

YOUR QUESTIONS, 02/04/22**Q12. Revelation – What is the essence we need to know?****Revelation 1:9-11; 21:1-8; 22:1-5**

The Book of Revelation is not the easiest of the books of the Bible to read and understand. This is because the language in which it is written, whilst familiar to its audience of the day 2,000 years ago, is not in common use today. It is written in the form of a 'revelation' – an unveiling of truths apparently revealed in a vision - and is stuffed full of symbols and Old Testament references that are difficult for us to comprehend. Some try to read it as a 'calendar for the end times' and it is easy to get lost trying to puzzle out the meaning of some of the imagery and symbols. However, if we look at the broader underlying themes of faith, hope and new life, there is much to be gained.

What follows are some potential questions for discussion, based on passages at the beginning and end of the Book of Revelation – the parts in italics after some of the questions are pointers to help those leading connect groups (or studying on their own).

Read Revelation 1:9-11

1. What has been your experience of reading the Book of Revelation up until now? Has it been positive or negative? What has helped or hindered that?
2. At the outset of the Book, what are the three things that John (the author) says that he shares 'that are ours in Jesus'? (Rev 1:9). Why might that be both encouraging and challenging?

Suffering, the Kingdom and patient endurance are the three things John list. Suffering and patient endurance are clearly challenging. At the time the Book was written, the churches it was addressed to would have faced persecution for failing to worship the Roman Emperor. In our time, we have had to patiently endure the ongoing covid pandemic. The fact that John brings the 'Kingdom' into his writing is a reminder and encouragement to his hearers and readers that their Lord and master is not the Emperor, but King Jesus, who identifies with our suffering and provides the hope that enables us to continue to endure. There is also the hint that they can take encouragement as all are facing these trials – the author as well as the recipients -we don't need to go through things individually.

3. John seems to think that suffering is an integral part of following Jesus (Rev. 1:9). (So does Paul in Acts 14:22). How easy is it to 'patiently endure'? How does faith help you make sense of suffering?

There is nothing in the Gospels or NT that states that becoming a follower of Christ is an end to the trials that we may face in this life. However, we can take encouragement that we have Jesus who has known suffering and who through his Spirit walks alongside us through our trials. And we have the future hope of Rev 21:4, when heaven and earth are re-united and suffering is at an end.

4. The letter is addressed to 'the seven churches' (Rev 1:11). Why do you think it is important for followers of Jesus to meet together? Should it be both encouraging and challenging? Discuss your own experiences.

The writer of Hebrews makes it clear in Hebrews 10:23-25 that we are called to be in community together ('Let us not give up meeting together'). Our faith is a communal one sharing our gifts and needs. Meeting together we can both encourage one another and 'spur each other on towards love and good deeds'.

Now read Revelation 21:1-8; 22:1-5

5. How do you imagine heaven? What images and ideas inform your imagination?

Our images may be taken from medieval pictures, Victorian moral tales, or Hollywood movies, rather than being based on the Bible.

6. Whilst 'heaven' is often described as 'somewhere up above us' what is the direction of travel of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem? (21:2). Do you see any similarities between Rev 21:3 and Genesis 3:8; and between Rev 22:1-2 and Genesis 1:8-10? Is the intimacy between humankind and God restored? If we are restored to a renewed and recreated earth, who has done the work for us?

The Holy City descends to earth – God comes to dwell with us and his creation. We have come full circle from Genesis, where God was walking in the garden with humankind. The Tree of Life, first found in Eden in Genesis, is back in the new creation. (Don't worry about there being no coastline in the new earth – the reference in Revelation 21:1 to there being 'no sea' is due to the fact that at the time of writing the letter, his hearers would associate the sea as where evil and darkness lived – so the author is basically telling them that there will be no evil or darkness here). The crux is that God and man are re-united together on an earth set free from the suffering and troubles that affect us and creation in this present age. Whilst we can't easily imagine precisely how this will be or look like, note that there are no references here to us sitting on fluffy clouds plucking harps!

