

Session 1: The Greatest Story of All Time

Featured Bible Passages

- **Matthew 24:14**
- **1 Corinthians 9:14**
- **Mark 16:15**

Summary

This session explores the story of Jesus and how evangelism is rooted in the resurrection. It aims to encourage you to think about how the first disciples heard and told Jesus's story and what that means for evangelism today. It also features an interview with Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury.

This session is based around Chapter 1 of Hannah Steele's book *Living His Story*. A featured passage is below, but you are encouraged to read the whole chapter as the questions often reference the book.

Featured Passage, from Chapter 1 of *Living His Story*

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a story. It is a story about God that can be told and recited, studied and analysed, debated and discussed. Robert McKee is a lecturer in storytelling who has coached many Hollywood screenwriters and he says this is about our sense of connection with the idea of stories: 'Our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the pattern of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience.' We show this hunger through the stories that we tell of our lives, often using a narrative to describe how our day has been. When we meet someone for the first time, we tend to get to know them through recounting experiences we have had rather than presenting a list of facts.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a story, but it is quite unlike any other story we will ever encounter. In fact it is not something that we simply hear and understand but a reality in which we live and find our sense of belonging. His story is the living story that makes sense of all the other stories in our lives.

On the first Easter Sunday morning the women set off for the tomb, taking with them spices that they had prepared for Jesus' dead body. They thought that Jesus' story had come to an end. Peering into the tomb these women began to grasp that something in the fundamental structure of the world had changed. Though they did not fully realise this at that moment, they had seen into a world where death was no longer the final frontier, where sin did not get the last word. They glimpsed a new world where resurrection is possible and where death is defeated. To the other disciples this announcement initially sounded unbelievable, so much so that they had to check it out for themselves. What these disciples discovered that first Easter morning was that the Jesus story was far from over; in fact, it was only just beginning.

The gospel is the good news of the risen Jesus. It is the narrative which stands at the centre of human history and upon which the Christian faith is built.

The good news of the risen Jesus is the story we are called to pass on to others. We must be reminded once again of why the good news is really good news for those around us. We need to learn not only to say what Jesus did but to communicate in the way that Jesus did.

As witnesses, one of our roles is to connect this story with the stories of those that we meet. Our job is not to change the story to try and make it fit better with contemporary values. Our role is to help people to see its relevance and significance to them. We do this in a number of ways, through speaking of our own story and talking of the difference that Jesus makes here and now. We do it through connecting the gospel with the stories that shape our cultural landscape, which so often point to the gospel but which we can often fail to see. We do it through listening to others and finding points of connection. We do it through prayer and through living out the story in our character and actions.

Video

For this session, there will be a video interview between Hannah Steele and Archbishop Justin Welby, discussing the Archbishop's experience with evangelism and storytelling. This video will be available from **8th February 2021**. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

Study Notes

- Evangelism has come to be a word with a lot of specific connotations and is often misrepresented – rather than trying to convert people to our way of thinking, evangelism should be about inviting people to take part in God's story. We need to learn not just to say what Jesus did, but to communicate in the way Jesus did. (Pages 6-11)
- The term evangelist only appears three times in the Bible. The word that is used much more often is 'witness', and the first disciples were all called to be Jesus' witnesses. There are people with a natural gift for evangelising and preaching in public, but as disciples we are all called to be witnesses to the power of Jesus in our own lives. (Pages 13-14)
- Most people start attending church because of personal invitation from friends and family. Evangelism should be invitational by nature, but sometimes we place too much focus on an invitation to church when it should be an invitation to Jesus – even if it's just an invitation to start asking questions. (Pages 15-18)
- As witnesses, our job is to connect the story of the gospel with the stories of those around us, and to show them that it is relevant and significant to them. We need to be imaginative with our evangelism to find new ways of making that connection. (Pages 25-26)

Discussion Questions

1. How did you first come to hear Jesus' story? How did his story help you to make sense of your own?
2. What are the fears or concerns that hold you back from evangelism? Has this chapter made you think differently about them?

