

St Peter and St Paul, Seal

LENT 2008

PRACTISING FAITH:

The things Christians do and why
they do them ...



The Maria Gomez cross

The picture on the front cover of this booklet is from El Salvador. It commemorates the life and work of Maria Gomez. She was a primary school teacher and a member of a Baptist church in El Salvador in the 1980's which had a particular concern for issues of justice at a time when El Salvador was experiencing a time of state violence and oppression. Maria worked among other things to promote adult literacy, so that the poor in her community could be better informed about their rights. In 1989 she was abducted by a group of armed men as she left school, beaten, raped and shot dead. Her body was found dumped by the roadside. The Maria Gomez cross was commissioned by her friends to commemorate her life. Her everyday actions – teaching, caring, and working in the fields – are superimposed on the cross, the symbol of Christian service, to emphasize the connection between her life and her faith.

IMPORTANT NOTE!

Although you don't have to do anything except turn up and join in to do this course, you will probably find it helps, if possible, to have looked up and **read the Bible passages mentioned in advance**, so you have a rough idea of what they are about. Don't worry if you can't do this, though, as we will read them on the day.

If you have a reasonably modern translation of the Bible, **please bring it with you** to the sessions, but I will have plenty of spare Bibles on hand for you to borrow if you need to.

SESSION 1

INTRODUCTION

How did you first come into contact with Christian faith? My guess is that it wasn't through a systematic study of its beliefs – incarnation, redemption, salvation. Most of us probably first encountered Christianity in action. We came to church for worship, saying the prayers and singing the hymns along with others. We were baptised or confirmed. We took Communion or watched others do so. We heard the stories of faith at school or Sunday school, or from family and friends. We helped with fundraising or collected for charities like Christian Aid. Perhaps we received from the church some special care or support at a time of loss or difficulty.

It is right that faith should be seen in action. It shouldn't just be pious theory. But there is a danger that we become so busy doing “Christian” things that we forget why we are doing them, what they mean and why they matter.

Maria Gomez' life was rooted firmly in her faith. She knew why she did the things she did, and as a result she was able to find the strength to continue to do them even in the face of threats to her life. If our faith is to be real and to make a real difference to us and to others, we need to understand the things that we do when we come to church and within our community. In this five-week course, we'll be looking at some of those “Christian practices” – the things Christians do. We'll be exploring their history and the Biblical and theological ideas that underlie them, but most of all we will be exploring what they mean for daily life.

- What do you remember of your first encounters with Christian faith?
- What did those experiences tell you about the values and priorities of Christians?
- How do you experience Christian faith now – what do you DO because you are a Christian (inside or outside the church)?
- What difference do these things make to your life?

WALKING THE WAY - Baptism and Commitment

Read: Exodus 30.17-21, Isaiah 1.16-18, Mark 1.1-8, Acts 10.44-48, Acts 16.13-15, Acts 8.26-39, Romans 6.3, I Cor 12.12-13, Galatians 3.27

- What do these passages from the Bible tell us about Baptism and the ritual use of water?

A SHORT HISTORY OF BAPTISM

Like many religions Jews practiced ritual washing as part of their faith. Ancient baths (mikveh) survive from the 1st Century.

John the Baptist's ministry offered a baptism of repentance – washing that symbolised the new start people needed to be ready for the coming of God's kingdom. What he offered was not the same as the “once and for all” baptism that Christians go through, but it paved the way for it.

Christian Baptism was originally an initiation rite into a religion that was persecuted, so those joining it had to be very sure they

knew the risks they were facing, and what it was that they were committing themselves to. Sponsors – people who were already Christians – acted as guarantors that the candidates for Baptism would not betray the church. Preparation was very lengthy and the rite itself long and complex. It included what we would now call Confirmation in one service, and led immediately to being admitted to Communion, even in the case of children. It was led by a Bishop. As the church grew in size though, Baptism was delegated to priests, but Bishops retained the privilege of Confirmation, so the two ceremonies became separate. Baptism was normally the gateway to receiving communion however, right up until the 1500's.

According to the Bible it was common for whole households, presumably including children, to be baptised together. People had much more of a sense of themselves as part of a particular community or tribe than they do now, so this wouldn't have seemed odd.

Later on it became common for people to delay Baptism as long as possible. This was not because they placed low value on it; quite the reverse in fact. They believed that because it washed away sins it was important afterwards that you did not sin again, which, as we all know, is hard to achieve. Their answer to this was to be baptised as late as possible! The Roman Emperor Constantine was not unusual in choosing to be baptised on his death-bed – not much chance to sin after that!

However, one school of thought, led by Augustine, held that babies were born stained by “original sin” – sin inherited from Adam – and so they should be baptised as soon as possible after birth, since they could not be saved and go to heaven if this stain of sin remained. This view came to predominate, and very early

baptism of babies became the norm in churches that practise infant Baptism until comparatively recently. Un-baptised babies who died were often denied burial in consecrated ground.