None of this is our doing – it is Jesus who has 'delivered us from evil' and restored the creation he was involved in at the beginning.

7. In last weeks' talk/question, we were encouraged to live in the present. How does this vision of the future set out in these closing verses of the Bible help us to do this?

We have a future hope – what we see happening around us today is not how things will always be.

8. Even at the very end of the Bible, of this part of 'God's Story', we see invitations sent out: 'To him who is thirsty, I will give to drink' (21:6) and in Chapter 22, we see the Tree of Life bearing fruit and with its leaves 'for the healing of the nations'. How can we help carry the water, fruit and leaves to those who need it? What is the hope that we offer?

9. What was the most significant insight/takeaway for you from the talk and study?
10. How has this series of 'Your Questions' helped you in life at home and/or work?

For those who want to dig further into an exploration of Revelation, the six session Bible Study book 'Revelation – Faithfulness in Testing Times' written by Ian Paul and published by the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity is a good place to start (available to order through their web site at £4.99 - licc.org.uk)

YOUR QUESTIONS, 27/03/22**Q11. What does hell look like and who goes there?****Psalm 115**

Before we get to the questions a reminder of the words of two outstanding theologians:

Tom Wright, "The last thing I want is for anyone to suppose that I (or anyone else) know very much about all this"

Paula Gooder, "the answer to the question of what happens to our loved ones as they wait for resurrection is that we simply do not know – nor can we know this side of the grave". "All we can do is think and reflect on the traditions before us and the multiple images presented in the NT"

The questions that follow do not seek to arrive at, 'an answer', but simply to provide a structure to our reflections and thoughts.

1. What are your thoughts regarding the relative important of the past, present, and future? What parts of Scripture do you know of that speak to each of these things?
2. The most common understanding of hell appears to be one involving fire, demons, torture chambers, chains, sharp tridents, hooved creatures, and torment.
 - a. Has this been your understanding? Where do you think this has come from?
3. Paula Gooder suggests that there are 5 strands that lead to this common image of hell. What do you think of these and their contributions to our image of hell?
 - a. Sheol – Old Testament home of the dead (Psalm 88); place for all who died, both good and evil; an assumption developed in the New Testament that people would not remain in Sheol forever but would rise to either a new transformed life or be punished for their wrongdoing
 - b. Punishment for sins – Related to the requirement for judgement and justice. Without these, we are left with "nothing being right or wrong" or that "God simply doesn't care either way" (Daniel 12:1-3, 13)
 - c. Gehenna – most frequently used word for hell in New Testament (Matthew 10:28). Refers to a real and specific physical location.
 - d. Lake of fire – four references in the book of revelation (Rev 19:20)
 - e. Medieval imagery – often associated with fire, torment, and torture
4. Tom Wright suggests that there are three predominant understandings of hell. What do you think of each of these perspectives? What are their strengths and weakness?
 - a. Traditionalist view – human beings will continue after death to be human and will be punished for an endless time
 - b. Universalist view - It is a view which states that God will be merciful to all, that even after death God will offer all people the chance of repentance until all finally give in to his offer of love. That, if hell does exist, it will in the end be unpopulated
 - c. Conditionalist view - immortality being conditional on relationship with God. Without that relationship human beings will simply cease to exist after death.

5. Psalm 115, that Richard used to illustrate an alternative perspective states,

Idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.
Psalm 115 vv. 4-8

- a. What do you think of the idea that those who make, or worship, idols become like them? (empty, hollow, nothingness-es)
6. Related to this idea, Tom Wright describes this understanding as,
- a. When humans give their heartfelt allegiance and worship to something other than God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God, that they were created to be, and become more like what they are worshipping. It is possible for humans to continue down this path, refusing all whisperings of good news, all glimmers of true light, all promptings to turn and go the other way that after death they become at last, by their own effective choice, beings that once were human but are now not, creatures of a form that have ceased to bear the divine image at all, ex-human nothingness-es. Not ceasing to exist but ceasing to exist as a human
- b. What are your thoughts and reflections on this understanding?

