

# Growing and changing

## Planning

### Lectionary Bible readings

RCL Lent 5 Year B  
Jeremiah 31.31-34, Psalm 51.1-12 or  
Psalm 119.9-16, Hebrews 5.5-10,  
**John 12.20-33**

### Theme *Becoming the good news*

Six weeks in which we observe Jesus taking up the mission of the Old Testament writers. This will help us think about how we can enter the stories of Jesus and become good news ourselves. An article that provides an overview of the theme can be found on the inside front cover page and on the [WEB](#).

### Week 5 of 6

#### Growing and changing John 12.20-33

A seed must be planted to grow into something great. Today we think about our calling and what helps us to grow as Christians.

#### This week's reading provides an opportunity to:

- think about the 'grain of wheat' metaphor
- reflect on how being flexible enables us to grow and develop
- consider how being called might be unsettling.

A Bible study worksheet on this reading, suitable for midweek groups, is available on the [WEB](#).

## Gather

### Prepare the space

Continue to build the Lenten garden by adding a tray of earth and sowing some grass seed in it. Alternatively, create a display by covering a table with some brown, earth-coloured, rough cloth. Drape some green fabric across the centre and some wheat-coloured fabric across one end to create a colour progression from earth, to green shoots, to ripened wheat. Scatter some seeds across the cloths.

### Gathering words

God is constantly renewing the promise or covenant with us. Jeremiah tells us that it is written on our hearts. In John's Gospel, Jesus tells the story of the grain of wheat dying in order to grow. Today we are challenged to nurture our faith, so it grows and changes in response to the situations we confront.

## Open the Word

### Bible notes

#### Old Testament Jeremiah 31.31-34

This well-known passage is rightly regarded as one of the most important in the Hebrew Bible, containing the fourth and future covenant. In reality, this represents a variation on a theme. God is not a perpetual legislator but a God concerned to continue in covenant relationship with his people. Thus Jeremiah is not criticising the earlier covenants, though he does by implication comment drily on the failure of people within Israel to keep to the covenant. There is a distinct moral development evidenced here. Jeremiah focuses more on personal obedience and self-understanding, with a greater interest in individual responsibility, and less on the external manifestation of the covenant. This is accompanied by optimism that, when the time is right, people will want to obey the covenant as their dutiful response to God. This purple passage is quoted in full in the New Testament (Hebrews 8.8-12) and it may well have inspired Jesus himself.

#### Gospel John 12.20-33

John puts a theological interpretation on the ministry of Jesus, hinting at his descent from heaven (3.13) and future return to heaven (6.62). Jesus predicts his death with confidence in John, commenting also on its saving significance. In this passage – which in tandem with John 17 replaces the Last Supper in John – the Evangelist makes Jesus the universal Saviour who embodies God's presence and draws all people to him.

It may be difficult to reconcile the Christ of the Fourth Gospel with his presentation in the Synoptic Gospels. Don't be alarmed at the differences. None of the Gospels gives us a contemporary eye-witness account of Jesus. All the evangelists were theologians and interpreters of the story of Jesus. The basic message of this passage is easy to ascertain. It is that Jesus' death has saving significance; and that, in following God's will to the last, he calls his followers to a path of suffering service.

The focus of the Gospel is that the advent of the divine Son marks a moment of crisis or judgement for the world. How one responds to Jesus is made the criterion of one's own standing before God.

#### Growing and changing

##### *Becoming the good news* Week 5

The element that is 'new' in Jeremiah's prophecy of 'the covenant that God will make with Israel' is that 'I will put my law within them'. This is not a rejection of the law, and within Judaism in Jesus' time there remained a hope that in the Messianic age the law would be better interpreted and observed than ever before. Indeed the Jews of Jesus' day who belonged to the Qumran sect, known to us from the Dead Sea Scrolls, already described themselves as 'members of the New Covenant' and bound themselves 'by oath to return to the law of Moses' (*Damascus Document* 6.19, 16.1-2). God graciously called and delivered the people and gave them the law, and they thankfully and obediently responded by keeping its precepts. When it is written on the heart, the law is not just rules to keep in order to gain

