

- ◊ watching rather than responding to need?
- ◊ We may have had moments or experiences in our lives which have led us to answer as Martha answered, “Yes, Lord. I believe”. How has this transformed us?

RESPOND (15 minutes)

No sharing would be complete without a commitment to putting our faith in practice. You may like to share what you have decided upon and /or keep a record of your response.

- ◊ In what ways is your parish a life giving place? Consider ways in which these might be developed.
- ◊ Spend some time meditating on the Stations of the Cross, pondering on the faces of the people that surround Jesus on this journey, but focusing on the central face, the face of Christ himself.

Closing Prayer

The leader, or another member of the group, then leads the group in the closing prayer.

God of Life and Love, inspire us to be prophetic witnesses to Christ, the resurrection and the life.

Help us to break free from all that binds us,

all that prevents us from living out the call of our baptism.

Open our hearts to be transformed by your invitation to new life.

Give us the courage to respond and the wisdom to know how.

Through Jesus Christ, your Son,

who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, forever and ever. Amen.



Diocese of Westminster

Agency for Evangelisation

<http://rcdow.org.uk/faith/small-groups/>

LENT 2017

Proclaim Westminster
building missionary parishes



Introduction to faith sharing materials

Meeting Mercy

Welcome to this season of faith-sharing material to accompany us on our journey through Lent. Our gathering each week will follow the Sunday Gospel Readings and the teaching of Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and his Apostolic Letter to mark the end of the Holy Year of Mercy, *Misericordia et Misera*.

The Sunday Gospels for Year A of Lent – the Temptations, the Transfiguration, the Woman at the Well, the Man Born Blind, the Raising of Lazarus – will give us a brilliant lens through which to look at our own lives, the life of our parish communities and the lives of those around us. The Holy Father’s Letter, *Misericordia et Misera*, invites us to “*unleash the creativity of mercy*”, will spur us to reflect deeply and to dream daringly.

I hope and pray that everyone who embarks on this faith-sharing season will find it an experience of rich discovery and deepening discipleship.

Fr Chris Vipers

Director of the Agency for Evangelisation

The materials have been written by the members of the Agency for Evangelisation: Fr. Chris Vipers, Mary Crowley, Austra Cane, Adrian Cullen and edited by Diana Klein. The structure of the meetings has been taken from *At your word, Lord* and this introduction booklet is an edited version of their introduction materials.

Our journey through Lent

As we journey through Lent this year, we listen to God in the sacred scriptures seeking God's mercy so that our lives may be transformed and, through our service to others, share the joy of God's mercy. In his letter *Misericordia et Misera*, Pope Francis urges us to meditate on the words of St. Paul, who in referring to his own journey of faith, confesses that he was the greatest of sinners, "but for this reason I received mercy" (1 Tim 1:12-13, 16).

The dynamic of your community and reflections will be enabled by following these simple guidelines.

Leaders

Each community will have its own leader. A leader is not someone with all the answers who is there to put everybody else right. He or she is a fellow participant but with the particular responsibility of facilitating the community by:

- Preparing ahead of each session
- Developing a warm, accepting and open environment
- Guiding the group through the faith sharing process outlined on the following page
- Distributing the various tasks among members of the group
- Listening to what participants have to say
- Keeping the group on track
- When necessary, asking questions to keep the discussion moving
- Being flexible
- Gently including more hesitant members
- Ensuring that every participant has the opportunity to speak.

With the help of your group leader and other members of your faith

recognise, to articulate who Jesus is. She does not fail, all her experiences, conversations, observations of Jesus have led her to say, "Yes, Lord, I believe ..."

So much of our own human experience of loss is here. Jesus, manifesting the humanity that we often fail to recognise, is in "great distress", he sighs from the heart and finally weeps.