After these reflections and thoughts on the question of hell, spend some time on the questions below:

1. At the end of Sunday's talk, Richard proposed that, "we should every day be asking, not, "where will I go when I die?", but rather, "In the here and now, this day, am I bringing parts of heaven or parts of hell to this world?"
 - a. Do you think it is possible to bring parts of heaven or hell to earth?
 - b. How might we ensure we bring heaven to earth rather than hell?
 - c. What is God's role in bringing heaven to earth and what is our role?
2. Psalm 115 describes in beautiful poetry and stark detail the reality of idols. What might be our (societies or our own) idols today that are not made of silver and gold, that fight for our allegiance and worship?
3. Psalm 115 encourages us to "Trust in the Lord", to "bless the Lord" – how might we do this in the here and now in our words and deeds?

The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless the Lord from this time forth (present) and forevermore (future) Praise the Lord!

Recommended Reading:

Heaven (All, but specifically chapter 9), Paula Gooder

Surprised by Hope (All, but specifically chapter 11), Tom Wright

The Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis (a brilliant fictional story of a bus ride from hell to heaven)

YOUR QUESTIONS, 20/03/22**Q10. Do we pass on our faith to our children?****1 Timothy 4:12, Luke 2:41-51**

Rachel Turner video shown during Hannah Tarring's, here <https://youtu.be/hlqwKFDVeKg>

(CG leaders please be mindful of those who do not have children, or for whom their current relationship with their children, or their child's faith journey, could be a cause of upset. It is worth, as a church family, bring to mind our collective call to journey alongside the children in our St James church family.)

1. Where is the place you go, or what do you do, to connect with God? (Recall that Jesus as a child was found in his 'father's house')
2. As a child where was the place, or what did you do, that brought you close to God? Note the difference/similarity between your answers to Q1 and Q2
3. For your child[ren] (including your adult child[ren]) where do you think is the place they go, or the thing that they do, that connects them closest to God? (Is it church? Is it worth asking them where/what? They might surprise you!)
4. How does/doesn't St James see/treat children and young people as equal?
5. [From Rachel Turner] How can/do you be open and honest in front of our child[ren] about how we are journeying with God?
6. How do we (St James as a family as well as in your own family) encourage our children to journey on their own faith journey?
7. How do we (St James) enable children to contribute to the life of the church?
8. [For parents with adult children] how do we trust that God is [still] already discipling our children? What are the difficulties of trust God with the faith of our children?
9. What important thing has a child taught you about faith?

YOUR QUESTIONS, 13/03/22**Q9. How do we interpret Scripture?****John 16:12-15, Romans 15:1-13**

During this week's message, Craig was addressing the question "How do we Interpret Scripture", he suggested that in order to interpret scripture well we need to pay attention to; Genre – what kind of writing are we reading, Context – what did it mean? and Content – What does it say?

Opening Questions:

1. How aware are you of the need to interpret scripture? how has this arisen in your own personal reading of scripture and you're reading with others?
2. How well have you been equipped for the task of interpretation? what skills and understanding do you bring from other areas of your life where interpretation is needed?

Use the below questions to facilitate a discussion for each of the 3 headings:

Genre:

1. Which genres within the biblical writings do you find most appealing to read? which do you find the most challenging?
2. How has recognising the genre of a biblical passage or book helped you make better sense of it?

Context:

1. What resources might we need in order to understand the context of what we're reading?
2. What positive experience have you had of learning about the historical context of a passage of the Bible?

Content:

1. How easy do you find it to read slowly and carefully?
2. When have you had the experience of reading something and realising that it does not say what you thought it said? how did you feel?

Optional Closing Prayer:

Eternal God,

Thank you that your Holy Spirit helps us to discern and understand your Word. Give us all a hunger to feed our souls on Scripture daily, as you have said, "...man shall not live by bread alone but on every Word that comes from the mouth of God."

We recognise that living according to your word gives us a firm foundation for this life and the life to come because "your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" Thank you that your Word is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path so that we can walk securely in your goodness. Amen.