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### Week by week

Bible notes  
Prayers  
PostScript: up-to-the minute comment  
Bible study worksheet  
Children's sheet  
Further resources  
Drama sketches  
Sermon notes on a different Bible reading  
Links to other materials for this week's readings

rewards and avoid punishments. Instead its precepts, 'rejoicing the heart' and 'enlightening the eyes', are 'sweeter also than honey' (Psalm 19.7-10). When a young man told Jesus that he had kept all the commandments 'since my youth', Jesus 'loved him', telling him to give his riches away; 'then come, follow me' (Mark 10.20-21). Just keeping rules can be as sterile as an unplanted seed, but responding to God's call will bear much fruit. 'The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1.17), and the Gospel keeps them together.

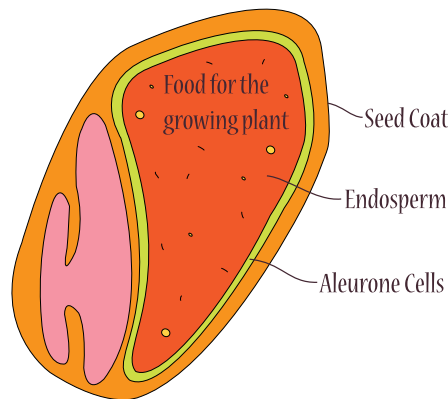
**Q** In the other three gospels, Jesus prays in Gethsemane, 'Remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want but you want'. What is different about John's portrayal of Jesus in today's passage? Which portrayal do you find more comforting, or more unsettling?

**Q** What is 'sweeter than honey' to us?

## Sermon ideas

- For up-to-the-minute comment, see PostScript on the [WEB](#).
- The RAF teaches its personnel that 'flexibility is the key to air power'. Flexibility is also a great asset for any of us to have and possibly the key to many things. Current thinking in management training similarly suggests that to be effective we must develop the capacity to move comfortably from one area of skill to another.<sup>1</sup> A calling to follow Jesus is unsettling, it involves being prepared to change. Verses 24 to 26 of today's Gospel are unequivocal: our fundamental instincts will be challenged and we will be called to be ever on the move. It is no coincidence that the disciples here, who are asked about seeing Jesus, are among those who were called first: Andrew and Philip. What aspects of 'following Christ' do we find difficult?
- Cardinal Newman said 'To live is to change; to be perfect is to have changed often'.<sup>2</sup> We are all affected by the environment we find ourselves in and we must develop the capacity to adapt,

## Seed Germination



nurturing the capacity to judge how we can bring life to a situation rather than seeking comfortably to fit in. A seed must develop roots as well as shoots.

- 'Father, glorify your name', we hear Jesus say in verse 28. How can we 'glorify' God in the twenty-first century? It has been suggested that we give glory to God by being what we are, when we need to be it.
- The image of shoots sprouting is particularly evident at this time of year. The renewal of the earth can challenge us to consider our own renewal. This organic metaphor of growth and development may be more accessible to some than the idea of a sudden conversion. Nevertheless, this passage is challenging. What is it about hating this life in order to inherit eternal life that sits uneasily with us? Is this statement the complete opposite of what Jesus says in John 10.10: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full'?
- In a globalised economy, the question of who rules the world is once again topical. It certainly isn't kings; some would say that it is bankers rather than politicians; other might suggest that it is personal ambition or human greed. Do these suggestions connect more readily with the questions that Jesus is asking here? Those of us who might have been mistrustful of the language of spiritual warfare might see a different expression of this idea here.

## All ages together

See p.17 for an idea to engage very young children during worship.

### Present the reading

Teach the congregation to sing the chorus of Bernadette Farrell's song, 'Unless a grain of wheat' (see *Hymns and songs*). Break the reading up into suitable sections and read each section and then ask the congregation to sing the chorus. Some musicians might be able to play an instrumental version of the verses behind the reading and time it so that the congregation joins in for each chorus.

### Explore the reading

**You will need:** some wheat seeds (available from health stores); a tray of sprouted wheat grass (this could be left out if not prepared in advance); a storybook or downloaded version of the story of Persephone for children (see [WEB](#) for sources). If downloading a story, then search on the internet for suitable pictures to accompany the story.

