

PETER'S NOTES FOR LENT GROUPS
based on "Living his story", Hannah Steele

SESSION 1 - THURSDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2021

Please watch the interview with ++Justin and Hannah (the book's author) at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qgt1YtFk4k>

The Archbishop says he likes to end his sermons by asking people "Why are you a Christian and why do you go to church?"

What is your answer? Don't just know why you go to church, but also what does Jesus mean to you?

Please read pages 4 to 28 of Hannah Steele Living His Story – if your copy hasn't come, let me know asap and I can scan the pages and email them across.

Here are some questions we might like to discuss:

page 5 – "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."

- this is a bold statement – if we're honest, does it feel like this?
- how do we live this story?
- do we feel we are witnesses?

page 5 – "The empty tomb is an invitation to use to enter into new life in Christ where death is not the end"

- I've got four funerals over the next fortnight – three of them were not church goers, yet want the funeral in church. One (Alan Ferguson) was, and his sons were part of St Matthew's choir, but we're just at the Crematorium! Before we judge any of them, what does "new life in Christ where death is not the end" mean to each of us – then what do we think it means to others, what should I be saying to them?

page 6 – Evangelism as invitation. It is interesting that in the video the Archbishop talks about "being part of the story, part of the Acts of the Apostles", but also talks about "not just the institution" – yet so much is "being part of the church"

What do you feel we are inviting people to?

Have we stopped inviting those nearest to us? Have we stopped even talking about our faith to them?

How do you feel about (page 7) Evangelism is for experts, (page 8) Evangelism is morally dubious, (page 9) Evangelism is irrelevant, (page 9) Evangelism is hard work?

Later in the chapter (page 19), she says

- the gospel tells us we are loved
- the gospel tells us we are forgiven
- the gospel tells us we do not have to fear death

We'll discuss each of these – and try and understand what we need, what other people need, and how we fulfil these needs.

If we are focussing on the story of God, are we able to see God at work outside the church, outside faith in Jesus? I've always sought to lead churches that are part of the community, where we make people feel welcome, where we don't demand people jump through hoops before we deal with them. I've been told we focus too much on beautiful buildings rather than on Jesus Christ.

Page 26 – we are in a post-Christian climate. Even in parishes with a flourishing Church School, where we do teach and tell the Christian story and the story of the Church and its people, the vast majority of children, teachers and parents would not say the Christian story is “a reality in which we live and find our sense of belonging”. When I go into a non-Church story, should I tell the story differently.

In reality, we fail to get more than a tiny minority of people to “live that story”, but does that mean that the story that many are living has nothing of God in it?

page 28 - “Evangelism is always done in partnership with others and most importantly in partnership with God.”

Please stop me being too depressed!

SESSION 2 - Chapter 2 – Catching up with God

page 29 – the story about the hairdresser put me in a bad mood. The lovely Sophie has cut my hair for four years, and we have chatted about her partner,

son, the possibility of marriage, and what I do at St Edmund's. Last time I went she told me he had proposed at Christmas "but I can't get married at your church as that would be hypocritical when I don't believe in God"! I admire her honesty, but I'd still like to marry her.

page 30 – "Witnessing is always done in response to God's initiative and in partnership with the Spirit"

Jesus the storyteller – 35 different stories – many of these still remain part of our cultural heritage – his stories sought to challenge and subvert the normal understanding of how things are or should be – "they sought to offer an entirely different way of seeing the world; the topsy-turvy world of the Kingdom of God" (page 31) – if we are invited into God's story, then Jesus's stories should help us

Respond to God's initiative of love – God loves people who are lost, an urgent message – read Luke 14.15-24 "reveal God's heart for those who are not yet part of his kingdom" (page 33) – do we agree with that?

"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 and ever because God is love" (page 33) – do we agree with that?

Missio Dei – God is the source of mission – for the lost, the least and even the lawbreaker

The Bible as the story of God's love – evangelism is theocentric (finds its origins in God) rather than anthropocentric (finding its origin in the needs of humanity) – Trinity is a God of relationship (of love) – concern of non-Jews too – extraordinary love for ordinary people (who are the lost people in our communities?) – 2 Cor 5.14 "For the love of Christ urges us on" – how do we "simply share the love of God with people"? (page 39)

Pope's words at top of page 40 – focus on those

I find stories like her Valentine's Day one (page 41) rather OTT – is it rather presumptive that we define as "lost" anyone who doesn't share the same belief as me?

Love as motivation, long-term love, trust in God – partnership, joining in with God, never alone, prayer

Chapter 3 – Jesus was in the transformation business

Is there a particular individual in the gospels whose story inspires you?

Personal stories today

Think about the John Drane quote bottom page 54 – do we feel like “spiritual pilgrims with which others can identify”?

Be prepared – can we articulate what faith means to us?

Be accessible – can we tell the story as people (not as religious people)?

Be authentic – are we OK with being ordinary?

Be honest – are we OK with the struggles?

Be bold – is Jesus the centre?

Be relevant – how can I relate to my hairdresser??

Look for the connections – link to the hearer’s story

Be respectful – I will never forget discussing suffering with a Hindu in the parents room of a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

A story shared is a story lived – faith is personal and public (what does that actually mean?)

I doubt we can manage all this in an hour!!

LENT GROUP 3 - THOUGHTS FOR THURSDAY 9 MARCH 2021

Chapter 4 – Catching up with God

page 69 – Jesus’ personality type – Myers Briggs was all the rage when we were at College – “What we need is better and more imaginative ways to connect the gospel we know and believe with the person we are talking to. This is the pressing task of Christian witness” (page 70)

page 70 – Everyday witness – how do we share other things in our lives? – person-to-person approach – might just be an idea of reminding ourselves of definitions:

In Christianity, **evangelism** (or **witnessing**) is the act of preaching the gospel with the intention of sharing the message and teachings of Jesus Christ. A Greek word originally meaning the reward given to a messenger – same root as angel.