Suggested further reading:

How to Read the Bible for All its worth – Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart

What is the Bible – Rob Bell

Shaped by the Word – M.Robert Mullhollan Jr.

Your Questions Series

Further Study Questions

Unbreakable – Andrew Wilson

The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament – Craig S. Keener

YOUR QUESTIONS, 03/03/22**Q8. What is the Soul? And how do we feed it in a consumerist world?****Exodus 23:12, Psalm 46**

1. Without thinking too much about what the soul is or isn't, how do you feed your soul?
2. Again, without thinking too much about what the soul is or isn't, what would you consider as healthy and unhealthy ways to feed your soul?

Greek Philosophy (Plato and chums) separated the body and the soul, with the body being material, perishable, and bad, and the soul being immaterial, immortal, and potentially good. A lot of (early) Christian thinking has been tainted by this way of thinking about the body and the soul.

3. How can this way of thinking affect how we see our own bodies (and other material things)?
4. How could this way of thinking influence how the church has viewed the body (and carnal activities!)?
5. How could this way of thinking influence how the church has viewed the soul (and spiritual activities)?
6. What happens to us when we die if we believe in the separation of body and soul.

The Bible teaches that we are a soul, rather than that we have a (good) soul imprisoned in our (bad) body. The words used for 'soul' ('nephesh' in OT Hebrew, and 'psyche' [pronounced sue-key] in NT Greek) can mean 'throat', 'breath', 'living being', 'refreshed', 'I', 'me', 'self', 'appetite', 'mind'. Essentially the Bible teaches there is no separation between body and soul, as the soul is our entire living being.

7. How can this way of thinking affect how we see our own bodies (and other material things)?
8. How could this way of thinking influence how the church has viewed the body (and carnal activities!)?
9. How could this way of thinking influence how the church has viewed the soul (and spiritual activities)?
10. What happens to us when we die if we believe in the unity of body and soul. (Consider Jesus' resurrection?)

C24 is a Canon (legal law) of the Church of England that pertains to 'priests having a cure of souls'. Priests, at when licensed to a new parish, are given the 'cure of souls' in the parish. This 'cure of souls' is something that is, if we believe in the priesthood of all believers (which I do), is something that we share. You and I (Keith), have a shared responsibility for the cure (care, wellbeing, salvation) of souls in the St James parish.

11. If we take the Biblical understanding of 'soul', what does that care look like/include?

12. Are your answers to Q11 what St James provides with the resources we have (our buildings, our people, our activities, our mission)?

Look at the list below from Canon C24, that itemises what the CofE understand the 'cure of souls' to include

- undertaking Morning and Evening Prayer daily
- celebrating Holy Communion on all Sundays
- preaching a sermon at least once each Sunday
- teaching the Christian faith
- baptising and preparing for confirmation
- visiting parishioners, esp sick and infirmed, giving spiritual counsel and advice

13. In light of the contrast between what Pato thought and what the Bible teaches, what are your thoughts on this list?
14. What is the best thing you can do for your soul this week?
15. Prayerfully consider what you are being asked to do for the care (cure) of another person (soul) this week?

YOUR QUESTIONS, 27/02/22**Q7. What about other faiths?****John 14:1-7 & Romans 3:21-26**