Today the picture of baptism is very mixed. Some churches baptise infants, some only adults. Some have rigorous baptism policies, others are very open and require little commitment or preparation. Some emphasize Baptism as a rite for joining the church; others emphasize it more as a family's act of thanksgiving and dedication of their child.

- Are there things that surprise you in this brief history of Baptism?
- What is your experience of Baptism and Confirmation?

COMMITMENT

Baptism and Confirmation have always involved commitment – a decision on behalf of the individual or their parents to identify themselves as Christian. In being baptised we are not necessarily saying that this is the only right path through life, but that this is the one we choose to follow. The first followers of Jesus were not called Christians but followers of “The Way”.

- Looking back at your life, what have been the “decision/turning points” on it – times when you had to choose one path rather than another?
- How do you feel about committing yourself to something if that means closing off other options? (You might think of choosing a job or a spouse for example.)

- Have there been times when you have found it difficult to “walk the Way” and follow what your faith tells you is the right path.

SESSION 2

SACRED ENCOUNTERS – Communion

INTRODUCTION

- What was your first experience of Communion (receiving it yourself or watching others receive it)?
- If you had to explain to someone else why Communion is important for Christians what would you say?

Read the following extract from *Angela’s Ashes* by Frank McCourt

Frank has just taken his First Communion. He is taken back to the house of his very devout and rather fierce grandmother, where she insists he eats a large breakfast in celebration. The combination of the difficulty he had found swallowing the very dry Communion wafer whole, as he had been instructed to,, and the large amount of rich and fatty food to which he is unaccustomed has the inevitable effect...

“The food churned in my stomach. I gagged. I ran to her backyard and threw it all up. Out she came.

Look at what he did. Thrun up his First Communion breakfast. Thrun up the body and blood of Jesus. I have God in me

backyard. What am I goin' to do? I'll take him to the Jesuits for they know the sins of the Pope himself.

She dragged me through the streets of Limerick. She told the neighbours and passing strangers about God in her backyard. She pushed me into the confession box.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's a day since my last confession.

A day? And what sins have you committed in a day, my child?

I overslept. I nearly missed my First Communion. My grandmother said I have standing up, North of Ireland, Presbyterian hair. I threw up my First Communion breakfast. Now Grandma says she has God in her backyard and what should she do.

The priest is like the First Confession priest. He has the heavy breathing and the choking sounds.

Ah...ah...tell your grandmother to wash God away with a little water and for your penance say one Hail Mary and one Our Father. Say a prayer for me and God bless you, my child.

Grandma and Mam were waiting close to the confession box. Grandma said, Were you telling jokes to that priest in the confession box? If 'tis a thing I ever find out you were telling jokes to Jesuits I'll tear the bloody kidneys outa you. Now what did he say about God in my backyard?

He said wash Him away with a little water, Grandma.

Holy water or ordinary water?

He didn't say, Grandma.

Well, go back and ask him.

But, Grandma...

She pushed me back into the confessional.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, it's a minute since my last confession.

A minute! Are you the boy that was just here?

I am, Father.

What is it now?

My grandma says, Holy water or ordinary water?

Ordinary water, and tell your grandmother not to be bothering me again.

I told her, Ordinary water, Grandma, and he said don't be bothering him again. “

- Christians have often slipped into superstitious thinking about the Eucharist, as if the bread and wine somehow work by magic. How might this damage our faith?

SACRED MEALS

Just as many religions give sacred significance to water (remember last week's session on Baptism) so it is common to give sacred significance to food. We need both to stay alive and cannot “manufacture” either entirely for ourselves – we may sow the seed that grows into the crops, but we can't govern the process by which that happened.

It is no surprise that food and shared meals have often been regarded as holy therefore.

Read Exodus 12.1-20

- What else do we celebrate with communal meals?
- Why do we celebrate by gathering together and sharing food?

- If someone invented a pill that we could take on our own to replace shared meals what would we miss out on?

HOLY COMMUNION

Read: John 6.1-5, 25-35, Matthew 26.26-30, 1 Corinthians 11.17-33

- These passages have been very important in shaping the way Christians understand Communion. What ideas or advice do you think people have drawn from them?
- Who do you think ought (or ought not) to receive Communion and why?

Jesus seems to imply in what he says that in some sense when we take Communion we are especially close to him, or are reminded of that closeness. We are meant, though, to experience that closeness throughout our lives – Communion is a focus which helps us to be aware of God’s presence with us at all times.

- What sorts of things would you class as “spiritual experiences”? Have you ever had an experience which you could not explain rationally, and which you have felt was a “sacred encounter” or a moment of unexplained peace, wonder or insight?
- Have you ever felt that God is particularly near or that he is telling you something – if so how have you known this?
- People often say they are “spiritual” but not “religious” – what do you think they mean, and what do you think of this?