Let us never allow ourselves to be robbed of the hope born of faith in the Risen Lord. We are often sorely tested, but we must never lose our certainty of the Lord's love for us. His mercy finds expression also in the closeness, affection and support that many of our brothers and sisters can offer us at times of sadness and affliction. The drying of tears is one way to break the vicious circle of solitude in which we often find ourselves trapped.

Maybe in this narrative we see what have been our own first steps in being able to respond to the challenges living the Christian life offers us. If I have a sure and certain faith that Jesus IS the resurrection and the life, and that, because of that, all the glory of God is revealed to me, I will have the courage, strength and determination to live as Christ as shown me to live. When Jesus says "Unbind him, let him free" perhaps we can see ourselves too in Lazarus. What are the bands that bind us?

What temptations, secrets, blindness, fears prevent us from the life that Jesus calls us to live. Maybe grief, anxiety, resentments, practical problems of life have held us in the tomb. Jesus calls to us today "Come out", be set free. And what of the crowd that surrounds this action, trying to work out what's going on? Some are brought to belief, others to questioning and rejection. Have we been part of that crowd too, helping to release 'Lazarus' and going back to our lives transformed, believing, experiencing new life – or being critical, suspicious, cynical?

REFLECT

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions, then share your reflections.

- ◇ How and when have you felt somewhat like Lazarus, bound and trapped in the tomb?
- ◇ How and when have you been part of the crowd, standing around and

Pope Francis tells us, “...we see the particular importance of the moment of death. The Church has always experienced this dramatic passage in the light of Christ’s resurrection, which opened the way to the certainty of the life to come. ... Yet death must be faced and prepared for as a painful and inescapable passage, yet one charged with immense meaning, for it is the ultimate act of love towards those we leave behind and towards God whom we go forth to meet.” (*Misericordia et Misera* 15)

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following question, and then share your thoughts.

Share

Recall your own experiences of illness and death of those you love, thinking particularly of your reactions and emotions .

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES (45 minutes)

Instructions: Some time before the next meeting, the leader may ask a member of a group to read the Gospel for the fifth Sunday of Lent Year A.

Gospel: John 11:3-7.17-27.33-45

Take some time for silent reflection after the Scripture passage is read; then read the following reflection silently or aloud.

This Gospel of the Fifth Sunday of Lent is our last step on the journey towards the events of Holy Week, the culmination of a series of Sunday gospels touching on choices, on change, on water, on light and on life – a reflection on our baptismal journey, and the journey of our catechumens, now the Elect, towards Baptism at the Easter Vigil. This week, we encounter the tomb of Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, and a friend of Jesus. In just two weeks we will be at another tomb, an empty one, singing alleluias, in faith, at the joy of resurrection.

Themes of glory and belief run through this passage. Jesus says, ‘This sickness will end not in death but in God’s glory, and through it the Son of God will be glorified.’ Martha, on being told that her brother ‘will rise again’, says, almost like a lesson learnt, ‘I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus’ reply: ‘I am the resurrection. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die...’ offers a challenge to Martha, to face, to

sharing community, we would encourage you to see the small community meeting not merely as a discussion group where you just talk about ideas but as a sharing group in which you might grow in faith. Indeed, as Jesus says, “where two or three gather in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”

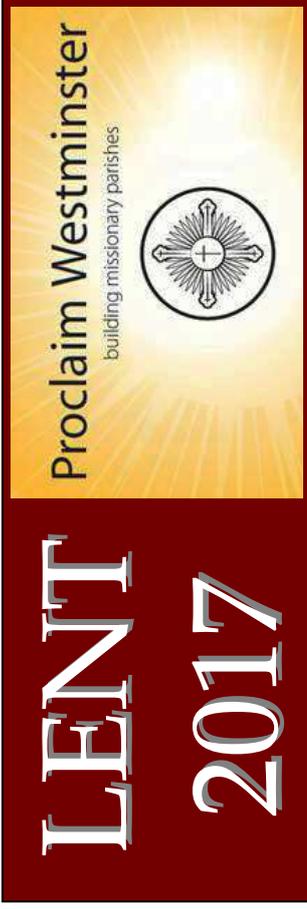
Gathering

Gathering as a small community to share prayer, life and faith is an important aspect of parish life. This is a sacred time. When you come together, it is important that you take the time to get to know one another. Therefore, in the first session, begin with introductions and, in subsequent sessions, take time to ask one another how you are, what has happened since you last met, and if someone is new to the group, take the time for introduction.