3. We've heard that personal invitation is still the most effective form of evangelism – who first invited you to the church and into the story of God? How did they do it? What can you learn from the people that helped you on your journey of faith?
4. How can you connect the story of the gospel to people in your local community?

Session 2: Catching Up with God

Featured Bible Passages

- Mark 1:15
- Luke 15:7
- 2 Corinthians 5:14
- Luke 14:15-24

Summary

This session lays out God's mission in the world and our involvement in that mission. Our role is to respond to what God has initiated and to partner with the Holy Spirit. The session aims to increase your awareness of what God might be initiating in your life and your confidence to join in. It also features a video interview. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

This session is based around Chapter 2 of Hannah Steel's book *Living His Story*. A featured passage is below, but you are encouraged to read the whole chapter as the questions often reference the book.

Featured Passage

Jesus himself told a story about an urgent and compelling invitation. In Luke 14.15–24 we read the story of a man who prepares a lavish banquet. But on the day when his guests are supposed to arrive, one by one they make their excuses not to attend. Angered by this response, the master instead commands his servant to go into the town and bring in anyone he can find, including those who are not normally invited to such prestigious gatherings. Parables such as these would have been shocking to Jesus' listeners, particularly the religious who considered themselves safely on the list of those invited. Through these parables, Jesus asks who are the recipients of this good news and suggests that it is not the prestigious and important people, those who simply assume they are invited. Jesus' extraordinary kingdom prioritized the poor, the neglected, those who didn't think they stood a chance.

The parable of the banquet, like those of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son in the following chapter of Luke, reveal God's heart for those who are not yet part of his kingdom. Central to the notion of evangelism is this simple yet profound theological truth: God loves. Any understanding of evangelism that takes its starting point from anywhere else can so easily become coercive, manipulative or purely pragmatic. The overarching narrative of Scripture is that God loves people. Evangelism, then, finds its ultimate motivation not in the crisis of a church in decline that needs to act in order to prevent its own extinction. Evangelism is always only and ever because God is love. Our witnessing, therefore, is only ever in response to the invitation that God has already made. As I discovered that day at the hairdresser, my role as a witness was to follow up and speak clearly of the invitation God was already making.

In theological terms, this conviction is often expressed as *missio Dei*, a Latin phrase meaning 'the mission or sending of God'. This concept was articulated at a conference on mission in 1932 by the theologian Karl Barth. This signified a move away from understanding mission as something that the church did in response to God's action, and instead reimagined mission as rooted primarily in God's being and his intention in the world. The term *missio Dei* was later formed and identifies God himself as the initiator of mission rather than the Church or any other Christian organization. While mission is far broader than evangelism and encompasses the scope of the Church's presence and action in

the world, such as social justice and environmental concern, the call upon the Church to witness is an integral part of its mission. Understanding mission as primarily rooted in the nature and purpose of God means also that evangelism is not our clever idea or a calculated response to try and boost church membership during a period of decline. Evangelism finds its rationale and origin in the love of God for the world, and this theme bubbles over in many of Jesus' parables.

The three lost things (a sheep, a coin and a son) collectively focus on the one who is seeking. In turn, the shepherd, the woman and the father seek diligently and sacrificially for the one that is lost. First, the shepherd leaves behind the 99 that are safe (by all accounts a high-risk strategy) and looks for the one that is lost. The woman, though she has nine other coins, is not prepared to wait for the natural light of morning but uses valuable resources to search thoroughly until the one missing is found. Finally, the father, whose son has severed his familial ties and set off for an independent life, glimpses his son in the distance and runs towards him, silencing the prodigal's cries of regret and remorse with joyful celebration.

