

## Growth Groups for Lent 2017

### Prompts to reflect on before meeting

Some prompts are given below for each of the five meetings during Lent.

They are not discussion materials or Bible-studies. They are some quotes and thoughts to set the theme for the week. It will be best if each person looks through these either at the start of the meeting or (even better) in advance. Reflect on the words (particularly anything which 'jumps out' at you) and use them as a mirror to look at your own life.

This is definitely *not* about beating yourself up! Look first and mostly for the good things that are true in your life, and let the thankfulness and joy rise up in you as you think on the things God is doing in and through you. Think how you will tell others about them.

And there may be one or two areas where you feel challenged, or excited about a possibility that is not yet true. This is God's Spirit prompting you, inviting you into something new. Don't be downhearted about past failings (you can say sorry for those and move on) but think about what will be necessary for you to move forward. What would you like to tell the others about this?

When the members of the group have done this, then you are ready to begin the group time using the 'Spiritual Growth Groups for Lent' guidance.



Material based on the Community of St Chad 'Rhythms of Grace' course, which draws on Smith, J. and Graybeal, L. *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* (Harper, San Francisco Rev 1999), who in turn acknowledge the early church 'Fathers and Mothers' who attribute everything to Jesus!

## RHYTHM ONE: By God's grace I will seek to be transformed into the likeness of Christ

*"Discipleship is more than getting to know what the teacher knows. It is getting to be what he is"* (Juan Carlos Ortiz)

Paul writes:

We are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3: 18)

He expects us to become ever more Christ-like; when people meet us, they smell Christ:

Through us [God] spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him [Christ]. (2 Corinthians 2: 14)

Jesus said:

If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me. (John 15: 5, CEV)

And Paul again:

Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten and everything is new. (2 Corinthians 5: 17, CEV)

John tells us that:

...when he appears we shall be like him. (1 John 3: 2).

A startling thought! And Paul claimed that, even in the here and now:

...for me to live is Christ (Philippians 1: 21);

and that Christians:

... should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (2 Corinthians 5: 15).

**Try saying these about yourself:**

*I speak and act in a positive way wherever I can*

*I think on what is right, pure, lovely and admirable*

*I am honest in word and action*

*I look to Jesus for an example*

*I think about and choose who has influence over my life.*



You may remember the image we were given last year of the shuttering (which we put up) and the concrete (which God pours in). The image is of co-working: we have a part and so does God.

## RHYTHM TWO: By God's grace I will be open to the presence, guidance and power of the Holy Spirit

Jesus spoke of the Spirit as being like the wind, not seen but felt, particularly in people whose lives are touched by the Spirit. (*John 3: 8*)

The Holy Spirit makes God the Father and Jesus the Son real to us. By the Spirit we call God 'Daddy' (*Romans 8: 15*)

The Spirit is nothing less than God within us. Being open to the Spirit's **presence** is saying "yes please", wanting and asking God to let His influence change us.

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Jesus used a word to describe the Holy Spirit that means helper or encourager or close friend, who would remind his followers of his teaching, and help them to understand it (*John 14: 26*). The Holy Spirit would also be their **guide** (*John 16: 13*). There are many situations in life when we do not know what direction to take, how to respond to something that has been said or done to us. We can talk to God about these dilemmas, and ask God to guide us. It is the Holy Spirit who will work within our minds and with our emotions to show us the way we should take.

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After Jesus had risen from the dead, he promised the disciples the ability and the courage to speak and act for him. He said it would happen when the Holy Spirit came to them (*Acts 1: 8*).

On the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came in a dramatic way (read Acts, chapter 2). The disciples were changed from being timid and nervous to being confident and bold. They found they could speak out for Jesus, even if it brought them into conflict with the authorities. They even discovered they could heal people in the power of Jesus. This was all because of the **power** of the Holy Spirit in them (*Acts 4: 29-31*).

One of the results will be the steady growth of personal qualities that Paul calls the *fruit of the Spirit* (*Galatians 5: 22-23*).

Paul also speaks of the *gifts of the Spirit* (*1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 and Romans 12: 3-8*). *Ephesians 4: 11* has another similar list. God gives these free of charge; we have no part in 'earning' them, and they are mostly for the benefit of others.

Paul encourages us to be *filled with the Spirit* (*Ephesians 5: 18*). We are leaky vessels and need to keep asking to be *filled* again. Expect some surprises! The Spirit is like the wind – unpredictable.

**Try saying these about yourself:**

*I want the Holy Spirit in my life*

*I often ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit*

*I try to be sensitive to the Spirit's promptings. And then I obey them.*

*My gift is ....*

*I am sometimes surprised at where the Spirit leads me.*

## RHYTHM THREE: By God's grace I will set aside time for prayer, worship and spiritual reading

The third Rhythm of Grace identifies three practices necessary to strengthen and give balance to our spiritual lives. Of the five Rhythms, this is the one most under our own control - I can choose to set aside time, or not. However it won't help if we reduce Christianity to a set of observances, this is an invitation to explore a vast new world full of delight and joy!