Hospitality and environment are very important to the small community process. Try to have a reflective environment with as few distractions as possible. You may want to have a candle where you gather in order to create a reflective atmosphere and you will want to have a Bible as a sign of the central role of the Word.

The suggested time for each session is 90 minutes. Prayer will probably take different forms in your group; people in the group should be invited to lead the prayer and we will make some suggestions. It is helpful to try varied ways of praying; some may be more comfortable with one style while others with another. Ordinarily, it is good to have about 15 minutes of prayer. Silence is an important part of the process. Don’t be afraid to pause during your prayer time or, indeed during the reflection time for some quiet.

Each week, we have an opportunity to respond. It may be a good time to assess our priorities and see how we are living our faith in the totality of our lives: in our families, in our relationships, in our work environment. We may not need to do more; we may need to do less. This is the time to look at how we are living the values of Jesus and perhaps to identify new behaviours and attitudes.



Structure of the Meeting

In planning your sessions, it is important to know that each session has a beginning, a middle and an end. Putting it into practice:

Beginning—about 30 minutes

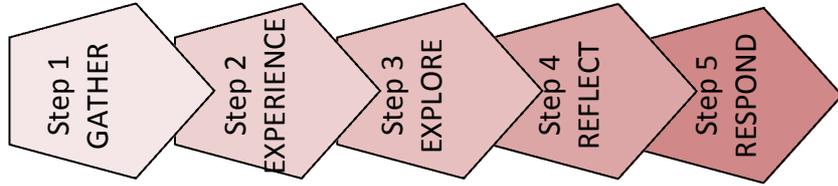
- Step 1: We GATHER. This is a time of introductions or catching up with one another
- Step 2: LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE. This part of the session is about “my story” and how it relates to the theme of the session.

Middle—about 45 minutes

- Step 3: EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES. This is the part of the session where we explore “God’s story” and to reflect on what you have heard.
- Step 4: REFLECT. Here we are given the opportunity to reflect on “our story” and how God’s story and our story link together.

End—about 15 minutes

- Step 5: RESPOND. Finally, having reflected and shared, we are faced with the challenge of responding. How am I to respond to what I have heard? What difference will this session make to me and how I live out my faith?



Week Five, Meeting Mercy The Raising of Lazarus

GATHER (30 mins)

Living our faith

If you wish, share something of how last week’s session has influenced your thoughts and actions.

Opening prayer

Grant, almighty God, through our yearly observance of Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE/Living our faith

Take a few minutes to read the following reflection silently or aloud

Many of us have stood at a funeral, faced an open grave, watched the curtains close around a coffin, buried the ashes of one we loved. We know what it’s like to feel the turmoil of emotions that come with that experience. We may have spent time with someone suffering the illness that will end in death, may have been the one who cared for someone suffering. Or we may have had the shock of a sudden death. Often these experiences have changed us in some way, have made us look at life – and death – differently.

then share your reflections.

- ◇ What did Jesus teach us in curing the blind man, and how can we share this message?
- ◇ When we are sick or someone close to us is very ill, how can we strengthen our trust in God, and show others how they too can trust in God's mercy?
- ◇ Healing of the sick was an outward sign of God's mercy, and something that has continued in the Anointing of the Sick. How can we help to show others the healing power of God's Mercy?

RESPOND (15 minutes)

No sharing would be complete without a commitment to putting our faith in practice. You may like to share what you have decided upon and / or keep a record of your response.

