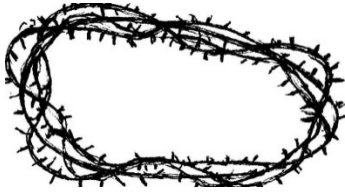
Discussion Questions

- What has been your experience of God's love in 'word and action' throughout your life? How do you find they relate to one another?
- Who do you have in your life right now that not only needs physical help but also emotional or spiritual love/help? Which do you find it easier to give?

Please pray for our friends in Fiji and in other parts of the Pacific where the church is providing not just practical support but the encouragement of the love of Christ, lifting people to their full potential.

Study 4: Self Awareness

Luke 22: 24-39

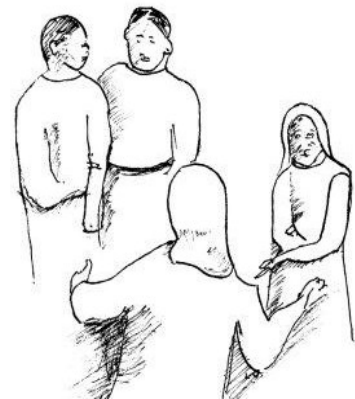


Preparation: Read through the passage noting important themes/words/ideas. Observe how Luke weaves his narrative around the central images/themes of the Easter story and how this passage fits in its narrative context.

Structure: There are three fairly clear sections in this reading. In each there is a problem, perhaps even a dispute among the disciples, and in each Jesus brings them sharply back on track. In the first, vs 24-30, we see a dispute about greatness. In fact, it is worse than that – the dispute emerged among the individual disciples as to who was the greatest, second only to Jesus of course! In other words, who had the most clout in the little inner group?

In the second section, vs 31-34, Jesus clearly sees deeply into Peter's weaknesses. Perhaps Peter thought that his assertion that he was prepared to go fearlessly with Jesus to prison or to death, put him a cut above the others. Whatever the case, the disciples' continuing debate concerning their own status and power was missing the point. Jesus had shown this. It was neither their own accomplishments, nor greatness in others' eyes, that would gain them a place in God's kingdom. Rather it was Christ's achievements and blessings which he shared with them. Although they didn't seem to understand it, the reality was that greatness, as Jesus would show, would come by giving oneself away for others; it would come through humility not boasting. And in the third section, vs 35-39, the disciples come back to reality when Jesus points out that when they were sent out without a purse, bag, or sandals, they had in fact lacked nothing. Were they ready to go? Practically speaking, it seems so; spiritually, not quite.

Placing the Readings in a modern framework: When we look at these readings and try to appropriate the issues they raise into a modern context, we quickly see that nothing much has changed. Just like the disciples, the perceptions we have of ourselves are often deluded. The odd thing though is that, while we would all agree that deception is wrong, so often we deceive ourselves by sustaining our own self-delusional attitudes. The reality is that often we don't want to search deeply for the truth, we prefer to live with our illusions; sometimes they are more comfortable. We think we already know all there is to know and see all there is to see. Perhaps we're worried about what the truth might expose. Perhaps sometimes, like the disciples, we're not really aware of how misguided we are. Perhaps we are much more likely to act



according to the principles – ‘Sounds good, must be right!’ or ‘this is easier, so I’ll stick with it’. In doing so, we confuse the truth with our broken perspectives. We are self-delusional.

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways do we delude ourselves in terms of our faith and practice?
- Are there things which aid our self-delusion in this regard? What might they be?
- Do you feel that leaders, in the church and elsewhere, often exhibit self-delusion?
- How does the story of Jesus, and particularly the events of Easter, break through our self-delusions?
- In what ways might we observe when we are breaking out of our self-deluded mode and really following in Jesus’ way?

Asking the hard questions of ourselves: how easy is it to “live simply” and for others?

[Watch the video for Week 4: The Power of Partnership](#)

Alexandra’s story might be familiar to some of you. Perhaps you have a story a little like it. Perhaps you too have had a personal experience that changed your perceptions; you became convicted and wanted to live differently.

Discussion Questions:

- Who helps hold you to account and asks you the hard questions about the gap between your values and your lifestyle? Do you have any safeguards you put in place to stay true to your values? (for example, attending a small group regularly, setting yourself goals, having a spend limit on something you really enjoy like clothing.)
- If you were to assess your diary and your credit card statement, what do you think it would reveal about the way you spend your time and your money? How does this measure up against what you believe your values to be?
- Spend some time praying for each other as you think about ways to genuinely live with simplicity and generosity. Perhaps as a group you may be able to set some goals together about generosity, simplicity and giving.

Study 5: Hospitality and Care

Luke 10: 38-42

Take time to read the story aloud together, and in pairs discuss the following questions.