16. We live in a multi-cultural, multi-faith country. How can the Church proclaim the Gospel sensitively to those of other faiths (given that the Gospel will often automatically cause offence)?
17. Devizes is not as multi-cultural as many places, but everyone believes something. What do you think is the dominant 'faith' in this part of the world?
18. Is the definition of religion as 'human beings reaching out to something or someone beyond themselves' a valid one?
 - a. If so, do you agree that Christianity is not a religion but a relationship, with God reaching out to us?
19. A definition of 'monist' belief (mono - 'only, alone') is that God, or the Divine, and humankind are not separate but one. We are on a path to the divine and we can achieve oneness with it, or spiritual perfection whereby we lose the shackles of mere human existence. Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and New Age beliefs are broadly in this category.
 - a. How does that differ from Christian belief? How can we communicate the idea of a loving Creator/Father God to those who fall in this category?
20. Dualistic faiths (duo - 'two') are nearer to Christianity in that they do teach about a Creator and we, the created, being separate entities. Does that mean that, for example, Islam and Judaism are as valid as Christianity?
21. Muslims believe that God (Allah) requires us to live a good life and does not tolerate sin. God is one, and is not revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Islam teaches that Jesus is a prophet. At the crucifixion the body on the cross was not that of Eesa (Jesus) but that of a disciple. Eesa was raised by Allah with body and soul intact and saved from the Jews. He did not die but he is alive in the heavens and will return to this world for a second time.
 - a. Do any of these beliefs make Islam similar to Christianity? What differences are there?
22. Believing Jews are still waiting for the coming of the Messiah, God's 'anointed one'. Why do you think they reject the idea that he has already come?
23. Many faiths also involve a strong cultural and community basis. What do think of the notion of honour and shame in those communities being so strong that punishing, even killing, someone who changes their faith might be justified?
24. Christianity has a strong emphasis on God as a loving heavenly Father. How can we explain his love and mercy without compromising the idea of his holiness?

25. From what you know about other faiths, do you agree that most put the emphasis on human effort, whether to achieve spiritual perfection or to please an angry god? How does this differ from Christian teaching on the work of Jesus on the cross, that he died as a sacrifice to pay the price for our sin and that this does not depend at all on our own effort? *'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified (put right with God) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.'* (Romans 3:23-24).
26. "I am the way....no-one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Is Jesus' claim to uniqueness justified, or was he just being egocentric?
27. How would you explain the human condition (sin, separation from God) and the promise of eternal life through the cross to a person of another faith? And where would you begin with a person of no faith (although actually everyone believes *something*)?
28. What about the sincere person who lives their life by a faith other than Christianity? Romans 2:12-16 says that Jews are judged according to the standard of the Law of Moses, while the non-Jew is judged according to conscience, with the Law 'written on their heart'. Is this helpful in understanding how judgment works? Do you know anyone who has never gone against their own conscience?
- a. Where does the Romans 2 passage fall short of an answer? For example, how will God deal with a person who sincerely believed in the doctrines of Nazism?
29. One answer might be that we can't ultimately say how judgment works because we're not God. However, we do know that the person who is 'under the blood of Christ' is no longer under judgment. If that's true, how strong is the need to share the good news of it with all, regardless of their faith?

YOUR QUESTIONS, 20/02/22**Q6. Suffering****Isaiah 43:1-3a & Matthew 7:24-25**

These questions are just suggestions to help you dig deeper and explore further this vast and complex topic of suffering. They are not provided to go through one by one to cover them all in one evening. Some will be reminders of my talk with further Scriptures to read. Others will require deeper unpacking.

Separately, I have also included three of my poems – or psalms. You may like to write your own based on your experiences.

May you know the Lord's presence and guidance as you mine the treasures of suffering together.

1. Genesis 6 : 5, 6. The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain."

Question: So does sin HURT God?

2. Romans 8: 22: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." All that goes wrong in this world can be traced back to man's sin. Creation itself is subject to the fall of man too so even natural disasters, the so-called 'acts of God', go back to the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden.

Question: How does creation "suffer" as a consequence of sin and does this thought require humankind to repent of the lack of responsibility it has taken in caring for the world God created.

3. In my talk I commented: "We sometimes abuse our bodies in how we treat them and this can lead to illness". Many years ago I went to a Christian meeting but was in a lot of back pain. In the ministry time at the end, I asked for prayer for healing for my back but first I was challenged to repent of "abusing your back". Shocked I brought to mind how, in spite of manual handling training and advice to ask for help, my pride and self-sufficiency had led me to continue to lift the boxes of resources, display boards and leaflets in and out of my car when working in my job delivering health promotion programmes. Yes, I was guilty of 'abusing my back' so my pulled muscle and back pain was actually self-inflicted.

Question: Can you think of other examples where failure to care for our bodies can lead to illness?