- ◇ What can you do to support the sick and housebound in your parish?
- ◇ What Jesus did for the blind man was spiritual but it was also practical. Go and visit someone who is suffering, spend some quality time with them and do something practical for them.
- ◇ Pray for those who are ill, those who care for them and for those who work in health and social care.

Closing Prayer

The leader, or another member of the group, then leads the group in the closing prayer.

Gracious and loving God
as we take Communion to the sick and housebound
help us in your mercy
to bring them your healing in body and soul,
through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen



Week One, Meeting Mercy *In the desert*

GATHER (30 mins)

As this is the first session in this Lenten faith sharing series, take the time to introduce yourselves and, perhaps, about why you said yes to participating in this small community.

Opening prayer

Grant, almighty God, through our yearly observance of Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE/Living our faith

Take a few minutes to read the following reflection silently or aloud

When we daily see so many shocking images on our TV screens - of thousands of migrants crossing the treacherous waves, of children dying of starvation or people living in constantly bombed cities - it can be all too easy to close our eyes and hearts as soon as the TV is switched off. The temptation is to justify our inaction by reasoning that, as individuals, we are helpless—or we project the responsibility for change on to the international community, or the countries involved in a conflict or even the victims of suffering themselves. We can pray for the suffering of others, but what more can we do?

Oskar Schindler was a German industrialist, a womanizing, heavy-drinking, German-Catholic and Nazi Party member who is credited with saving the lives of 1200 Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his enamelware and ammunition factories. During the Second World War, many people closed their eyes, hearts and minds to the suffering inflicted upon hundreds of thousands of their countrymen, even their close relatives or neighbours.

So why did this unlikeliest of all role models answer the call of conscience? Was it because he learned at one point that people who were not deemed fit for work were going to be sent to extermination camps and killed? Hundreds more were killed on the streets by the Nazis as they cleared out the ghetto. Schindler had his workers stay at the factory overnight to prevent them coming to any harm. Schindler witnessed the liquidation of the ghetto and was appalled. From that point forward, Schindler changed his mind about the Nazis. He decided to get out and to save as many Jews as he could. Why did he not turn a blind eye like so many of his fellow countrymen?

Schindler was a man all too human, full of flaws, like the rest of us, just an ordinary man. Why did he rise to the highest level of humanity to save the lives of others? Why did he spend everything he had and even risk the lives of his family and himself? Schindler's life story bears witness to goodness, love and compassion, an inspiring evidence of human decency. Louis Bülow said it all, "Oskar Schindler not only saved the lives of 1200 Jews; he saved our faith in humanity".

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on what you have heard or read. Then share your reflections.

Share

1. The temptation not "to get involved" is great. Can you think of a time when you resisted the temptation?
2. Can you think of a time when the actions or words of another challenged you or your living out of the Gospel?

His profound

gesture of worship now shows his faith in Jesus as divine. His seeing is one thing; his believing is something more.

The whole story of the blind beggar's cure is summarised in a brief final teaching from Jesus (39-41). Jesus came to give sight to those who recognise their blindness, and to show the blindness of those who think they already know all they need to know. When the Pharisees near him overhear his teaching for the cured blind man and the disciples with him (9:2), they reject any suggestion that they are blind. They really cannot see, Jesus tells them bluntly because their stubborn refusal to believe in him keeps them locked in their blindness.

The mission of Jesus was to preach the good news and to bring healing; to restore the friendship between God and humanity. Healing of the sick was an outward sign of God's mercy, and something that has continued. In the early Church, St James says, "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven" (James 5:14-15).

In the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, Pope Francis notes that the prayers are not just for encouragement, but that through faith we will receive mercy and our lives will be transformed. God's love goes before us, and if we open ourselves to God he will come to meet us in love – and where our sickness is of the spirit, where there is sin, we can trust that God is always with us ready to show his mercy.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick reminds us of each person's dignity, and that in caring for those who are ill, we care for Jesus himself. Pope Benedict tells us that in the dust and spittle that Jesus uses to make the paste to put over the blind man's eyes, he is showing us a new creation, where the blind will see; yet for those, such as the Pharisees who think they already see, in rejecting the blind man and Jesus, they will always remain blind.

