

Ascension and Pentecost



praying with prodigals

AIM

This can be used in a number of different ways for personal study and reflection, with a small group or as the basis for a service.

INTRODUCTION

Let me tell you

Rev Paul Cowley was called to work with the poor and marginalised as Executive Director of Social Transformation for Alpha International, but that is not how the story started. He was born in Manchester in 1955. Expelled from school at the age of 15. Lived on the streets for a short while and then moved into a life of crime. After a short prison sentence Paul joined the Army, throwing himself into his career for the next 15 years. He left the army in 1991, and continued in the area of fitness training.

In 1994 he became a Christian after doing an Alpha course at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) and in 1996 felt called to work in Prison Ministry as a volunteer. The increasing demand for the Alpha Course in Prisons led him to join the staff of HTB. As more lives were changed by Jesus in Prison and people completed their sentences Paul felt the need to set up Caring for Ex-Offenders, which links ex-offenders to churches around the country. The charity aims to equip and encourage local churches to assist these ex-offenders to reintegrate back into society.

The Social Transformation department of that organisation has now grown to meet the needs of the poor and marginalised in a number of different ways.

About his call to ministry, Paul writes: 'I know that I have taken on all of the different roles at different times in my life and with different people. However I know that I am called to strive to be more like the Father, the God and Jesus figure, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I am called to be the one who takes the initiative, goes out and meets the vulnerable'.

WHAT DOES GOD CALL US TO DO?

What have we been asked to do? Read the following bible passages carefully

Isaiah 61

Micah 6: 8

Matthew 2: 31-46

Matthew 28:16-20

Think about

What do these passages suggest we should do?

Reflection

It seems to me that the emphasis is on God or us (the church) going to the broken; the vulnerable and the outcast. We are to be the active ones not the broken, vulnerable, or outcast.

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Isaiah 61: 1 "He has **sent** me to bind up the broken-hearted..."

Micah 6: 8 "To **act** justly..."

Matthew 25: 35 "For I was hungry and you **gave** me..."

Matthew 28: 19 "Therefore **go** and make disciples..."

Reflect and celebrate those occasions when you have stepped out towards the broken, vulnerable and outcast.

Think about who are the broken, vulnerable or outcasts in your community and how you can step out to meet their needs.

Who is our pattern?

Our role model is God and Jesus. Look how radical He was, going to where the lost were, being with the lost and meeting the needs of the lost.

The entire story of Israel is a cycle of messing up, being shown grace and mercy by God and enjoying a restored relationship until they stumble and fall again. Eden, the Exodus from Egypt, the whole golden calf incident, wanting Kings rather than Prophets, the list goes on.

In every instance God disciplines them, there are consequences but He is also gracious, merciful and patient. Is that not our experience of God as well?

What did Jesus do?

Let's focus on Luke 15. This chapter contains 3 parables which could all be summarised as describing how Jesus is passionate about stepping out, finding the lost, walking with them and lavishing his love on them.

Think about

1. What is the context of this passage?
2. Who does the finding in each of these stories? Who does that figure represent?
3. Which character do you most closely associate with and why?

THE PRODIGAL SON

The third of story is a particularly well known parable. We often focus on the prodigal son character however there are many roles in this story. Let's think about each of them as they all have something to tell us about how God acts towards us and how we should act and behave towards others.

The prodigal

The son implies that he wants his father dead by demanding his inheritance now! The consequence of this would be to embarrass his father. The son did not care about the father's feelings. He walked out on his family and did what he wanted to do.

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The older son

This son sulks because he has been obedient and has been given nothing. He thinks he has rights because of his obedience. The younger son has not earned any of the love the father lavishes on him. The older son disobeys his father by refusing to go into the house.

The father

He accepted his son's decision and respected his free will. He was willing to embarrass himself by selling goods in his home town to fulfil his son's request. He stood looking for his youngest son, never giving up hope. Again he humiliated himself by running (not a dignified act for a man of standing) to embrace his son. He speaks first before the son can deliver his pre-prepared speech. He covers his younger son's shame (can you imagine the smell) with clothing.

To his older son the father shows grace and understanding. The father could have seriously punished him for disobedience and refusing to go into the house and join the celebrations.

Think about

1. When you have taken each of these roles? Ask forgiveness for the times when you have been the prodigal or the older son
2. How could you be more like the father more often? Pray for perseverance to be more like the father to others.

Prayer

This material needs a prayer please

Websites

You can find further information here:

CFEO website: www.caringforexoffenders.org

Alpha for Prisons website: www.alpha.org/prisons

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

If you want more seasonal material please revisit the website.

Acknowledgements

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HOW TO FEEDBACK TO VISION4LIFE?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group about general or website V4L issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the prayer year, you can email the V4L prayer year coordinator via prayer@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 3 – Transformed for Evangelism: evangelism@vision4life.org.uk