In these stories Jesus teaches the religious leaders, who chastise him (as they do on several occasions) for his questionable choice of dinner guests, that God's love is for the lost, the least and even the lawbreaker. In so doing, he challenges them that they should not be surprised that the Messiah acts in this way. God's love is and has always been for such as these.

Video

For this session, there will be a video interview Hannah Steele and Canon J John. The video will be available from **15th February 2021**. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

Study Notes

- Our storytelling should be in response to God's initiative and in partnership with His Spirit. These two principles are seen through Jesus' own storytelling. He was a prolific storyteller - the gospels recount more than 35 parables, telling stories that offered a completely different way of seeing the world and thus invited his listeners into a new way of life in the Kingdom. (29-31)
- Jesus came to announce good news as the culmination of the story of scripture – God reaching out to the world in love. Evangelism is announcing this good news in a way that is urgent, compelling and invitational, following the pattern and initiative laid out by Jesus. (31-43)
- Evangelism is not something that we do alone. We are to partner with God in evangelism. In some senses it is completely out of our hands, and yet God chooses to partner with us. Our partnership with God should give us confidence and lead us to prayer. (43-49)

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt you were just the person God wanted in a particular situation? Did later events confirm that in some way?
2. How do you think you might become more aware of God at work in relationships and conversations you are involved in?
3. Who might be regarded as 'the least', 'the lost' and 'the law-breaker' in your community, area, workplace (or even closer to home)?

Session 3: Jesus was in the transformation business

Featured Bible Passages

- Mark 5:1-20
- 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8
- 1 John 1:1-3

Summary

This session explores the transformational power of stories. Jesus was, and is, in the transformation business. As a result, we have powerful stories of what Jesus has done to share with others. The session aims to embolden you and give you the tools you need to tell your story. It also features a video interview. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

This session is based around Chapter 3 of Hannah Steel's book *Living His Story*. A featured passage is below, but you are encouraged to read the whole chapter as the questions often reference the book.

Featured Passage

One of the most remarkable stories of instant transformation is in Jesus' dealings with the demoniac in Mark 5. Jesus travels by boat to an area called the land of the Gerasene's. It is one of the first encounters that we see Jesus having in Gentile territory. In this remote place, Jesus encounters a man who is possessed by multiple demons. The initial description that Mark gives us of this man is distressing: wild and unkempt, ostracized from the local community, even his own family, wailing out loud and a danger to himself. We can only presume that this troubled man had no prior knowledge of Jesus, yet he is drawn to him and falls down on his knees before him. It becomes clear that the man is entirely riddled with demons and that only the all-powerful word of Jesus can break his chains. Jesus instantly sets the man free, although it does not turn out so well for the herd of pigs nearby. Mark is keen to report that by the time the crowd had heard of this story they were faced with an entirely different picture of the man, who now sat clothed, calm and able to communicate articulately. The transformation undergone by this man was complete: from chaos to peace, from danger to security.

This miracle is one of many instances in the Gospels when encounter with Jesus brings complete and utter transformation and freedom. You might think that this story of transformation would be met with great relief by the town who no longer have to listen to the terrifying screams of the man wandering around the tombs. However, their fear now turns away from this man and focuses on Jesus instead. They are unsure what to make of his power and were possibly also concerned about the impact on the local farming community. The town turns out and begs Jesus to leave. This is so different from the many occasions where people beg Jesus to stay. Here his presence is not welcome. It is therefore not surprising that the freed man now wants to follow the one who has set him free. Why stay in the town that has exiled him? The man tries to climb in the boat with Jesus when he goes to leave, but Jesus says these words to him: 'Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you' (Mark 5.19).