*Help!* is valid prayer, and Jesus indicates that God will not short-change those who ask for his help (Luke 11: 9-13). But when Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray, it was because they had observed his own practice of praying in solitude late at night or before dawn. Prayer in secret was the foundation of Jesus' earthly life. And he encouraged them to:

...go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father. (Matthew 6: 6)

Prayer is 'talking to God about what we are doing together.' (Dallas Willard)

'Prayer lays hold of God's plan and becomes the link between His will and its accomplishment on earth. Amazing things happen, and we are given the privilege of being the channels of the Holy Spirit's prayer.' (Elisabeth Elliot)

'Prayer has far more to do with what God wants to do in us than with our trying to "reach" or "realize," still less "entertain," God in prayer. This truth eliminates anxiety and concern as to the success or non-success of our prayer, for we can be quite certain that, if we want to pray and give the time to prayer, God is always successful and that is what matters. . . . What we think of as our search for God is, in reality, a response to the divine Lover drawing us to himself.' (Ruth Borrows in *Essence of prayer*)

'Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depth of our hearts.' (Mother Teresa)

Prayer

"...all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise; praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed; praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." (Reflections on the Psalms, C. S. Lewis)

James K.A. Smith in his book "Desiring the Kingdom" describes how worship can be a 'transforming encounter' which re-aligns and restores an individual's desire back towards God, where the day-to-day secular pressures and influences around us have drawn us away from him. Like a magnet attracting a compass needle, every time we come to God in worship we re-shift and re-orientate ourselves towards God again.

Worship

The Bible is core to the Christian faith, it is one of the ways in which we believe God tells us who God is, who we are and what all of that means! It isn't an instruction manual but a complex and rich narrative of the way that God has been at work in the world since the beginning. It is rightly referred to as the living Word of God, and we need to find ways to let it work on us.

*"the goal is not for us to get through the Scriptures. The goal is to get the Scriptures through to us."* (John Ortberg: The Life You've Always Wanted)

Spiritual reading includes a wide range of other reading too, and this will depend on the sort of person we are. John Martin wrote:

"People's knowledge of their faith needs to be at the same level as their professional knowledge and practice. Our churches need to be much more serious about being places of learning." ([www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/?643](http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/?643))

But beyond learning is an *attitude* to the things we read, indeed to everything we experience. It's an attitude of looking for God in things, listening for what God might be saying.

### Try saying these about yourself:

*I live out of my praying*

*The kind of prayer I currently find most real, most helpful, most challenging and which orients me towards God is ....*

*Worship brings me alive*

*I let the Bible work on me by ...*

*I love to listen for God's voice in my reading and experience (is this easy or hard? Which expresses more love?)*



## RHYTHM FOUR: By God's grace I will endeavour to be a gracious presence in the world, serving others and working for justice in human relationships and social structures.

This reminds us to follow the example of Jesus, who showed compassion to all. He healed and cared for the sick, forgave the sinful, and shared meals with prostitutes and corrupt officials. He also addressed issues of injustice and fought against it.

Jesus believed that true compassion was motivated by love. When asked which commandment was the greatest, he said:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments. (*Luke 10:27*)

Jesus also teaches us to look for Him hidden in people, saying that when we care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison, we are serving him (*Matthew 25: 31-46*).

The philosopher Aristides in AD 125 wrote of the Christians:

"They despise not the widow, and grieve not the orphan. He that has distributes liberally to him that has not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him as if he were their own brother: for they call themselves brothers, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit of God; ... if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, and they have not an abundance of necessaries, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food."

Care for the poor and marginalised is not only about provision. Christians have to go beyond direct aid and join the struggle for justice. We may be called to oppose the structures and institutions that deny those in need access to certain occupations, job promotions, essential services, educational opportunities, adequate housing, and more.

Psalm 82:3 says, "*give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.*"

And the prophet Amos is very clear in distinguishing between true worship (which leads inevitably to a passion for justice) and empty worship.

Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
But let justice roll on like a river,  
Righteousness like a never-failing stream. (*Amos 5 23-24*)

**Try saying these about yourself:**

*I look for Christ in every person*

*I try to be generous with my time and money without being asked*

*It is part of my worship to meet the needs of others*

*I oppose inequality and injustice when I encounter it.*

## RHYTHM FIVE: By God's grace I will sensitively share my faith with others and support God's mission both locally and globally.

Rhythm Five reminds us of the great commission that Jesus gave his followers just before he ascended into heaven:

*"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

(Matthew 28:19-20, and see Mark 16: 15; Luke 24: 47; John 20: 21)

and in Acts 1:8

*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"*

The New Testament demonstrates that Jesus' first followers shared the *good news* wherever they could. For example Peter's encounter with the crippled man (Acts 3: 11-26) Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 26-29). The Apostles also taught about Jesus in synagogues, private homes, and public meeting places. Paul stood in the public square in Athens (Acts 17: 16-32).

And the first followers of Jesus showed their faith by how they lived. Justin Martyr, an early Christian theologian, explained this in a letter to Emperor Antonius Pius:

*"We formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, but now love only chastity; before we used the magic arts, but now dedicate ourselves to the true and unbegotten God; before we loved money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and to everyone who is in need; before we hated one another and killed one another and would not eat with those of another race, but now since the manifestation of Christ, we have come to a common life and pray for our enemies and try to win over those who hate us without just cause."*

Justin also pointed out that some of those who had been opposed to Christianity had been won over because of the honesty of Christians in their business dealings and their forbearance when cheated.

Paul wrote:

How can people have faith in the Lord and ask him to save them, if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them?  
(Romans 10: 14)

And 1 Peter 3:15 says

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

**Try saying these about yourself:**

*I ask God to give me opportunities to share my faith*

*I pray for those I know, family, friends, people on my 'frontline' (where I spend most of my time, the place God has put me) and look for moments to share my joy*

*I think about how to express the Good News in today's language*

*I take an interest and support mission initiatives in other parts of the world*