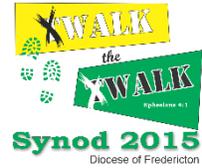


OUR NOVEMBER 2015 SYNOD

STUDY GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

As I reflected upon our November 2015 it occurred to me that the main points of [my charge](#) should go beyond those of us who were there. I am sure that Synod delegates have reported to parishes about the content of the charge, but I believe there is a need for as many of us as possible to engage with these ideas.

The purpose behind this study guide is to give as many of us as possible the opportunity to grapple with some of the issues I raised. It comes in the form of three studies. None of them will take more than an hour, one ideal venue for them is Vestry, though they should go beyond this.

SESSION 1. WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

The basis of our faith is Jesus. Surprisingly this is something that can be very easily forgotten. The conversion of C. S. Lewis from atheism to Christianity is often held up as an example of coming to faith in Jesus. In his memoir "*Surprised by Joy*" we discover there was more to it than that. On page 226 Lewis writes:

"In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in and admitted God was God. I knelt and prayed, perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England".

Many people presume this was Lewis's conversion to Christianity; it was not. The passage is an account of his conversion to belief in God, generally known as Deism. If we read on in the book we discover it is approximately a further two years before he decided to follow Jesus.

Why is it so important to make this distinction? The Christian faith is not about a notional relationship with a distant God. Rather it concerns a life giving encounter and relationship with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit.

What follows is a very basic outline of the Christian story. You will find it helpful to look up the Bible references as you read it through.

VERY BASIC CHRISTIANITY 101

Whatever we believe about the early chapters of Genesis they tell a particular story. Whether we see them a literal truth or a poetic explanation of a deeper meaning, what they teach remains the same.

- 1) Humans were created for a perfect relationship with God (Genesis 1: 26 – 28).
- 2) Humans turned away from God and that relationship was broken (Genesis 3: 1 – 10)
- 3) God seeks to restore the relationship, firstly through Abram (Abraham) and the Jews (Genesis 12: 1 – 3) and ultimately through Jesus.
- 4) Jesus lives and dies in order that the original relationship can be restored (Romans 6: 1 – 10).
- 5) People are asked to put their faith in Jesus. As a result they receive God’s Holy Spirit as their helper and guide in growing to be more like Jesus (Ephesians 4: 29 – 5: 2).
- 6) Baptism and Confirmation are signs that a person has been incorporated into the Church and is a follower of Jesus (Romans 6: 3 – 5).

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why do you think it is important to be a follower of Jesus rather than solely a believer in God?
- 2) How did you become a follower of Jesus?
- 3) Paul makes it clear that followers of Jesus are part of one body, the Church (1 Corinthian 12: 12 – 15; Ephesians 4: 1 – 6 and Romans 12; 3 – 5).
 - i) Why does he use these body images?
 - ii) Why is unity in the body so hard to maintain?
 - iii) What strategies can we use to maintain unity?

SESSION 2. THE GREATEST OF THESE IS... .

In the Charge I suggested that the most important thing we can do as far as our future is concerned is to move more deeply into prayer. In order to help us all with this I have sent a copy of Richard Peace’s book *Meditative Prayer* to each parish for use during Lent 2016. Consequently, I will step over that part of the Charge and move on to other aspects.

In Session 1 we began to look at the idea of the Body of Christ, this time we will continue that theme in a little more depth. In Ephesians 4: 2 we are told to bear with one another, which in the original Greek means “put up with each other”. The problem is that often within our life as

congregations we find this very hard. This affects us in two ways: people are often unhappy and find it hard to worship; and, warring Christians can be a poor witness in our communities.

In 1 Corinthians 13 we are reminded about the need for love (charity, agape). Basically this means putting the needs of the other person (people) in the relationship before our own. This can be very hard, because we are all from time to time convinced of the rightness of our opinion. In our current society the emphasis is often on winning. To allow someone else's view to carry the day is seen as weakness. This picture with God is often different. His heart's desire is that we should all respond to his love, but he does not get his way. It is painful for him, but he allows us our choice.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why can disputes arise so easily within congregations?
- 2) Is it necessarily weak to not insist on our own way?
- 3) What do we need to learn in order to "bear with one another"?

People have very different views about the Bible and how valuable it is as a guide for life. Some of us see it as the literal word of God, dictated by God and copied down by the authors word for word. At the other end of the scale are those who see it as a collection of different types of literature in which the writers reflect upon God and his nature. Most of us are somewhere along this spectrum.

For the whole of the life of the Church the Bible has been seen as the guiding light for the people of God; in fact, this has been true for both Jew and Christian. Today an issue for us is how well do we know it?

QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you honestly believe about the Bible? Where are you on my suggested spectrum?
- 2) Why is studying the Bible often so hard?
- 3) How could Bible study be improved for you?

SESSION 3. THE DIFFICULTY OF DOING AND BEING.

It seems that most of us agree that Christianity has lost a good deal of its influence in New Brunswick during the last 50 years. There are numerous reasons for this and many of us feel upset or confused about it. There is a hope we might be able to go back to the “good old days”, but that does not seem to be possible and some would question if it is even desirable.

The question for us then becomes how do we move forward? An often used response is to jump into a frenzy of activities where we try to attract people to our church buildings, in the hope that if we can get them through the doors they will stay. This does not seem to have worked terribly well over the years, so what can we do?

The story of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, can help us here. In Luke 10: 38 – 43 we have the story of Martha wanting Jesus to chastise her sister for being lazy and sitting at his feet while she gets on with the preparations. Jesus says that Mary has chosen what is better. In John 12: 3 we find that Mary acts by anointing Jesus. For many of the characters in the Bible we see this pattern of listening to God and then action.

The other thing to note about this pattern is that the reflection often leads to action for the benefit of others. The greatest example is found when Jesus prays on the Mount of Olives on the night before his crucifixion (Luke 22: 39 – 42), but there are many more. Our prayers need to lead us outwards to engagement with the communities into which God has placed us.

One of the greatest challenges as we engage in this process is three-way listening. Listening to God, listening to the community and listening to each other. It is by doing this that we are able to see a way forward.

QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the most important reasons for us to reach out to the communities around us?
- 2) Should we reach out?
- 3) What stops us from reaching out?
- 4) How do we create three way listening space?
- 5) To whom do we need to speak in the community to help us discover where we can be of help?

[Click here for a copy of the Bishop's Charge to Synod](#)