Define an “Evangelical church” – all churches should be “evangelical” – although the Church of England has traditionally been the church every English Man has automatically been part of, there have been made “evangelical revivals” in the CofE – when the importance of personal conversion, personal belief, has been stressed.

Friendships and relationships – communicate like Jesus did? Do any particular stories of him communicating with others, particularly relate with you? What is your response to the phrase “beautiful evangelism”?

page 72 – who do we relate to? who do we relate to outside church? How might we relate this summer? – build relationships with those around, as individuals (and as a church) – as a church: Vicarage garden party, tea and cake in and outside our church buildings, or will we all be away relating to others as individuals?

page 74 – how do we relate differently to different people? how do we talk about faith in a way which will make them think? – evangelism is not about communicating information but to encounter the other – not done *to* people, but *with* people.

page 77 – start from a place of love – does the shepherd imagery help you? what image does?

page 79 – Jesus makes himself vulnerable – Covid and post-Covid is certainly a travelling to a place we have never been before – is it a good thing that our churches are more vulnerable now than ever before?

page 82 – Jesus allowed himself to be interrupted – are we OK to “go with the flow” – good discipline to look back at the end of a day and remind ourselves what has been good (some people find it helpful to write it down, then they can look back and see what God has done)

page 83 – Listen as well as speak – when I was a child I wanted to go into the book makers (I liked books). I still would not have a clue what to do if I went into a betting shop at the age of 58! interesting example she gives from St Paul's Cathedral (page 85) of the horror of people watching us share a chalice.

page 86 – Jesus asked good questions – any examples touch you? Once when I was giving blood, the nurse asked me what Lent was. I explained and led the discussion on to what we give up (meaning to talk about why, with a spiritual meaning). It ended up being a debate with several nurses who were all giving up chocolate so they were bikini-ready for the summer ...

page 87 – Restorative and full of grace – I will content myself that I helped them find positive self-images of themselves!

LENT GROUP 4 - THOUGHTS FOR THURSDAY 18 MARCH 2021

Chapter 5 – Passing on the story of Jesus

page 89 – read Acts 2 and the story of Pentecost – a dramatic explosion (which I suggest is like nothing anything you or I have ever seen in the churches we attend) – perhaps the disciples were expecting a quiet confidence, what they got was something very different – so successful that 3,000 people were added to their number (I do wonder what that actually means)

Throughout Acts, the Spirit is seen at work – the primary witness to the events – chief agent in the growth of the church – how have we seen that in this pandemic year (I find the food parcels story (page 91) difficult – I do believe in a miraculous God, so I shouldn't be surprised if he can re-fill a car's boot, on the other hand I find it easier to believe that someone mis-counted. I would like to think that my Harry's work feeding the hungry in Newcastle is just as miraculous, even if it is done by a non-Church organisation. Perhaps it is more miraculous since many of the people he works with do not need a religious faith to motivate them).

The story of Philip in Acts 8 is about chance encounters (anything but 'chance' where the Spirit is concerned)

Cornelius in Acts 10 is about the outsider, who comes in and becomes key – do we have faith that God is at work with people outside the church (and, it almost seems to imply, is he only at work in them if he is bringing them to church?) – will we trust the Spirit if it leads the church in new and different directions? – I

struggle to balance the “we have something wonderful here that we want Society to join” with the “God is calling us to do a completely new thing”

How have we witnessed in this pandemic? It is very easy to be able to list all the wonderful things we have done, and feel decidedly annoyed by those in our churches who we have not seen for a year – how do we move our churches on, but not leave behind those who are hurting/struggling/feeling abandoned by their church?

page 100 – Variety – can we find the resources to offer variety?

page 102 – Seeing God, not taking God – is this something that resonates with us? I think we are quite good at seeing God in the wider community, realising that so many act with love and Christian virtues (even if they would never claim to be Christian). How do we sense God at work? How do we help others to sense God at work?

page 109 – working in partnership, but not hiding our Christian faith – are we willing to do this, especially if the Spirit pushes us out of our comfort zones

Chapter 6 – Finding echoes of the story of Jesus in our world today

page 114 – “The gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest gift we could ever offer to another person” – I know I should say “Amen”, but ... I have some good friends who don't share my Christian faith, and I honestly can't say my goal in life is to make them believe. Perhaps I should resign now, or perhaps I need to change my goal.

Read the story of Paul in Athens in Acts 17 – do the steps she gives help? 1 Look and listen, 2 giving credit where credit is due, 3 looking from a different angle, 4 pointing to Christ.

LENT GROUP 5 - THOUGHTS FOR WEDNESDAY 24 MARCH 2021

Chapter 6, continued

page 123 - Look at the questions – who are we? (but none of the books she mentions are books I have ever read) –

What's wrong? – what a shame she doesn't start with what's right!

What's the solution? – I have seen *Les Mis*

What's the future?

Chapter 7 – Stories of finding Jesus

Road to Damascus – read Act 9

Road to Emmaus – read Luke 24

I have never put these stories together, seeing the similarities and the differences.

page 143 – the importance of evangelical preaching, and she has a point when she writes “We must avoid the temptation to allow the criticism of a particular model of evangelism to become an excuse for doing nothing”

How do we nudge people along the pathway? – change negative perceptions – enquirers’ courses – how do we help people to live his story (without limiting his story) – time, community, getting involved

page 160 – Conclusion – I could write this conclusion myself, but I would also want to acknowledge (and celebrate) that God works with other people. The buttresses (those who support the church from outside) are just as welcome, and it is a privilege for us to share their stories too.