It is surprising that Jesus doesn't take the man with him, isn't it? Only a few chapters ago he had been recruiting followers for his newly formed band of disciples. Surely this man would be the perfect new apprentice with a miraculous story to share? Jesus knows the home crowd are hostile. Why not save the man the hardship and take him on board? However, Jesus resists the man's desire to follow him and instead sends him back as a witness to his own community, the very community

that had been so fearful of him. What is also striking is that this man has very little experience of Jesus other than this one exchange. He hasn't listened to the hours of teaching that the other disciples had. However, Jesus sends him back, simply to tell 'how much the Lord has done' for him. This man was called to witness to the story of God's work in his life, to speak of his utter transformation and his present experience of freedom and peace. And we soon read that 'every-one was amazed' in the surrounding towns (Mark 5.20). Where Jesus had caused initial confusion and fear, this man's story of his encounter with Jesus in turn began to transform the lives around him.

I love this story from Mark's Gospel because it is a powerful illustration of the influence of personal story. Jesus leaves the man in his hometown, untrained but full of his own personal encounter. And the results speak for themselves. This way of witnessing is one of the first and easiest ways we can start to share our faith with people and can be one of the simplest ways to get started on imaginative evangelism.

Video

For this session, there will be a video interview between Hannah Steele and Phil Knox. This video will be available from **22nd February 2021**. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

Study Notes

- The world is full of stories. A quick look at a newspaper or blog, half an hour in front of the television, or time spent listening to a podcast will tell you as much. We each have a story too and our personal stories are powerful. (53-58)
- Telling our story doesn't have to be difficult. Hannah Steele gives a blueprint for us as we share our stories. We should be prepared, authentic, honest, bold, relevant, respectful and look for connections. Our stories should be accessible. (58-64)
- Our stories are not only to be told but lived. Indeed, we cannot tell a story that we have not lived. Part of telling our stories is inviting others to share in our lives and be part of our stories. (64-68)

Discussion Questions

1. Think of a story of encountering God that you have shared with others or others have shared with you. What did you learn from the experience?
2. In what practical ways might you express God's love to a neighbour this week?
3. At this point in your Lenten journey, be still for a while and imagine Jesus gazing into your eyes in love. How do you find yourself responding?

Session 4: Communicating Like Jesus did

Featured Bible Passages

- John 4:4-29
- Mark 10:51
- Matthew 9:36

Summary

This session is all about relationship and conversation. The gospel writers often depict Jesus in conversation with others. By examining the primacy of relationships for evangelism and the nature of Jesus' conversations, this session aims to equip us to converse like Jesus did. It also features a video interview. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

This session is based around Chapter 4 of Hannah Steel's book *Living His Story*. A featured passage is below, but you are encouraged to read the whole chapter as the questions often reference the book.

Featured Passage

When you read Jesus' encounters with people in the Gospels you get the impression that each person is held in his gaze. When the rich young ruler claims to have kept all the commandments, we are told that 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him' (Mark 10.21). In the midst of the bustling crowd, Jesus seeks out the woman who touched his cloak. In that moment, the needs of the wider crowd come second to Jesus' desire that this woman knows that she has been seen and that she is loved. There is in Jesus a relentless pursuit of the one over and above the crowd, and there is a personalized response given to each individual over and above a set formula or singular message.

Sometimes Jesus is the one who initiates the conversation. In the conversation with the Samaritan woman, for example, Jesus begins the conversation by asking her to give him a drink of water (John 4.7). In so doing, Jesus subverts the cultural norms of the day, but he does it in order to initiate conversation with her. Similarly with Zacchaeus, Jesus initiates the conversation. He senses Zacchaeus' interest (the fact he had climbed up a tree to get a better view was a bit of a giveaway), but Jesus is the one who calls him out of his hiding place and into hospitality (Luke 19.5).

At other times we see Jesus responding to the initiative of others. Jesus responds to the secretive but courageous action of the bleeding woman who reaches out to touch his cloak. Mark tells us that as she touched his cloak she was instantly healed. However, Jesus is not content to leave it at that, seeking her out in conversation so that she knows she is precious and loved (Mark 5.34). Jesus responds to the question of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19.16), the cries of the demon-possessed man (Mark 5.7) and the request by Jairus, the synagogue leader, to heal his daughter (Mark 5.24).