REFLECT

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions;

Pope St. John Paul II who became Pope in 1978, was a keen sportsman, enjoying jogging, swimming and hiking in the mountains, and was very fond of football. Over his 27 years as Pope however, he was seriously injured by an assassination attempt, had a number of cancer scares and in his last few years succumbed to Parkinson's Disease, having difficulty speaking and hearing, and suffering severe osteoarthritis. In February 2005, his health deteriorated and he had to have a tracheotomy because of breathing problems. On 31st March 2005, now back in his private residence, his condition worsened and he was close to death.

Described as "serene and lucid" to the end, John Paul managed to speak several times before finally losing consciousness. When he was told about the thousands of young people singing and calling his name outside his window in St Peter's Square he said: "All my life I have been searching for you. Now you have found me."

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following question, and then share your thoughts.

Share

- ◇ What do you think Pope St. John Paul meant by his comment, "I have searched for you, and now you have come to me"?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES (45 minutes)

Instructions: Some time before the next meeting, the leader may ask a member of a group to read the Gospel for the fourth Sunday of Lent Year A.

Gospel: John 9:1-41

Take some time for silent reflection after the Scripture passage is read; then read the following reflection silently or aloud.

Jesus took the initiative to cure the blindness of the blind beggar (9:10). Then he sought him to offer the gift of believing in who Jesus really is. The healed man already knows that Jesus is a prophet (9:17), that he has unique power (9:32) and that he comes from God (9:33).

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES (45 minutes)

Instructions: Some time before the next meeting, the leader may ask a member of a group to read the Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent Year A.

Gospel Matthew 4:1-11

Take some time for silent reflection after Scripture passage is read; then read the following reflection silently or aloud

When we begin the forty-day Lenten journey, the Scriptures invite us to be united with all who are suffering from starvation, different forms of war, oppression. Also, it invites us to break old models of thinking we might have formed over the years. By doing so, we can make our conscience much sharper and able to see the temptations of our time more clearly. This is a hard and a life-long work. However, we are not alone in this. Jesus also was tempted by Satan throughout his whole life and we can expect the same. The only difference is that our temptations will be shaped by the time we live in and might be not always self-evident.

Pope Francis asks us to go back to very basic truths of love and mercy and to learn again how to live by them and be shaped by them. He invites us to try to discern the working of God in each concrete circumstance and to offer an accompaniment of each other in our parish communities.

By doing so, Pope Francis reminds us of a few truths. The first one is that "time is greater than space" (*Evangelii Gaudium*. 222-225). He means that we should not be trying to fill, or dominate space and shape it as we believe it ought to be shaped. We have to respect the pace and the timing of each person's conversion. There might be a temptation on our part to do otherwise and therefore to deny a genuine sense of belonging within the Church for some people who might feel they are excluded. Feelings of exclusion might be different depending on each person's life situation, but exclusion is always painful.

Our God of mercy and compassion never stops drawing compassionate mercy from us: "*We have learned that God bends down to us (cf. Hosea*

11:4) so that we may imitate him in bending down to our brothers and sisters, for nothing is more pleasing to the Father than a true sign of mercy" (Misericordia et Misera 16).

REFLECT

Instructions: The leader invites people to take few moments of silence to reflect on the questions. Then share your reflections.

- ◇ What does this gospel passage say to you?
- ◇ Can you see how to go back to these very basic truths of love and mercy and to learn again how to live by them and to be shaped by them?

RESPOND (15 minutes)

No sharing would be complete without a commitment to putting our faith in practice. You may like to share what you have decided upon and /or keep a record of your response.