Discussion Questions:

- What does the story tell us about the characters and their relationships with each other?
- Martha welcomes Jesus as a guest. What do you think this meant in the culture and day? Was this a normal occurrence?
- Martha is clearly upset with Mary. Why? Is she justified in her mood and behaviour?
- Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens. Would this have been expected to happen in this culture? Who would normally take this role?
- Which character do you feel the most affinity with?

As a group, discuss the following.

If Martha was already upset, why do you think Jesus responds the way he does?

Do you think this story is about prioritising one role (the spiritual/scholar vs the homemaker) over another?

Read Luke 10:1-37 and Luke 11: 1-8. These stories help put this incident in context.

When Jesus sent out the seven (Luke 10), he instructed them not to take provisions with them but to depend on the hospitality of those in the towns who welcome them. Hospitality is stressed by Jesus. In 11:5-8, Jesus tells the story of a friend who refuses hospitality to another in need. Again, hospitality is emphasised. In between these two incidents is the story of hospitality found in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Bearing this in mind, why would Jesus rebuke Martha for her hospitality?

In short, he doesn't. But it's more than simply preparing a meal and serving guests, as Martha does. It's about being there and truly present for the guests.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes: "Martha's distraction and worry leave no room for the most important aspect of hospitality – gracious attention to the guest..."

Jesus' criticism highlights the need for those who are being hospitable to get their priorities right.

To discuss: In the Pacific, sitting with and being among people, listening, talking and truly being present is a real feature of hospitality. It's one of the ways we are often blessed when we spend time with our Pacific partners. How can we take more time to truly be among people without the worry and distraction of 'entertaining'?

Gender roles inverted

There's more to the story. Earlier in the chapter Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God being near. This kingdom works in ways that are counter-cultural, inverting norms and expectations. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan is the hero - the model of religious faith - and the religious leaders are the villains. This is an inversion of the expected piety of the day. In our text, Mary assumes the role of the man by sitting at Jesus' feet to listen to teaching and inverts the long-held tradition of men sitting and listening to Jewish rabbis.

As Craddock says "Rabbis did not allow women to sit at their feet, that is, to be disciples. However, Luke has no problem with women being numbered among the disciples." This is the nature of the Kingdom of God.

To discuss: In cultures where women are typically assigned roles within only the family and home,

how radical do you think this teaching might be? How radical do you imagine it was for the early Christian church to allow women to be numbered among the disciples of a Jewish teacher/preacher?

[Watch the video for Week 5: 'Raising her Voice'](#)

In Pacific cultures, efforts have been made for many years to raise the status of women by western human rights activists and feminists. But because of the deeply Christian nature of the culture, it's actually stories like these in the Bible that hold far more power. Today's study is based upon one of a series of Bible studies prepared by Pacific theologian Rev Dr Cliff Bird. It's being used extensively, and with explosive impact, throughout the Pacific. While culture and biblical teaching have traditionally emphasised the submissive nature of women, studies like these that show Jesus including, empowering and enhancing the status of women are giving new life to the ministry of both women and men and through them to the entire nation.

Powerful male leaders have openly wept as they acknowledge how poorly they've understood the Scriptures and how much this, combined with of a culture of patriarchy, has allowed violence toward women and children to go unchallenged. From Papua New Guinea to Vanuatu, they're stepping up to change, offering more leadership opportunities to women in theological college, within the church and within the community. Yet throughout the Pacific, as everywhere, progress is slow and frustrating, dogged by a lack of resources.

To discuss:

In Australia, the role of the church has also been questioned recently in terms of the ways biblical teaching contributes to inequality and domestic violence. How do you think your local church does in terms of creating opportunities for women to thrive? Given that White Ribbon reports one in four children have been exposed to domestic violence and that on average, one woman per week in Australia is killed by a former partner, have you any particular supports in place either for women or families who may be vulnerable to violence in the home? How do you think genuine acts of hospitality can contribute to caring for people in our community who may be vulnerable to violence?

<https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/understand-domestic-violence/facts-violence-women/domestic-violence-statistics/>

Please pray: For families everywhere, but especially for our sisters in the Pacific who experience violence far higher than anywhere else in the world. Pray that as we learn from our own experiences, we would be moved and motivated to share the opportunities and resources we have with our neighbours.

Study 6: Sacrifice

Pastor Frank Moore

Jesus and Sacrifice, Crucifixion and Resurrection,
the Heart of the Gospel

Introduction:

The story of the death and resurrection of Christ sits central in the Christian faith. It is 'the heart of the Gospel'. Take some time briefly at the start sharing with each other how, if at all, 'sacrifice' has been a part of your understanding of Christ's death. An agreed 'theory' or 'model' of the 'atonement' (the making right of the relationship between God and humanity through Christ's death) has never been formalized by the Christian faith, though it is a part of Christian understanding that has caused considerable debate over the centuries. Given that 'sacrifice' is at base about healing the rift between God and humanity, about God drawing near, how does this relate to how we understand the 'atonement' of Christ?

