

Kingdom questions

Planning

Lectionary Bible readings

RCL Proper 25 Year A
Leviticus 19.1-2, 15-18, Psalm 1,
1 Thessalonians 2.1-8,
Matthew 22.34-46

Special Sunday Today is Bible Sunday. A new all-age service, based on Colossians 3.12-17 is on the [WEB](#). Further resources can be found on the Bible Society website (see [WEB](#) for a link).

Theme

Living every day as first and last

Six weeks in which we recognise the urgency of the gospel message, reading Matthew's uncompromising words as we approach the celebration of Christ the King. In *Adult & All Age* we read the Gospel alongside Paul's first letter to the emerging church in Thessalonica. Read more about the theme in *Month by month* on the [WEB](#).

Week 2 of 6

Kingdom questions

Matthew 22.34-46

Pressure on Jesus is unrelenting and a lawyer now poses a question about the commandments. Jesus answers this readily and responds with a further question – that no one can answer. Paul acknowledges the suffering of the Thessalonians and responds with words that are tender and gentle.

This week's reading provides an opportunity to:

- see that Paul's churches redefine what we mean by family
- wonder and question to increase our understanding
- recognise the centrality of the commandment to love God and neighbour in Jewish and Christian tradition
- consider who Jesus was as the Messiah
- recognise that the sharing of the gospel is an act of love.

Gather

Prepare the space

Decorate the worship space with question marks: a giant computer-generated question mark projected on to a screen or huge cut-out colourful question marks. Decorate service sheets with question marks or distribute card question marks.

Gathering words

This week we think about questions: some that Jesus was asked and some he asked of other people. We will ask some of our own questions and think about the importance of questions in our lives.

Open the Word

Bible notes

New Testament

1 Thessalonians 2.1-8

Members of the Thessalonian church are wondering about Paul's motivation. When the going got tough, he left town and sought asylum in safer places. He is still keeping his distance, despite the needs of the hard-pressed church he founded. Is Paul any better than the wandering philosophers who go in search of an audience and a quick profit? Is his message anything more than cleverness with words?

Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christians of what they know of him and his co-workers: their courage in the face of opposition, their God-centred preaching, their see-through sincerity and heartfelt care. This is nothing less than the concrete expression of devotion to God and love for the family of faith (notice the intimate family language in vv.1,7-8). It is as if he has seen the commandments reshaped by Jesus' sacrificial generosity, only to commend this example to his converts in ways that speak more powerfully than words. The readiness to share not only a message but also 'our own selves' provides Paul's most robust answer to his critics.

Gospel Matthew 22.34-46

After the Sadducees, it is the Pharisees' turn to test Jesus' authority. This is not necessarily from sinister motives – Jewish teachers are fond of debate and questioning – though by this stage in the narrative, we can be forgiven for being suspicious. Jesus is faced with a much-discussed issue: which of the law's over 600 commands is the most important? His answer brings together the opening words of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6.5) and Leviticus 19.18 (which is included in today's Old Testament reading). Jesus agrees with those rabbis who say that love for God and neighbour forms the foundation of Jewish law. But now, in the Temple precincts, it is significant that there is no mention of worship or sacrifice, a major interest in the law of Moses. Jesus comes to Jerusalem having endorsed the teaching of the prophets that mercy is much more important than offering sacrifices (Matthew 9.13; 12.7). His priorities lie with the fundamentals – the nature of God, the centrality of relationships and community-building values – rather than the particularities of beliefs and practices, with their potential to set one group against another.

Jesus takes the discussions in a new direction. David was a warrior who paved the way for the building of the Temple. A messiah who is 'son of David' would continue to use weapons of war and would give pride of place to a temple whose separate areas for Jews and Gentiles, women and men, and lack of hospitality towards disabled people and children (see Matthew 21.14-16) endorse a divided world. Jesus uses the opening words of Psalm 110 to suggest a new possibility. By calling the messiah 'lord', David brings the analogy of 'like father, like son' to an end. What kind of messiah can God's people expect, then? What will the world that he brings – the world of 'the resurrection of the dead' – look like? What difference will a messiah who is not David's son make to a world that is divided by privilege, learning, beliefs, race, gender, health? Jesus' messianic questions silence an audience bent on testing him. But the issues he raises remain to this day.