Think about what God is inviting you to do:

- ◇ Is there someone you need to listen to and to allow to grow in God's love in their own ways and pace?
- ◇ Are there examples of loving communities in your parish? Are you able to acknowledge what they are doing and thank them?

Closing Prayer

The leader, or another member of the group, who has been advised in advance, then leads the group in the closing prayer.

Loving God, teach us to
fast from judging others; feast on Christ dwelling in them
fast from emphasis on differences; feast on the unity of life
fast from apparent darkness; feast on the reality of life
fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness
fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.
fast from discouragements; feast on hope and enthusiasm.
Through Christ, our Lord, Amen.
(Unknown author)



Week Four, Meeting Mercy

By the Pool

GATHER (30 mins)

Living our faith

If you wish, share something of how last week's session has influenced your thoughts and actions.

Opening prayer

Grant, almighty God, through our yearly observance of Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE/Living our faith

Take a few minutes to read the following reflection silently or aloud

Good health is something we all hope for and wish one another. If someone is taken ill, we pray that they will get better soon. However, we may know someone, or maybe even ourselves, who have an illness that is serious and prolonged, or perhaps it is a permanent disability. We pray for them too and ask God to bless them to be with them in their suffering. We accompany them, visit them and care for them. You might say that we are allowing God to work through us.

- those you are challenged to love". So who are the challenging ones for you?
- ◇ What should a Christian response be to issues around social exclusion and stigma?
 - ◇ How could our parish respond to those on the margins of society?

RESPOND (15 minutes)

No sharing would be complete without a commitment to putting our faith in practice. You may like to share what you have decided upon and/or keep a record of your response.

- ◇ *Something to do* – Find out what you can about different charities involved in work with the homeless, victims of human trafficking, alcoholics, drug addicts or victims of domestic violence. You may find the Caritas Westminster website helpful – www.rcdow.org.uk/caritas.
- ◇ *Something to pray* – Sitting with the Lord at the well, ask him to help you review your life and examine your own conscience.

Closing Prayer

The leader, or another member of the group, then leads the group in the closing prayer.

Leader: Let us pray to the Father and ask him to form a new heart within us

All: God of all compassion, Father of all goodness, to heal the wounds our sins and selfishness bring upon us you bid us turn to fasting, prayer, and sharing with our brothers and sisters. When our weakness causes discouragement, let your compassion fill us with hope and lead us through a Lent of repentance to the beauty of Easter joy.
Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

(from the Roman Missal 1974– Alternative Opening Prayer)



Week Two, Meeting Mercy
On the mountain

GATHER (30 mins)

If you wish, share something of how last week's session has influenced your thoughts and actions.

Opening prayer

Grant, almighty God, through our yearly observance of Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE/Living our faith

Take a few minutes to read the following reflection silently or aloud

Joe's life suddenly changed. He had been living with his mother who looked after all his needs since he had become ill. But now Joe found himself isolated in his village; his mother had died and he was too afraid to go out other than to the corner shop. He was lonely and depressed. The only company he had was Rita who called in once a week to help him with his shopping and his bills. Joe asked Rita one day how much she got paid for looking after him? "I don't get paid for this", said Rita. "I'm a volunteer. I do it because I enjoy it, and it helps me to get over my problems. Perhaps you should try being a volunteer". Joe laughed. He didn't think he had it in him to be a volunteer.

The next day Rita called in unexpectedly and told Joe to put his coat on. “We’re going volunteering” she said. Joe did not think it was a good idea, but did as he was told. They went along to the high street, past the corner shop where Joe did his shopping, and stopped at a local charity shop for the elderly; and Rita introduced Joe as the new volunteer.

Every week after that, Rita would take him along to the charity shop. He helped sort out the clothes and bric-a-brac, and even learned to use the till. One day, one of the older customers asked Joe if he could help her in her garden and he agreed. He now helps tidy gardens for elderly people two or three days a week as well as helping in the shop. When Rita asked him one day what volunteering had done for him, Joe responded that it had changed his life—just when he wasn’t looking and—while he thought he was helping to change other people’s lives.