SESSION 3

HELPING AND HEALING - Social action

INTRODUCTION

- Have you given help to others because of your church involvement, or received help from the church or a Christian group?
- How is the church involved in helping and healing in our village life, national life, international life?
- Make a list of as many individuals and groups as you can who have put their faith into practice in helping and healing over the centuries.
- If you were looking at this list as someone who knew nothing of Christian faith, what would it tell you about the values and priorities of Christians?

Read: Genesis 1.31, Luke 4.16-19,

- What do these passages tell us about the reasons why Christians should seek to help and heal?

Read: Luke 8.26-39

The man who is healed in this story lives among the tombs in territory of Gerasa. This is an area in which most people were Gentiles, and the fact that pigs were being kept is significant, since these were regarded as unclean animals by the Jews. Like the rest of the area, Gerasa was occupied by the Romans, who had brought in a large army to enforce the occupation. Some commentators on this story have suggested that the pigs were being kept to provide the Roman army with meat. The fact that

the man calls himself “Legion”, a reference to the largest unit of the Roman army, seems to support this. Commentators suggest that this story is in part about the experience of living under brutal Roman rule.

Look at this story through the eyes of:

- the man who was healed
- the other inhabitants of Gerasa.
- How does Jesus’ action in healing this man change their lives?

HELPING AND HEALING – THE DOWNSIDE?

Read the following extract from a 1961 speech celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of the National Society for promoting Religious Education the body which now oversees Church schools such as that at Seal. Originally the Society was called the "The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church". It was founded in 1811.

At [its first] meeting, the purpose of the Society was defined: namely, "That the National Religion should be made the foundation of National Education, and should be the first and chief thing taught to the Poor, according to the excellent Liturgy and Catechism provided by our Church". The primary objective was "to teach them the doctrine of Religion according to the principles of the Established Church, and to train them to the performance of their religious duties by an early discipline": the secondary object was "to communicate such knowledge and habits as are sufficient to guide them through life in their proper station", which meant imparting a limited amount of secular instruction, based upon the monitorial system devised by Dr Andrew Bell.

Regarded in the light of our modern educational system with all the resources of the community behind it, this may seem very inadequate and unenlightened. But, regarded against the background of the widespread ignorance and brutality of the England of the Napoleonic Wars, it can be recognized as a heroic missionary enterprise, financed by private charity, and designed to illuminate the surrounding darkness and to rescue the children of the poor, particularly in the new industrial and manufacturing towns, from heathenism and barbarity.

From an oration delivered by Canon Charles Smyth, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Society, on the Twelfth of October Nineteen hundred and Sixty-one

<http://www.natsoc.org.uk/society/history/jwatson.html>

- Many people are unhappy now about the existence of “faith” schools in the state education system, and the privileged place given to the Church of England in our national life. Do you think they are right to be concerned?
- Are there ways in which our individual efforts to help and heal can do more harm than good? Should we stick to praying and leave politics to the politicians? What would we lose or gain if we did this?
- What, if anything, do you think Christians have to give to society that is distinctive – things which only Christians can offer?

SESSION 4

TELLING THE STORY – Evangelism

OUR STORY – HIS STORY

Introduction

- Who first told you the stories of Christian faith?
- The fact that you are coming along to this Lent course indicates that you are interested in Christian faith – how has that come about?
- In some Church traditions “testimony” plays an important role in worship, with members of the congregation standing up to tell others about the things they believe God has done in their lives. How would you feel if you were in a church like this?
- In what other ways can we proclaim what we believe?

WE HAVE A GOSPEL TO PROCLAIM, BUT WHAT IS IT?

Look at the following hymns: (Hymn numbers are in Hymns Old and New)

532	We have a Gospel to proclaim
406	One shall tell another
565	Ye servants of God
227	I come with joy

- What sort of Good News do these very different hymns proclaim?

Read: Luke 1. 46-55, Acts 10.34-43

- What is the Good News according to Mary?
- What is the Good News according to Peter?

There is a traditional summary of Christian belief, popular in many evangelical churches, called “**The Four Spiritual Laws**”. (God's love and plan for our lives.”

“Law One: God LOVES you and offers a wonderful PLAN for your life.

Law Two: Man is SINFUL and SEPARATED from God. Thus he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.

Law Three: Jesus Christ is God's ONLY provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.

Law Four: We must individually RECEIVE Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience

- According to the writers of the four spiritual laws, this **is** the Gospel. What do you think about these laws?
- Do they express what you understand to be the Good News?
- Recalling the conversation we have had about the Good News according to Mary, and that expressed in the hymns above, do you think the 4 laws are the complete story?
- How do the people around you at home, at work or in your leisure activities know that you are a Christian? What do you think they might have learnt about Christian faith from you?
- If no one was to tell the Christian story, and it was to be forgotten, what do you think we would lose?