On other occasions, Jesus responds to the initiative of a third party. He strikes up conversation with Nathaniel, but only after Philip has introduced them (John 1.47). Jesus is able to operate in a different mode in each of these conversations, sometimes responsive and at other times taking the lead.

While Jesus deals differently with each of the people before him in such a way that it would be impossible to construct 'Jesus' seven-stage approach to evangelism', he does always seem to know what the next step each individual needs to make. In some instances, this next step is dramatic; for the rich young ruler the next step was to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor. But for the unnamed woman in the crowd, it was the knowledge of peace and reassurance. I have found it helpful to think in terms of 'steps' in my own encounters with people. It is rare to meet someone who is ready on the basis of one conversation with you to surrender their lives to Christ there and then. It can happen, but such instantly transformative encounters are few and far between. Thinking in terms of 'next steps' can be helpful and relieve the pressure. What is the one thing I can helpfully say to this person now that might help them to think Christianity is worth further exploration? What one comment might I make about Jesus that might make them intrigued to explore more about him? Viewing conversations in those terms can free us from either the paralysis of thinking we have to say everything and therefore saying nothing, or from saying too much and losing the person along the way. I like to imagine what it might take for someone to leave a conversation with me thinking, 'Huh, I've never thought that before.'

Video

For this session, there will be a video interview between Hannah Steele and Bishop Jill Duff. This video will be available from **1st March 2021**. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

Study Notes

- Sharing the good news is much more than having a prescribed set of words to share, although this can be helpful. If we are to be witnesses, we need to think of sharing the good news with our whole lives, considering how we spend the 110 waking hours we spend out of church as much as the 2-3 we spend at church. (70-71)
- The gospels recount more than 150 conversations between Jesus and one other person. Conversation and relationship were crucial parts of his ministry. (70-71)
- Jesus relates to all kinds of people. The gospels depict Jesus conversing with the rich and the poor, religious leaders, political leaders, the educated and the uneducated, people on the inside and people on the outside. We need to think about who we are relating to. ()
- Jesus talks to different people in different ways, but there are some common features to Jesus' conversations: He always started from a place of love; he is not afraid of vulnerability; he is interruptible; he listens; he asks good questions (more than 300 of them); his conversations were restorative and full of grace. (74-88)

Discussion Questions

1. Taking your personality type into account, think of three natural ways you might share your faith. (These may not involve speaking explicitly of spiritual matters.)
2. Have you ever experienced an interruption that turned out to be a God moment? How might you become more prepared for interruptions in your everyday life?
3. What strikes you most about the way Jesus interacted with people? How might you learn from his approach?

Session 5: Passing on the story of Jesus

Featured Bible Passages

- Acts 2:4
- Matthew 10:19-20
- Acts: 8:26-40

Summary

This session attempts to scratch the surface on the many ways that the holy spirit enables us to share the good news, from miracles, to dreams, to giving us the words to say. By the end of the session, you will have explored some of the ways the holy spirit inspires and releases our evangelism and will be encouraged to step out in faith. The session also features a video interview. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

This session is based around Chapter 5 of Hannah Steel's book *Living His Story*. A featured passage is below, but you are encouraged to read the whole chapter as the questions often reference the book.

Featured Passage

One individual who follows where the Spirit leads is Philip. When persecution broke out, we learn that while the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem, many of the early followers of Jesus were scattered but that 'those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word' (Acts 8.4). This is one of those examples where God is mysteriously still at work even through a terrible situation or crisis. I was interested to hear at an online event during the lockdown of one girl who had tuned into an online church service. She commented that she didn't go to church, but her brother was involved in the service, and because she was missing him she tuned in to watch. This experience had her interested in the Christian faith, which she then wanted to explore. It is incredible how often God works through extraordinary or difficult situations, or times when our plans go awry, to bring new opportunities.