Do:

Read Matthew 27: 11 - 61

Look:

The power of the good news to convince and inspire us has not faded - or has it? As a scientist I might say, "Let's do something different – something quite different – and see what happens".

Let's do something counter-intuitive and see what happens.

Let's focus on the characters on the edge of the story. Let's look. Perhaps through such an approach subtle aspects of 'sacrifice' might emerge we have previously not noticed.

Think - Wrestle:

Well? Can we categorise these characters on the edge of the story? At first glance, it seems that there is almost a time-line present and that there are seemingly pairs or groups of characters on the edge of the narrative.

There are the betrayers:

Peter and Judas.

There are the powerful and corrupt: Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate.

There are those involved accidentally:

Barabbas and Simon of Cyrene.

There are the two condemned criminals.

There are women and a Centurion.

And the final characters:

Joseph of Arimathea, and the Roman Guards.

“At last we begin to feel as if there is some evidence that, amongst all the crowds following this journey, there was a tiny but significant group of people prepared to make sacrifices for Christ.”

1. Let's look at the betrayers, Peter and Judas

Consider their membership of the Twelve, their presence at the Last Supper, their betrayal, their response when their discipleship was tested, and their later regret.

2. Let's look at the conspirators

Trumped up charges by Caiaphas and his co-conspirators clearly show an agenda was at play here. The outcome was predetermined, and their scheming only needed pretence of evidence. Pilate's primary job was keeping peace, and this he attempted, until Caiaphas' direct involvement stirred up the crowd. . Pilate's wish to calm the crowd eventually deferred to the crowd's passions rather than the truth, that Jesus was innocent. Pilate washes his hands of the matter. Their conspiracy is a clear reminder of the political machinations surrounding Jesus' death.

3. Let's look at those accidentally involved

The paths of a condemned criminal, Barabbas and an innocent sojourner from abroad unexpectedly cross as they are conscripted. One escapes his judgement and gains his freedom, which no doubt was a welcome outcome. The other, Simon of Cyrene, could not have anticipated and may well have been horrified at being commissioned to assist in a crucifixion.

4. The condemned bandits

The two bandits surely must have been found guilty of serious crimes more serious than mere theft to have been condemned to crucifixion. Yet even they joined with the crowds mocking Jesus. This is almost an extreme reflection of the events on Palm Sunday when the indications are that the crowds believed Jesus was not guilt free and that he deserved shame on the cross.

5. The witnesses to the end

It seems that Jesus was not wholly bereft of support. Yes! Even right to the very end the dedicated women persevered and took responsibility for caring for the body and tending to the burial needs. Although Jesus was essentially deserted by the disciples, Joseph of Arimathea provided a temporary place for Jesus' body. One lone Centurion, a representative of Rome, a required witness of Jesus' identity and tortuous execution, watched on as he had almost certainly done at many crucifixions. And yet, on this one occasion, a revelation occurred, and he recognised who Jesus really was: God's son.

Discussion Questions:

- The theme of 'sacrifice' is a constant background in the crucifixion events. Yet as we see, Matthew is more interested in simply telling the story. Through the interactions of the characters, especially the 'supporting cast', what elements of 'sacrifice' can you see here? Try not to superimpose thoughts from other places onto Matthew's account; rather seek to identify how it might be that later writers and thinkers came to see sacrifice as connected to the crucifixion narrative.
- How is it helpful to our faith to consider the approach and reactions of the 'supporting cast' of characters through the crucifixion narrative?
- Jesus' crucifixion, central to the Easter story, tends to elicit as many different reactions today as it did back then. Think of some of the experiences you've had, or seen, or heard, of people reacting to the story. What were they like? How do you live as a person of faith amid these contrasting voices? What are your responsibilities as a follower of Jesus?

Act:

Being a Christian is not always easy. Sometimes you find yourself in situations where you feel under pressure because of what others think or say. Many in the 'supporting cast' of the crucifixion story were 'under pressure' and responded in different ways. Consider how you might respond next time you're 'under pressure' as a Christian. What might you say? How might you respond? Try and imagine that in those circumstances God calls you to be as much a follower of Christ as when there's little pressure.

[Watch the final video: 'The Road Ahead'](#)

To discuss together:

- What particularly stands out to you from this call to action from the Uniting Church's International Partnership Agency?
- What moments from the life of the Bible study together have been particularly memorable? Do you feel that you've learnt more about your own faith as well as more about the life and witness of our church family in the Pacific?
- What particular challenges and encouragements do you want to take forward into the new life of Resurrection, beyond Easter?