Put the wheat grains in a bowl and hand them round so everyone can take one to hold and look at but don't say what they are. Explain that the tale of Persephone is a famous story from Ancient Greece. It would have been well known across the ancient world at the time of Jesus. Tell the story of Persephone with some projected pictures. Invite people to explain what the story of Persephone is trying to say. The story encompasses many themes – about life and death, the turning of the seasons, the role of memory, and growing and changing. Ask people if they can identify the seed in their hand. Show the wheat grass that has grown from the same seeds. Consider the story of Persephone and think about why Jesus used the grain of wheat metaphor in his teaching. Does this offer any insights into our faith? Is faith always the same or does it grow and change as we grow and change?

<sup>1</sup> *Becoming A Master Manager: A Competency Framework*, Robert E. Quinn, Sue R. Faerman, Michael P. Thompson & Michael McGrath, John Wiley & Sons 4th edn.

<sup>2</sup> [www.newmanreader.org/works/development/chapter1.html](http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/chapter1.html)

## Prayers

The text of these prayers is on the [WEB](#).

### Call to worship

Come to God,  
who wants us to flourish.

Come to God,  
who writes the law of life into every heartbeat.

Come to God,  
who knows our failings – but also our possibilities.

### A prayer of approach

We're here to see Jesus!  
And news spreads fast –  
but Jesus is troubled.

We're here to see Jesus!  
But unless the grain of wheat falls and dies –  
it is just a single grain.

We're here to see Jesus!  
Save me from this hour –  
but it is for this reason I came.

We're here to see Jesus!  
And there is a voice from heaven –  
thunder? An angel?

We're here to see Jesus!  
And Jesus is lifted up from the earth  
and draws all people together.

Here is Jesus!

**Amen.**

### A prayer of confession

*For three voices*

1 Come, I am making a new covenant with my people.  
2 But we broke the last one.  
3 And the one before that.

1 Come, I am writing my covenant on your hearts.  
2 But David sinned against you.  
3 And we are not much better.

1 Come, I have written my covenant into a human body.  
2 But the grain of wheat falls to earth  
3 and dies.

1 No, you don't understand,  
my covenant is the grain of wheat that dies and bears much  
fruit;  
my covenant is not for constantly breaking and renewing.  
It is eternal  
and it is everlasting.

**Amen.**

### A personal prayer

I will be their God and they shall be my people.  
I have written my law of love on their hearts.

**Amen.**

### Ways into prayer

**You will need:** newspapers, pencils, scissors and an ear of wheat  
template (see [WEB](#)).

Distribute the templates to cut out. Then invite people to look  
through the papers, find a news story where new life (or a new  
way of seeing things) is needed and cut it out. Ask people to  
stick their ear of wheat to the corner of their news cutting and  
add them to the *Prepare the space* display.

### Prayers of intercession

*For two voices and congregation*

What are you doing?

*I'm planting seeds!*

Wherever we find devastation and hopelessness:

**help us to plant seeds;**

*make us nurturers of fertile ground.*

Wherever we meet fear and anxiety:

**help us to plant seeds;**

*make us nurturers of fertile ground.*

When we find people who want to give up:

**help us to plant seeds;**

*make us nurturers of fertile ground.*

When people want to learn:

**help us to plant seeds;**

*make us nurturers of fertile ground.*

When people don't want to learn:

**help us to plant seeds;**

*make us nurturers of fertile ground.*

Make us workers with you, Lord,  
in your project of creation:

**help us to plant seeds;**

**make us nurturers of fertile ground.**

**Amen.**

### A prayer for all ages together

Just a tiny seed, (*look at something very small in hand*)  
in the earth it goes, (*point finger down into the earth*)  
just a little rain. (*wiggle fingers as hands are lowered*)  
It begins to grow. (*wiggle fingers pointing upward*)

From that tiny seed (*look at something very small in hand*)  
grows a mighty tree. (*open arms out wide*)  
Branches spread out wide (*stretch arms upwards*)  
shelter you and me. (*move hands to protect head*)

In that mighty tree (*open arms out wide*)  
birds will perch and sing. (*open and shut hand*)  
Like the tree, God's love (*open arms out wide*)  
from small seeds can spring. (*look at something very small in  
hand*)

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## Respond to the Word

Ideas to suit different interests, ages and learning preferences.  
The Children's sheet [WEB](#) offers activities to do in worship & at home.