One of those who found themselves unintentionally scattered to Samaria was Philip, one of the seven who had been chosen to wait upon tables as the church started to grow. The Spirit prompts Philip to go to the desert road to Gaza where he meets the Ethiopian eunuch. Luke tells us that this individual was a person of great influence, 'a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury' (Acts 8.27). As Philip is told by the Spirit to travel alongside this man's chariot, he heard him reading out loud (as would have been normal practice) a passage of Scripture from Isaiah. I suppose having a conversation with a stranger on public transport is the modern-day equivalent, although I have to say that in many years of such conversations, I have never met someone who 'just happened' to be reading Isaiah 53! Philip finds that the Spirit is at work in him enabling him to explain the Scriptures so that that this Ethiopian Chancellor of the Exchequer can hear and understand the good news of the risen Jesus. In fact the response is so immediate that the Ethiopian eunuch commands the chariot to be stopped so that he can be instantly baptized in a nearby pool of water. We don't hear of this man again, but Luke tells us that he 'went on his way rejoicing' (Acts 8.39) and we presume he then returned to Ethiopia as the first Christian disciple in that great continent of Africa. When we stumble across a chance conversation with someone on the train or the bus, we cannot know the impact our words may have or the seeds sown that will bear fruit in places and locations other than our own. Stories like Philip's should encourage us to seize every opportunity that comes our way and trust the Spirit to be at work.

Video

For this session, there will be a video interview between Hannah Steele and Rev Canon Yemi Adedeji. This video will be available from **8th March 2021**. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

Study Notes

- Pentecost was an explosive moment for the early church. Before the Holy Spirit came, the disciples were waiting. Afterwards, the good news spread like wildfire. Such is the power of the Holy Spirit in Acts, it might be appropriate to name the book the Acts of the Holy Spirit, rather than the Acts of the Apostles. (89-92)
- The Holy Spirit is behind almost every encounter in the book of Acts. Especially significant is Peter's dream in Acts 10. God's instruction that Peter should 'kill and eat' opened up the good news to everyone and showed that God has no favourites. (92-97)
- At the time of writing, the UK was in lockdown because of COVID-19. Hannah Steele points out that the role of the church is to share the good news in whatever circumstance it finds itself. (97-98)
- As we seek to share this good news there are 6 principles we should follow: we should be risk takers and not comfort seekers; we should embrace variety and not a one-size-fits-all approach; we should be relational and not confrontational; we should seek God, not take God; we should go out there and not stay in here; we should go together not alone. (100-111)

Discussion Questions

1. This session encourages us to think globally. How can you perceive the Holy Spirit at work during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. The Spirit often 'propels us out of our comfort zones'. Have you ever surprised yourself by speaking boldly, or can you think of someone else doing this with remarkable results?
3. The work of the Holy Spirit is mysterious . . . Can you think of a situation which has been transformed beyond imagining by the work of the Holy Spirit?

Session 6: Finding echoes of the story of Jesus in our world today

Featured Bible Passage

- Acts 17:16-34

Summary

This session explores how we can share the good news by bridging from common references such as books and films. With Paul's sermon at Athens providing the principal example, this session aims to equip you to share the good news in this way, outlining key practices and questions to consider as you do so. The session also features a video interview. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

This session is based around Chapter 6 of Hannah Steel's book *Living His Story*. A featured passage is below, but you are encouraged to read the whole chapter as the questions often reference the book.

Featured Passage

One of the best examples of this thoughtful gift-giving approach is seen in Paul's visit to Athens in Acts 17. He shows us an example of intelligent and imaginative evangelism. Athens was a famous location in the first-century world. Boasting a strong intellectual heritage from the Greek philosophers of the fourth and fifth centuries BC (the likes of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates), its incorporation into the Roman Empire had not dampened its reputation as a city of immense intellectual and educational importance. Paul had grown up in the city of Tarsus, which was also well known as a centre of philosophy and a plethora of Hellenistic religious cults. While Paul was steeped in the Scriptures as a Pharisee, his background in philosophy meant he was well prepared for his missionary trip to Athens.