Kingdom questions

Living every day as first and last Wk 2

Jesus often answers questions with further questions. Some versions of Christianity give the impression that they are more interested in answers than questions. That makes them particularly prone to answering the questions that no one is asking, or missing what others are really saying. There is surely a place for both questions and answers, as this week's readings show. What matters is that we learn how to listen.

Q What questions would you put to Jesus or Paul?

Q What questions do the readings raise about the priorities of your church?

Sermon ideas

■ Don't forget *PostScript* on the [WEB](#): up-to-the-minute comment available on Thursday morning.

■ Popular perceptions of the commandments are to do with 'thou shalt not'. Jesus' summary of the law, the *Shema*, with which every synagogue service begins, affirms that love is at the centre of Jewish and Christian belief and practice. These words provided an inspiration, and then a framework, for some of the great social reform movements in Britain in the nineteenth century – the abolition of slavery, prison reform and the provision of universal elementary education – and also the part played by the churches in today's food banks and night shelters.

■ Jesus enjoys the rabbinic practice of arguing over the interpretation of Scripture and is unafraid to ask hard questions of the text before him. This is central to Jewish traditions of study, depicted well in Barbra Streisand's film *Yentl* (see [WEB](#)), about a young woman who poses as a boy in order to study the Talmud. The opening song begins with the words, 'There's not a morning I begin without a thousand questions running through my mind...'.
 ■ The 'Son of David' was imagined by Jesus' contemporaries as a military figure, who would win freedom from foreign forces. However, Jesus, as David's Lord, is a figure of vulnerable, self-giving love, not violence. This understanding, along with the convoluted line of deduction, challenges simplistic and preconceived notions of how God makes himself known in the world.



■ Jesus unequivocally locates the foundation of holy living in loving God and loving your neighbour, but other strands of belief are open to investigation and interpretation. He demonstrates how questioning and wrestling with knotty problems of Scripture enriches faith. Not knowing a clear-cut answer to everything does not denote ignorance or lack of faith, but invites the Spirit to bring understanding.

■ Love is at the very heart of the gospel and we see this worked out in the very non-religious context in Paul's evangelisation of the Thessalonian leather workers. Paul makes no claim to Scripture among these pagan labourers; he needs to embody and enable the love of God and love of neighbour that Jesus proclaims without reference to a religious tradition they did not share. Their community is a work-based group of low-paid labourers living in communal lodgings. This freshest of expressions of church was an intimate community that discovered together, day by day, what it meant to live with the love of Christ, demonstrated by another manual labourer, Paul the tent maker, who lived among them 'like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children'. Paul lived the gospel as much as he preached it, and did so in communities with no historical predisposition towards the values of the gospel. How might his Thessalonian experiences shape our proclamation of the gospel in our 'post-Christian' society?

All ages together

See p.37 for an idea to engage very young children during worship.

Present the reading

In order to draw attention to the drama in today's Gospel reading, ask people to shout out 'Question!' each time they identify one. Write these up (electronically, for projection, or on paper). The reader should pause to allow this: after verse 36 and frequently from verse 42 to the end. Then the reader pauses and asks, 'Any more questions?' Have someone 'planted' to call out, 'No more questions!'

Explore the reading

Invite the congregation to give an example of a simple question (e.g. What did you have for breakfast?); a cheeky question (e.g. What time did you come home last night?); a mean question (e.g. Are you putting on weight?); a complimentary question (e.g. Where did you get that cool new bag?); a test question (as in an exam, e.g. What's the square root of nine?); a trick question (e.g. almost any joke); a searching question (e.g. What would you like to be doing in ten years' time?). Identify together other categories of question. Invite people to try out different kinds of questions on each other, then discuss how this felt.

