

Week 1 – Abundance not Scarcity

SETTING:

Before the group arrives prepare the room, with seats in the round and a central table. Soft lighting helps, and try to have everything you need in place before people arrive. Place two large plates on the table in the middle of the room. On one put a large bunch of red grapes, the other should be empty. Light the candle and arrange the other items for the Thank you and Goodnight.

As the group arrives play some music to go with the theme. For example: 'I Want it All' (Queen); 'Big yellow taxi' (Joni Mitchell); 'Money, money, money' (Abba); 'Big Spender' (Shirley Bassey); 'Money' (Pink Floyd). Feel free to choose other music that you think would fit the theme or set the right atmosphere.

WORSHIP AND WELCOME (15 mins):

Begin with these opening words followed by a moment of silence.

**All: God of the harvest, we have heard your call and we have come.
 We are in awe of your everlasting love.
 We are humbled by your belief in us.
 We are sorry for reluctance and our apathy.
 We are ready to toil together in your vineyard, and to unveil your Kingdom on earth...
 That the last may be first and all may share in your feast of life.**

Silence

Now encourage people to open their Windows on the Week (see course notes) and share those things for which they are thankful (gestures of kindness, gratitude for health, a moment of beauty). Allow a moment of quiet after each to allow the group to reflect. After those that wish to have shared have a time of silence or open prayer followed by:

Leader: Eternal God,

you crown the year with your goodness
and you give us the fruits of the earth in their season:
grant that we may use them to your glory,
for the relief of those in the need and for our own well-being;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen

OR The Lord's Prayer.

Welcome everyone and thank them for coming.

OPEN QUESTION (10 mins):

Ask the group to share, either with the whole group or in pairs, the answer to this question:

How did you get here? (Answers may include transport and travel arrangements)

This is intended to engage people at a surface level and help them feel more comfortable. When they have had some time to do this ask them to think on a deeper level:

How did you get here? (What has drawn you to this group? Who or what has influenced your journey to this point? What are your hopes and expectations for our time together?)

These can be shared openly, but use your discretion.

WORD PLAY (15 mins):

Invite one or two people to read the parable of the workers in the vineyard from the New Revised Standard Version (Matthew 20:1-16)

Divide the group into pairs and give each couple a sheet of paper, a pen and the name of a newspaper or magazine such as: The Daily Mail; The Guardian; The Financial Times; Hello magazine and The Church Times. Invite each pair to discuss how this parable might be presented in their publication, and to write a headline and a short strapline that summarises the story and catches the attention of their readers. When they have all written their headlines, ask them to share, to notice the differences in interpretation, and the possible reasons for these. Touch on the need for us to approach scripture aware of the context.

CONVERSATION (30 mins):

(Explain) Any good story has context. When you go to see a play a set has been created, there are back stories, sub plots, props and extras to help us understand the production. We may not consciously acknowledge these at first but once we do they give us a deeper insight into the narrative. As an example, the unacknowledged backdrop of Winnie the Pooh is that cuddly toys have a world and life of their own where they talk and have adventures.

(Ask) What is the backdrop of this parable? What are we not noticing?

(Ideas) There is an abundant harvest of grapes, there is a Master and there are people who need work and are called to help. The story begins with the overwhelming abundance of God's creation in the harvest, so much so that it requires more workers. There is also an urgency to the story as harvest must be reaped whilst ripe and before the weather changes.

(Sum-up) Part of the unacknowledged context of this parable is that, however we interpret the creation in Genesis, God gives abundantly (enough that even more workers are needed to harvest it!) and what has been given is good.

(Ask) What are the fruits of the harvest that we take for granted in our own lives? What are the things that we don't notice that form the backdrop of our own lives? What do we forget to say thank you to God for?

(Ideas) The right and ability to work; good health; free and accessible education for all; freedom of speech; living in a country where there is peace and a system of democracy; homes for ourselves and our families; the ability to travel locally and further afield; rights and opportunities for women; loving families; easily accessible water and food.

(Sum-up) It's very easy to ignore the backdrop of all the good things in our lives and concentrate on what we *don't* have. In forgetting these things we live in a mind-set of scarcity, concentrating on what we don't have, rather than acknowledging our abundance and seeing what we have from God's creation.

"We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity – a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighbourly." Walter Bruggemann

(Activity) These scriptures that pick up on the themes of scarcity and abundance, and living as please and thank you. Where do you see echoes of these passages in our own lives and in the world today? (Could be done in 3 groups and shared)

1. Exodus 16: 13-21 God sends the manna down to his people in the desert.
2. Matthew 4: 1-4 Jesus is given the option of an easy meal as he is tempted in the wilderness.
3. Luke 12: 13-21 The rich man fills his barns.

(Sum-up) We live in a world that celebrates ownership, and in a culture that constantly seeks more. True thankfulness is rare, and is very powerful when we witness it (you could ask when participants have witnessed it). One of the marks of our faith is acknowledging that we don't 'own', but we have received gifts to care for and use wisely. Saying thank you for these gifts acknowledges the divine abundance of the earth and all that God has given, and is good for us and for our world and culture to see. We can be witnesses to God's generosity.

(Ask) Try and tease out how the group could seek to live more thankful lives during lent, and beyond. These questions might help:

In what ways do you find it easier to be thankful to God? Where have you done this well? How might you build / expand on that to increase your thankfulness? What might help you to be more thankful in the coming week?

(Response) Suggest that we can start that thankfulness right now. Ask everyone to choose an item from their person or bag that represents something that they would like to say thank you to God for. Something that points beyond itself to a priceless gift – eg glasses symbolising sight, a wedding ring signifying a loving relationship. Ask them to place it on the empty plate as a symbolic offering to God. These can be collected after the closing prayer.

THANK YOU and GOODNIGHT (10 mins):

Ask participants to reflect for a moment on what they've seen and heard, and then invite them to take an item from the table which represents their engagement during the session, and to hold it as they share their thoughts:

A candle for illumination – light a tea light from the central candle and hold it – it symbolises something new we have seen

Salt for faith in action – a pinch of salt from the central bowl – it represents a way in which we have been inspired to make a response in our own lives.

A peg for questions – take a peg and hold it – this stands of the reflections and questions we may want to ‘peg up’ for a while.

Bread - tear a piece from the loaf and hold it – it is a sign of how we have been fed and nourished by God’s Word.

As each person holds their item as we offer this prayer

Leader: *As we hold these items we remember that Jesus lived his life amongst ordinary things and by his presence transformed them into the extra-ordinary.*

All: So may Christ, who is the Bread of life,
feed us by his words and example that we may be full with the abundance of God’s Kingdom.
May Jesus, who commands us to keep our saltiness,
inspire us to action so that we might be his hands and feet, reaching and walking for justice.
May Christ, who is the light of the world,
shine his light into our lives and contexts that we might see with his eyes and peer even into the darkest places.
May Jesus, who told stories without explanation and left questions hanging,
help us to hold our doubts and queries as we continue to follow him.
And may Christ, who reveals to us the very generous heart of God,
guide and sustain us until we meet again. Amen.

Allow everyone to replace their symbols on the table, except those holding bread. Pass piece of bread to everyone else in the group and in the silence prayerfully eat together.

Leader: Let us bless each other with the words of the grace.

All: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.
Amen.

Play some music as people say farewell and leave.