



Great 50 Days

DISTRICT INITIATIVE



The Kindness Course Leaders' Notes

The Great 50 Days of Easter run from Easter Sunday (17th April) to Pentecost Sunday (5th June) and this year we're offering an opportunity to explore more urgently and more deeply than perhaps we have for some time, just how we're called to be 'Easter People', filled with the hope of Christ alive within us; ready to experience more of God's spirit in us and through us, transforming the world.

Find out more here:

www.yorkshirenethodist.org/great50

This document has been written by Revd Dr David Perry for leaders and facilitators of the Kindness Course in a local context.



Leaders' notes

These brief notes are intended to enhance your group discussions by providing a few additional pointers and ideas to aid your exploration of the material.

SESSION 1

THE THEOLOGY BEHIND EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS

p.6 Q. If you were asked to describe how non-Christians view God, what words come to mind?

Q. Why is that?

How non-Christians often view God. This is the context we need to take into account in our mission and evangelism

A word cloud of suggestions might look like this.



God is understood as an abstract concept, unrelated to everyday life, rather than being experienced as relatable. Frequently God is blamed vehemently for allowing suffering and anguish – “how can you believe in God when...”. God is often seen as judgmental, looking down on us and seeing the worst in us.

p.7 Q. Why then do we find it so difficult to love others like Jesus loves us?

On the one hand this question should elicit honest and open reflection about our fallible and imperfect lives, whilst also enabling us to consider the roots of our hesitancy and reluctance to fully engage with others, as we share our vulnerability and fears.

Q. So in summary, what picture of God do these texts give us that we can easily share with others?

Time to encourage the group to build a fresh and thrilling picture of God which will be attractive to others.

SESSION 2

EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : GETTING THE FUNDAMENTALS RIGHT

p.8 Q. What does this photograph say to you about where we find ourselves as church?

This is Filey beach at low tide, with people enjoying walking on the sand. It is a liminal moment, a between time. The tide will soon turn and come back in, erasing all signs of human activity on the beach, wiping the slate clean as it were. This is in contrast to the substantial promenade which is fixed, permanent, solid.

The image is a metaphor for the missional context of the church post-pandemic. It challenges us to go beyond what we know and engage with people where they are, beyond the 'unchanging fixity' of traditional church. Down on the beach everything is provisional and temporary; there is freedom to explore together.

The photograph brings to mind Thomas Arnold's telling phrase in his poem "Dover Beach":

The sea of faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

In this way the photograph echoes the secular context in which we seek to engage with non-Christians, all those who choose not to walk the fixed promenade of traditional church and for whom the sea of faith is effectively out of sight and out of mind.

p.10 Q. How might this understanding change our priorities as church?

These two key texts move our focus away from Sunday Church as the 'be-all and end-all' to being missional disciples in a world of crying need, because that was the clear priority for Jesus in his teaching and ministry. Given the cost of living crisis, rapidly increasing poverty, declining mental health and the unfolding eco-crisis, to name but four current components of the angst that is so prevalent in society, shifting our priorities as church is an urgent task isn't it?

SESSION 3

EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

p.12 Q. What does God do in this story?

Q. What role do Elijah and the widow have in making God's intentions happen?

God directs Elijah to journey to Zarephath. No reason or purpose concerning Elijah's **own unfolding ministry** is identified, this is about his survival in a time of hardship and famine. God will provide for him there and, through the faith of a widow, has a plan already in place. This is enough for Elijah and he goes. By bringing these two people together God enables them to realise the promise of scripture in a way that impacts their lives hugely.

The widow is open to Elijah's request and has a wellspring of generosity within her, despite her own desperate plight: she will meet the need of this stranger for a drink. She won't ignore his plea. For his part Elijah calms her fears, grounds her response in something she can do – give him some water – and from there enables her to provide not just for Elijah, but for herself and her son too. Drawing on his faith he quotes God's word, a text that is simply perfect for their joint predicament and which speaks directly into their dilemma. Here God's promise, Elijah's choice of it and the widow's trust in it, is the key to these two people finding a solution that seemed out of reach but which God knew could be delivered.

p.13 Q. In what ways is Boaz generous and kind?