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following question, and then share your thoughts.

Share

Can you identify with Joe’s story? In your own experience, have you seen lives being transformed by what you do for others? Can you think of a time when your life was transformed by someone else doing something for you?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES (45 minutes)

Instructions: Some time before the next meeting, the leader may ask a member of a group to read the Gospel for the second Sunday of Lent Year A.

Gospel Matthew 17:1-9

Take some time for silent reflection after Scripture passage is read; then read the following reflection silently or aloud.

It is often the case that climbing a hill or a mountain can give us a sense of being closer to God. The challenges of everyday life are left far below, and there is nothing to interrupt the lifting up of our heart and mind to God. In scripture too, the mountain is often the meeting place between God and humanity.

was where Jesus, tired and thirsty after his journey, needed to be the most. It is reasonable to assume that even in Sychar, her own Samaritan town, she would have been regarded as an outcast – 5 times married and now living with someone else. Using the well at noon, when the sun was at its hottest, suggests that others wouldn’t let her use the well at the same time as them. Hers would have been a lonely walk. But then to meet Jesus turns rejection on its head. As a Samaritan she would have been looked down on, treated as unclean, by all Jews – and she was used to seeing herself that way. But not by Jesus. She is clearly shocked that Jesus is speaking to her at all, never mind asking her for a drink. But it is the clear and natural and life-giving gift of water which Jesus uses to express his thirst for her faith, to unlock the deepest desire of her heart, and to unseal a spring in her “welling up to eternal life”.

We can wonder about this woman’s name. St John never tells us. We only know that the story she tells brings others to Jesus, to their own confession of faith in him as saviour of the world. We may not know her name but we know that she is one of the first evangelists, almost like an apostle. Her story is personal too: “He told me all I have ever done.” It is the authenticity of her personal testimony which compels the most.

Pope Francis speaks of “*the love of God, which is capable of looking into the heart of each person and seeing the deepest desire hidden there*” (*Misericordia et Misera* para.1). Speaking of another woman in the Gospel, a woman known by everyone to be a sinner, Pope Francis tells us that in meeting Jesus, “what great joy welled up in the heart” (*Misericordia et Misera* para.3).

God knows us – and loves us – through and through, no matter how far we have wandered through the choices we have made, no matter how deep we might have sunk. No matter what.

REFLECT

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions, then share your reflections.

- ◇ A priest was once heard to bless the congregation at the end of Mass with these words: “May almighty God bless you, those you love, and

abuse and neglect. The mission and aim is to help vulnerable women make choices and changes in their lives to break out of the multiple cycles of chaos, abuse and social exclusion that they seem to be locked into. Employees of the charity and volunteers offer support in accessing appropriate services, practical assistance in getting the best help needed, training in life skills and one-to-one support for a woman's health and wellbeing. Each and every woman matters to them. One woman, sharing her testimony of how *women@thewell* helped her to break free, says: "Where I was 4 years ago to where I am now: I was sticking needles in my arm 4 years ago. I was lying on a bus and waking up on the floor with people stepping over me. Now it's like looking over at a different person. A few years ago I couldn't say no but now I can. And my confidence is coming back. I didn't have any confidence a few years ago. It was kicked out of me, knocked out of me through the domestic violence and everything."

(A personal and powerful testimony to a charity which tries to help women embrace personal and powerful change.)

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following question, and then share your thoughts.

Share

What is your **first** reaction when you see or hear stories of drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution and homelessness in Britain today?

EXPLORE THE SCRIPTURES (45 minutes)

Instructions: Some time before the next meeting, the leader may ask a member of a group to read the Gospel for the third Sunday of Lent Year A.

Gospel: John 4:5-15,19-26,39-42

Take some time for silent reflection after the Scripture passage is read; then read the following reflection silently or aloud.