As was his usual custom, Paul goes to the central meeting places of this historic and busy city. He speaks the good news of Jesus in the synagogue but also in the marketplace. It is not long before Paul is creating a stir and arousing the interest of the philosophers of the day. In particular Luke mentions the Epicureans and the Stoics, who gathered around to hear him speak and to debate his ideas. The Epicureans were agnostic secularists; they were not concerned about the possibility of gods, as they considered them too far removed to be relevant to human life even if they were real. The Stoics, on the other hand, were pantheists who believed in a strong sense of unity between humanity and the divine. To the Stoics, God is everything and everything is God. While these two types of philosophers were very different from one another, Paul's preaching about the good news, and in particular the idea of resurrection, clearly aroused a response. Whether they wanted to argue against him and disprove his new and unfamiliar teaching or whether they were intrigued by the possibility of Paul's new teaching, they all wanted to hear more and so brought him to the Areopagus, a place where the latest ideas were discussed and debated. Despite the apparent pluralism of Athens, Paul's teaching about Jesus and the resurrection caused a stir and people were intrigued. Paul had a captive audience of philosophers and the latest thinkers of the day when he addressed the crowd.

However, before looking at Paul's approach in Athens, it is worth noting how Paul initially felt when he arrived in this strange and unfamiliar place that had not yet heard the good news of Jesus. Luke tells us early on that Paul 'was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols' (Acts 17.16). A more literal translation of Paul's deep distress might be that 'Paul's spirit was pained within him'. Just the sight of this huge city bursting to the brim with idols to various different gods caused a visceral response for Paul the evangelist. His belief in the uniqueness of Jesus as the way to the Father stood in stark contrast to the religious world view in front of him. Gone is the hot-headed

Saul who would have his way through coercion and control, as we see at the beginning of Acts. Instead we see a different Paul, still as passionate and zealous but now resolute to show that the deepest desires of the Athenians can only be adequately met by the risen Jesus. Paul is determined to show this with wisdom, grace and clarity. In so doing, he provides us with an effective model for how we can present the gift of the gospel in such a way that it relates to people's deepest longings and connects with the culture around us. The gospel cannot be delivered in a vacuum but is always spoken in a particular language, clothed in particular phrases and concepts. Paul's model shows us how to do that in the different situations in which we find ourselves, especially those where the message of the gospel seems peculiar or even alien to the surrounding culture. What we see in Acts 17 is imaginative evangelism at its very best.

Video

For this session, there will be a video interview between Hannah Steele and Dr Amy Orr-Ewing. This video will be available from **22nd March 2021**. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

Study Notes

- The good news of the Kingdom of God is a wonderful gift. However, like all gifts we need to be thoughtful in how we offer it. Paul provides a wonderful example of a thoughtful presentation of the good news in Athens. (113-116)
- Sharing the good news like Paul requires us to consider four steps: (1) Looking and listening to those around us and what they value; (2) giving credit where credit is due; (3) looking from a different angle; (4) pointing to Christ. (116-123)
- It is helpful to think of the story of the gospel as an answer to four fundamental human questions: Who are we? What is wrong? What's the solution? What's the future? In sharing the gospel with others, we should consider how the gospel answers these questions. (123-134)
- That said, these are not the only questions that those around us are asking. We need to be listening out for the questions that are being asked and be thinking about the answers the gospel provides. (134-135)

Discussion Questions

1. Which book or film that you have recently absorbed might give you a way of sharing the gospel – or more generally talking about the big questions of life – with others?
2. Do you regularly check out some of the things causing a stir in popular culture and, if not, how might you (enjoyably!) keep yourself well informed?
3. In what book, film, drama, musical, TV programme or radio broadcast do you find a winning presentation of the gospel?