Look at the questions in today's Gospel. What category do they fall into? The religious leaders' question is a mean trick question disguised as a simple question: they want to catch Jesus out. But Jesus treats it as a simple question, gives a straight answer, and shuts them up. What sort of questions are the ones Jesus asks? His last is also a trick question, and all are meant to make the people think.

What sort of questions might we ask as we read the Bible? What really happened? (We can't always know.)

What else do I need to know to understand this story: for example, who were the Sadducees (see *Bible notes*)? Does this story really make sense? What's this story all about? What does this story mean for my life? This is a kingdom question! Are there any questions you would like to ask about today's story? Any answers to those questions? Stress that it's OK to ask any questions you want to: you won't always get an answer straight away, but there is no question God can't deal with.

Prayers

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

Call to worship

Let us offer to God the gifts of our hearts:
our longings, and our love;
the gifts of our souls:
our prayers and creativity;
the gifts of our minds:
our thoughts and decisions.
Let us offer to God the best of all we are.

Gathering prayer

Jesus, our Master, we gather to hear your word:
help us to understand all you would teach us.
Help us to live out our prayers, and,
as we long for your kingdom to come,
equip us to share the good news of Jesus
with sensitivity and grace.
Amen.

A prayer of approach

Gracious God,
we are not called to impose our faith, but to be gentle;
to nurse hearts with hope, to restore battered self-esteem,
to raise up heads that have hung too long in shame,
to shed light into dark and lonely minds,
to heal wounds of past rejection,
to release sin's hold from all that haunts.
Holy Spirit, release and inspire in us your gifts,
that we may be agents of your redeeming love,
after the example of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.
Amen.

A prayer of confession

When our sharing of the gospel has been shallow:
Jesus, Lord and Messiah, forgive us.
When our words have been empty:
Jesus, Lord and Messiah, forgive us.
When we have given nothing of ourselves
and offered no kindness or depth of care:
Jesus, Lord and Messiah, forgive us.
When we have not lived what we have preached:
Jesus, Lord and Messiah, forgive us.
Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

We give thanks for those
who have shared the gospel with us:
those who nurtured our early steps of faith;
those who gave us the freedom to ask questions;
those who taught us to pray;
those we worship with week by week;
those who have gone ahead of us into your kingdom.
As we have been blessed, so may we bless others.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.

A Thessalonian prayer

Living and true God, make us gentle and loving,
caring for one another tenderly as a nurse holds a baby,
so that the good news of Jesus your Son
is shared more through our deeds than our words.
Amen.

Prayers of intercession

God of all people and nations,
we pray for your Church throughout the world.
For those who face hardship and opposition:
strengthen them in heart and soul and mind.
For those who feel their ministry is bearing no fruit:
encourage them in heart and soul and mind.
For those divided among themselves:
unite them in heart and soul and mind.
For those facing great change:
support them in heart and soul and mind.
For those looking for fresh new ways
to reach out to their community:
inspire them in heart and soul and mind.
Upon all your people, Lord:
**pour out your heart, your soul and your mind
through the Holy Spirit.**
Amen.

A personal prayer

Be gentle with me, dear God,
and help me to love you, my neighbour and myself.
Love is such a big word
and I am so often afraid of sharing myself with others;
of trusting others, even of trusting you.
Breathe confidence into my heart,
reassurance into my soul and understanding into my mind,
that I may become as loving as you.
I ask this in Jesus' name.
Amen.

A way into prayer

Spend a moment thinking about your neighbours. What do you
know about their hopes, their needs, their anxieties? Is there
a small kindness you could do for them today? Pray for them
by name and if there are difficulties, ask for reconciliation and
healing in any broken relationships.

A prayer for all ages together

Jesus, Messiah, Special One, Son of God,
we pray for hearts brave enough to love ourselves,
and you and our neighbours.
Jesus, Messiah, Special One, Son of God, hear our prayer.
We pray for souls brave enough to look out
for those who have no one to care for them.
Jesus, Messiah, Special One, Son of God, hear our prayer.
We pray for minds brave enough
to share the good news of your gospel.
Jesus, Messiah, Special One, Son of God, hear our prayer.
Amen.