Historically the town or village well was always known as a place of meeting, particularly for women, and as central to the community as water is to life. It was also a place of peace, somewhere cool to rest. It

It was on a mountain that God made a covenant with Noah when his ark came to rest after the Flood (see Genesis 8:4). It was on a mountain that God asked Abraham to make a sacrifice of his only son Isaac and then God provided the Ram as a substitute (see Genesis 22:2). On Mount Sinai God revealed himself to Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 19:16-20:12). Elijah met God in the "still small voice" (KJV) or "gentle whisper" (NIV) (see 1 Kings 18). And, now, Jesus and his closest disciples get a glimpse of the glory that is to come. They are transformed.

In *Misericordia et Misera*, Pope Francis shows us how mercy constantly gives rise to joy: "Everything is revealed in mercy; everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father" (para 1). He goes on to remind us that we can find God's mercy given in a particular way through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, when "we feel the embrace of the Father who comes to meet us and grant us the grace of being once more his sons and daughters" (para 8).

Paragraph 8 continues: "We are sinners and we bear the burden of contradiction between what we wish to do and what we do in fact (cf. Rom 7:14-21). Yet grace always precedes us and takes on the face of the mercy that effects our reconciliation and pardon. God makes us understand his great love for us precisely when we recognize that we are sinners. Grace is stronger than sin: it overcomes resistance, because love conquers all (cf. 1 Cor 13:7). In the sacrament of forgiveness, God shows us the way to turn back to him and invites us to experience his closeness anew." Pope Francis reminds us that, "in the sacramental life, mercy is granted us in abundance. . . . In the Church's prayer, then, references to mercy, far from being merely exhortative, are highly performative, which is to say that as we invoke mercy with faith, it is granted to us, and as we confess it to be vital and real, it transforms us" (*Misericordia et Misera* 5).

REFLECT

Instructions: The leader invites people to take few moments of silence to reflect on the questions. Then share your reflections.

- ◇ Think of a time when you have been transformed or when

you have seen someone else transformed. If you are willing, share what happened with the others.

- ◇ How does the Sacrament of Reconciliation reveal God's mercy to us and transform our lives?

RESPOND (15 minutes)

No sharing would be complete without a commitment to putting our faith in practice. You may like to share what you have decided upon and/or keep a record of your response.

Think about what God is inviting you to do:

- ◇ Rita knew just how to “unlock” the key to Joe. There are so many people in the parish just waiting to do something. Identify one of them and help them find their niche.
- ◇ Pray for those people who suffer from mental illness, and those who care for them, that they may be witnesses to God's mercy.
- ◇ Commit to celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation this Lent

Closing Prayer

The leader, or another member of the group, who has been advised in advance, then leads the group in the closing prayer.

Christ our Lord, your light shines into the shadows, and shows us where the obstacles to change lie.

We know that often they are in our own hearts, in the way we live, and in our daily choices and actions.

We pray that we accept the light of your love as a challenge to change ourselves and our world.

We pray that, each day, we make the choices and take the actions that will bring an end to poverty and hunger, and lead us all towards a fairer world.

Be with us, Lord, as we face your challenge and learn how to live our lives in love. Amen

(Linda Jones c 2004, CAFOD)



Week Three, Meeting Mercy *The Woman at the Well*

GATHER (30 mins)

Living our faith

If you wish, share something of how last week's session has influenced your thoughts and actions.

Opening prayer

Grant, almighty God, through our yearly observance of Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects.

We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

LISTEN TO EXPERIENCE/Living our faith

Take a few minutes to read the following reflection silently or aloud

In 2007, a remarkable charity opened its doors for the first time in a converted hotel just north of the City of London. The charity, *women@thewell*, was inspired by an equally remarkable Religious Sister, Sister Lynda Dearlove, who for ten years had been working in the East End of London with women involved in human trafficking, prostitution, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, and with physical and mental health issues. The charity envisions a society in which all women are empowered to achieve their full potential free from discrimination,