Session 7: Stories of finding Jesus

Featured Bible Passages

- Luke 24:13-35
- Acts 9:1-9
- Acts 26:29

Summary

This session explores the different ways that people come to faith in Jesus and unpacks the implications of this for our models of evangelism. The session aims to prepare you to share the gospel both 'long and short'. The session also features a video interview. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

This session is based around Chapter 7 of Hannah Steel's book *Living His Story*. A featured passage is below, but you are encouraged to read the whole chapter as the questions often reference the book.

Featured Passage

The book of Acts records for us many of the conversations the Apostle Paul had with those who were sceptical about the Christian faith. One such conversation came after he had spent two years imprisoned on a false charge, when Paul finds himself before King Agrippa in Acts 26. Agrippa stood in the lineage of a string of kings who had opposed truth and righteousness, not least Herod the Great who had tried to kill Jesus as a young child. And now Paul himself stands before the King, seeking his help and ultimately awaiting his fate.

Paul's response in this situation was, as on numerous occasions, simply to tell the story of God's work in his life. He does not engage in legal argument about his unlawful imprisonment but honestly and openly traces his journey of faith, from his religious childhood, through the dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, through to his present situation. The only defence he needs is to narrate his experience of God's work in his life and he does this calmly and full of respect for his listeners.

What is particularly striking in this testimony is the boldness with which Paul directs his question to the King himself: 'King Agrippa, Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.' One can imagine the shock at the brazenness of Paul's question to the King, demonstrating that all those years in prison have in no way dampened his courage. The King's reply is similarly feisty, questioning Paul: 'Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?' Suddenly the attention is not upon Paul's story but on the King's reaction to it. It is evident that Paul's testimony leaves the 'what about you?' question lingering in the air. Paul's response reveals a profound truth about the ways in which people come to faith: 'Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am – except for these chains' (Acts 26.27–29). In this statement Paul reveals his evangelist's heart. The beauty of Paul's evangelistic approach in this incident is the transparency of his desire that every person listening would meet Jesus. However, his use of the phrase 'quickly or not', translated in the NIV as 'long or short', indicated what Paul had learned about the variety of ways in which different people made the journey of faith. For some, their experience would be an instant moment of conversion, a crisis point in which their life is instantly changed, but for others it would take more time, a slowly evolving movement towards faith in Christ. What may appear as a somewhat throwaway comment from Paul is actually a principle that gives hope to us as we seek to witness to those around us. Since receiving the message from my

friend Chris, this idea of 'long or short' has been both helpful and hopeful in understanding that the journey towards faith will look very different from one person to another.

Video

For this session, there will be a video interview between Hannah Steele and Archbishop Stephen Cottrell. This video will be available from **29th March 2021**. Video content will be added to the SPCK YouTube channel (<https://cofe.io/SPCKYouTube>) throughout Lent.

Study Notes

- People's journeys to faith vary dramatically. Sometimes it can be sudden like the road to Damascus at other times it can be a process more like the road to Emmaus. (137-142)
- The different ways that people come to faith mean that way must re-evaluate more traditional models of evangelism. For example, while there is a place for persuasive evangelistic sermons followed by altar calls, we should also embrace models which engage people whose journey to faith is longer. (142-144)
- If faith is a journey for many than we must work to build trust, spark interest in Jesus, open minds by telling our stories and ask thoughtful questions. (144-152)
- Of course, the journey has not ended when someone says a first yes to Jesus. We must continue to journey together in community over time, inviting everyone to get involved in sharing the good news with those they know. (152-159)

Discussion Questions

1. This Lent, reflect upon your own faith journey and ask yourself: What are the key moments that stand out? Who has influenced and helped you?
2. How do you feel the story of your journey to faith affects others? How do those of others affect you?
3. What are some of the ways you might be able to help gently nudge people along the pathway to faith?