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.

Question trap

Trap questions are a common literary device. Retell a story about a question, e.g. *Rumpelstiltskin* (see [WEB](#)), or *The Hobbit*. Just as Jesus needed to have all his wits about him, so we sometimes need to think quickly when put on the spot. Try to identify together one good question about Christian faith, and one question that will not really lead to deeper understanding.

Question time!

Ask people to write a genuine question they have about faith or life on a mocked-up graffiti wall. Decorate the rest of the space with question marks and create a question mark border around it. Gather round the wall and invite one or two people to select a question, and see if you can manage to answer it together. There are no complete answers, and wonderment remains at the heart of our faith. Emphasise that this is to be done in a spirit of genuine mutual enquiry. We are not trying to catch each other out, like the Pharisees did with Jesus!

Tender and gentle among you

Display a map of your local area and, if relevant, a map of more remote places where your church supports the work of the gospel. Give everyone a few stickers and invite them to place a sticker wherever the tender, gentle work of the gospel is being practised. When your maps are complete, share again the words of today's reading from I Thessalonians.

A simple worship activity for all ages

God asks us questions, too! Let's answer some of them together.

God asks: Are you listening? (*hands on ears*) **Yes!**

God asks: Do you love me? (*hands on hearts*) **Yes!**

God asks: Will you follow me? (*walking on the spot*) **Yes!**

God asks: Will you stick by me? (*fist in air*) **Yes!**

God asks: Do you know that I will always be with you?
(*raise hands*) **Yes!** (*say together, repeating the actions*)

We are listening. We love you. We want to follow you.

We will stick by you. Thank you for being with us always!

When very young children are present

This week's activity offers a chance to play with things that help us to explore the commandment to love.

You will need: small paper hearts (see [WEB](#) for template); sequins and sparkles; glue sticks; a large sheet of paper with the word 'God' in a large decorated heart in the centre.

Use this simple paraphrase and actions: Jesus said: 'Love God (*point up*) and love each other' (*gesture round the room*). Repeat so the children can join in.

Invite the children to decorate the paper hearts and help them to write their names and the names of people they know on the hearts. Stick the hearts around the 'God' heart on the large sheet of paper. You could end by reading all the names.

Using today's psalm

Psalm 1

How shall we live? Like this...The image of the tree planted by streams of water is both beautiful and powerful. Not only is there refreshment and growth, but a tree stands flourishing for all to see. In contrast, people who are not rooted in God's law are simply blown over and scattered by the wind. The image of roots and growth is an active one, because we are called not to be sinless and static but to take risks, to refuse things that won't do us good, to make God's way our way. That way we will become the people God wants us to be, able to stand firm when the wind blows – and at this time of the year that's another image for the second coming of Christ.

Singing together Go to musical support in the left-hand menu of the [WEB](#) for how to use the psalms.

Response line Between the verses, everyone says or sings: Happy are they who trust in the Lord. There is a response action on the [WEB](#).

Versions of Psalm 1 can be found in PFTP, PAME, PRA and MCW1.

Hymns and songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.

A key to abbreviations is on the [WEB](#).

All my hope on God is founded
Be thou my vision
Father of all, whose laws have stood (HTC, PRA, SG)
Father, we adore you
Firmly I believe and truly
Give thanks with a grateful heart
If you want to be great (CFW, JP)
I'll love the Lord with all that lies inside me (HSN)
O Jesus, I have promised
O Lord, all the world belongs to you
O what a mystery I see (BPW, MP, ICP, PRA)
Open our eyes to see the anguish of the poor (MTW)
People think to be free (SB)
Teach me God to love myself
There's a wideness in God's mercy
Through all the changing scenes of life
You have won me with a love (MTW)

Send out

Live in faith

Practise valuing questions this week. Ask lots of questions and listen to the answers. When asked a question, be ready to give a good answer.

Pray

Be willing to learn, willing to share,
willing to love, willing to care.
And be blessed in your journey of faith today,
this coming week and always.
Amen.