SESSION 5

DYING AND RISING - Rituals of death and dying

INTRODUCTION - The Danse Macabre

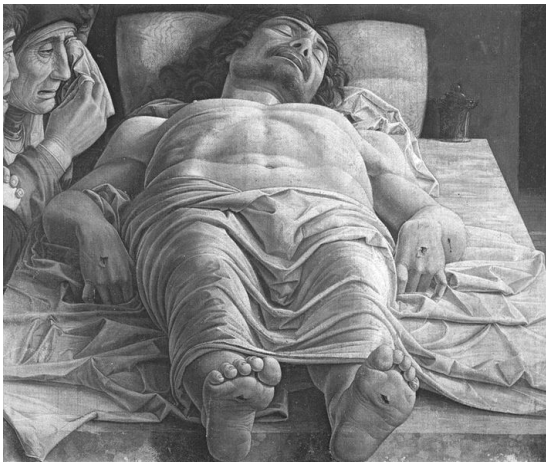


The images above are examples of the medieval art form known as the “Danse Macabre” Death is pictured leading people away, often as if they are dancing in a long line. A great variety of people are usually featured in these pictures, which were very common in the Middle Ages. Death usually comes first for the Pope, followed by kings, nobles, tradesmen and women, housewives and the poor. However exalted or lowly we are, however good or bad, we all die, the pictures say.

This was part of a whole spectrum of things designed to help people think about death – their own and others – at a time when

life was very fragile. Books of spiritual instruction called “Ars Moriendi” (the art of dying) were compiled, telling people what they needed to do to have a good death and to prepare for the judgement of God after it. Tombs often depicted the inhabitants – however grand they were – as decaying corpses. “As I am, so shall you be” was the message. The figure of Christ suffering on the cross, or dead and lying in the tomb became much more common – previously Christ had often been portrayed in glory, risen from the dead.

It is no accident that this new emphasis on death happened when it did. The Black Death had killed almost a third of Europe’s



population, a series of bad years for agriculture and almost constant wars had finished off many of the survivors. Death was all around.

*The Dead Christ,
Mantegna 1480*

Read: Psalm 103.13-18

- These verses are often read at funerals, just before the body is committed for burial or cremation. How do they make you feel? How would you feel hearing them at the funeral of someone you loved?
- What do you think are the good and bad points of the medieval focus on death and dying?

- What ways do we have in our society of reminding ourselves of the reality of death and how helpful are they?
- Bearing in mind that there was a time before we were born when we didn't exist, and most people don't feel sad about that, why does it worry people that they will one day die?

Rituals around death and dying

“Common Worship”, the Church of England’s newest collection of services, offers all sorts of possibilities for dealing with death and dying. There are resources for ministry at the time of death, for praying with people at home before the funeral, for those who aren’t able to be there, for receiving the coffin into church before the funeral, for a funeral vigil (a service of preparation), on the morning of the funeral. The funeral itself can consist of an almost unlimited variety of options. There are burial services, cremation services, and services for interring ashes after a burial, funerals with and without communion, prayers to bless a grave in unconsecrated ground, and prayers to be said in the home after a funeral. The content of the funeral isn’t set either – there are lots of suggested readings and prayers, but ministers can plan a service, in consultation with the family, that reflects what they want to say. If you have internet access you can find these resources at <http://tinyurl.com/2svq9j> .

- Think of funerals you have gone to – what have you found helpful or unhelpful about them? Do you have any preferences for what should happen when you die?
- A young driver was killed in a road crash. His friend, who was seriously injured in the same crash, heard about his death when

he regained consciousness. His uncle said to reporters *"He kept asking for Joe and eventually they had to tell him what had happened. The first thing he did was to ask for his mobile phone so he could text him goodbye."* What do you think of this reaction? (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/transport/Story/0,,2234023,00.html>)

- What does the way we handle death – the words and rituals we use - say about what we believe about it and about what comes after it?

Read: Ecclesiastes 9.3-6, Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Solomon) 3.1-13, Matthew 22.23-32, 1 Corinthians 15, Colossians 1.18-20

- The picture of death and the afterlife in the Bible isn't consistent. It changes over time, and different writers at the same period talk about it differently. What do these passages tell us about the understanding of the people who wrote them?
- What do you believe about life after death and why?
- Jesus called God "God of the living and not of the dead" What do you think he meant by this? How do our beliefs about life after death affect the way we live before it?
- For the New Testament writers, Christ's death and resurrection were seen as opening a gateway from death to life for his followers too (and perhaps for the whole of creation). Does this make any kind of sense to you? How might Christ's death have done this?