### Investigate growth

Beforehand, soak some sprouting seeds (larger ones such as chickpeas, peas or use a packet of runner bean seeds) for a couple of days to soften them. Give everyone a softened seed and invite them to take it apart very carefully. Note the different parts of the seed and how it is ready to grow given the right conditions: you should see its big food supply, the little shoot and its root waiting to grow. Look up 'parts of a seed' on the internet if you want to be more scientific.

### What is your potential?

Show the John Lewis advert 'Growing Up' (see [WEB](#) for link). Briefly consider what people like and dislike about it. Invite people to think about what they would like the next stage in their own lives to be (for children you might want to phrase this carefully). Invite people to discuss this a bit with their neighbours. Then invite people to say together the words of John 12.26.

### Plant vegetables

Agricultural metaphors don't work very well if you have no experience of growing things, so invite some gardeners to lead an experiment. You can grow vegetables very easily in buckets and storage boxes (even in old boots!). Plant a variety of roots and seeds today, put someone in charge of watering and watch the results.

## A simple worship activity for all ages

**You will need:** some yellow and green sticky notes and pens/pencils.

Give everyone a sticky note and ask them to spend some time thinking about a tiny hope, dream or talent that they would like to be nurtured. Invite them to write or draw something to represent this on the sticky note, making sure that the sticky part is at the base. Plant these in the Lenten garden: bend the sticky bit forward and stick it to the flat surface, pulling forward the rest of the note so that it stands upright.

## When very young children are present

Today's activity offers a chance to explore what is involved in planting seeds.

**You will need:** gardening toys – buckets and spades, kneelers, watering can, wheelbarrow, fabric flowers or vegetables; some tiny plant pots; some sand and some dried peas to use as seeds.

Encourage the children to play with the toys in the sand. Finally, help the children to put some sand into a plant pot and then plant a pea 'seed' in it. If appropriate, you might talk about what might happen to the seed. An extension to this activity might be to sow some mustard seed on to damp cotton wool in an egg box lid for the children to take home.

## Using today's psalm

### Psalm 51.1-12

Just before he died, St Francis said to his followers: 'Let us make a new beginning, for until now we have done nothing.' Deep into Lent, this psalm reminds us that sin is something we must face and overcome, but we can do that only through God's action: a new heart and a right spirit replacing actions that separate us from God. We ask for new life: God gives us that in Jesus.

**Singing together** Go to 'Musical support' on the left-hand menu of the [WEB](#) for how to use the psalms.

**Response line** Between the verses, everyone says or sings: A clean heart create for me, O Lord.

**Hymns and songs based on Psalm 51 include** Give me a new heart, O Lord (LAU, CFES); Create within me a clean heart (CAN); Create in me a clean heart (RE).

## Hymns and songs

*Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.*  
*A key to abbreviations is on the [WEB](#).*

A debtor to mercy alone (HTC)  
As we break the bread (HTC, RS, SG)  
Glory be to Jesus  
I cannot tell  
It is a thing most wonderful  
*Lift high the cross*  
My Lord, what love is this  
My song is love unknown  
Now the green blade rises  
O my Saviour, lifted  
Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle  
*Stay with us* (Taizé) (BPW, RS)  
Such love, pure as the whitest snow  
*Take, O take me as I am* (CH4, SG, WGWG)  
*There is a Redeemer*  
*Unless a grain of wheat shall fall*  
When Christ was lifted from the earth  
*Will you come and follow me*

## Send out

### Live in faith

Sow some flower seeds in a gloomy place this week and commit yourself to nurturing them until they flower.

Create a *good news tweet for the week* about dying to bring forth new life.

### Pray

May the God who is patient with us  
bless us as we carry our journey of faith into the week ahead.  
May the Son who redeems us  
bless us as we confess that we are broken and need healing.  
May the Spirit who gathers us together  
bless us as we seek to live as a community that lives in the light,  
now and for ever.  
**Amen.**