Q. What effect do you think this has upon Ruth?

This is the backstory of how Ruth the Moabite and Boaz came to be married. Be prepared to offer a brief overview of the story up to this point in chapter 1, as it concerns tragedy and struggle and sets the scene for what happens here in chapter 2.

Post #MeToo we might helpfully note that the power dynamics in this story are one-sided. Boaz has the power, Ruth has precious little. Does Boaz's question "To whom does this young woman belong?" and his injunction to "keep close to my young women" grate in modern ears? If so why? The group might want to explore any ways in which they find the story uncomfortable.

SESSION 4

EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : ENCOUNTERING JESUS

p.14 Q. what stops the church from being truly who Jesus calls us to be?

This is a catch-all question that can provide a moment of catharsis for the group as they identify the myriad ways in which the church is held back and inhibited from being what Jesus needs it – and us – to be. It is a time for honest reflection upon our own experience as well as taking aim at all of the familiar frustrations which are so common, from dull worship, boring meetings to purposeless agenda's etc.

p.15 Q. If the church exists to 'seek and to save the lost', what must change?

This question builds upon the answers to Q.14 by encouraging the participants to imagine what a truly mission-shaped church would look like as it sought to connect with "the lost". The group might usefully first consider who are the "lost" in their context today? What does "seeking" entail and what might "saving" look like? Crucially, what would it feel to be a part of a church like this and what values would drive the decision-making.

SESSION 5

EXPLORING EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS : THE WITNESS OF JESUS

p.18 Q. What barriers are overcome here?

Encourage the group to think of anything and anyone that could have stood in the way of this miracle happening. Here are some pointers: Jesus's mother could have simply sarcastically complained to those seated around her that the wine had run out. Instead she knew that Jesus could remedy the situation and directly challenged him to do something about it, for the sake of everyone present. Jesus breaks through a more selfish circle of concern ('it's none of our business, the host should sort it out') to demonstrate the all-inclusive life-giving principle of the transformational Kingdom of God. Religious convention is upended as the stone water jars are used pragmatically not for purification but for pleasure. The servants do as they are told by Jesus, even though he is not their master and what he is asking of them seems very odd. The new wine is outstanding, defying expectation.

Q. How does this story inform our approach to doing God's mission?

The story depicts a bold, radical approach to mission which is breathtakingly novel and which deploys resources that are already present. On the flip side we can easily imagine what might have unfolded to block this success: from lack of concern, paucity of vision, a

deficit of confidence to try something radically new, the story points to potential barriers to mission which need to be faced today.

SESSION 6

FOR FOLLOWERS OF JESUS EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY AND UNEXPECTED ACTS OF KINDNESS ARE NORMATIVE

p.19 Q. In what ways does this story really challenge us?

Note that “the first shall be last and last shall be first” is the interpretative heart and soul that Jesus gives to the story he tells about the casual day workers in the vineyard. Just as the story is set within the real and recognisable rural poverty of the time, and deliberately subverts its economics, so too Jesus is making a profoundly revolutionary political and spiritual point regarding God’s generosity and kindness in the context of Roman Imperial subjugation.

p.20 Photograph

Using the photograph of the rainbow and the text from Genesis 1, the group could helpfully pause to consider just what the covenant promise - and the purpose it carries, namely the **flourishing of all life on earth** – means to them. How important is this overarching inclusive vision of ecological wholeness in a time of climate crisis and global conflict? Is this a message that has the power to connect afresh with people today?

p.21 Q. Why do you think the early church was so markedly generous and kind?

A good place to start is to consider the impact of Jesus’s kindness and generosity on the lives of those he touched and transformed. Having experienced God’s amazing kindness and grace or themselves the early Jesus movement felt compelled to embody it to the full for the benefit of others.



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