4. In Luke 22 v 31 we read that Jesus told Peter that "Satan has asked to sift you like wheat" and went on to tell him "but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Question: How can our suffering be used to 'strengthen' our brothers. Can you think of an occasion when you have shared your experience and benefited someone else?

5. Does God punish us by inflicting suffering? Does He use suffering to get our attention? The OT is full of stories clearly showing that God punished deliberate rebellion: Numbers 12 Miriam spoke against Moses and her skin became leprous, Exodus 32:35 the Israelites were punished for their rebellion and God sent a plague on them. 2 Samuel 6:23 David's wife 'despised' him dancing before the Ark as he brought it into Jerusalem and remained barren. But in the NT, Jesus clearly taught that sickness was not God's punishment for sin. See John 9. And Hebrews 12 teaches that God disciplines us as a Loving Father. He wants the best for us.

Question: Is there a difference between punishment and discipline?

6. "For I know the plans I have for you." declares the Lord. "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 30:11.

Question/reflection: Can you look back over your life and think of times when you were suffering and found it hard to reconcile a God of love with what you were going through. With the benefits of hindsight, would you say the Lord used it for your good and for His glory?

7. My developing coping strategy for suffering is based on Scripture. Psalm 119:11 'Your word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against you.' It is the rock upon which I have built my life.

Question: What verses of Scripture give you strength and hope in times of suffering?

Maybe something we can all do is to use the familiar Lord's Prayer – not just SAY the words – but actively PRAY them in the midst of our suffering. There is power in the words of Jesus when we engage our heart and spirit and mind. Our paraphrase of The Lord's Prayer could go something like this:

"Heavenly Father, I come before you and bow in reverence to thank you that you know and love me and promise to be with me as I journey through this difficult time. I choose to accept the situation as I believe it is in Your hands and I trust You to see me through. You give me all I need each day to persevere, to cope, to keep living. Lord forgive me for the things I have done wrong and the times I have missed the mark, and I forgive those who have caused me harm. In Your mercy I pray You do not lead me into further trouble but deliver me from whatever is attacking my peace and wellbeing. I acknowledge that You can use this time for Your glory, You have the Power to overcome and help me overcome, and that one day I will dwell in Your Kingdom for eternity."

Link to Christ our Hope in Life and Death song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oibli1rz7mw>

YOUR QUESTIONS, 13/02/22**Q5. What is God's response to mental health?****Luke 8: 26-39**

(Due to tech issues the service was not streamed via YouTube. A PDF copy of the talk can be found here <https://www.stjamesdevizes.org/current-your-questions.html>)

This session is different. Rather than ask questions for discussion, we will take some time (with pen and paper) to reflect on our own wellbeing and seeking to hear God's response. Don't rush this.

1. What factors are you aware of that are affecting how you are feeling today? (You might want to list them in two columns: Positive & Negative Factors: or Life-Giving & Life-Sapping)
 - a) Take some time to give thanks to God for the positives/life-giving factors
 - b) Identify from each list 1 or 2 that are having the greatest impact on how you are feeling. (You might want to underline them)
 - c) Look at each one of the underlined factors and prayerfully consider if there are any bits of the Bible that come to mind.
 - d) Consider how Jesus might want to respond to the underlined factors that are currently having the greatest impact on your life? What might he say to you about them? (Use your imagination and your knowledge of how Jesus responded to the factors impacting upon those he met in the Gospels to get a sense of what He may be saying to you)
2. If the above didn't work for you, and you are OK to share of the things you've underlined, you could ask others in the group to go through steps 1c to 1d
3. You may wish to end this session by sharing anything from the session. For example, you might feel comfortable sharing a Bible reading that came to mind.
4. You might also/alternatively want to end the session by discuss the response's Keith gave to the 4 questions he addressed in his talk. What resonated? What gave clarity? What further questions do you now have?

YOUR QUESTIONS, 07/02/22**Q4. Is God always with us?****1 Kings 19:9-16 & Matthew 28:16-20**

5. What do you think about Matthew 28:20 and Jesus's promise that he is always with us?
 - e) Throughout the Bible this promise is repeated and shown in the lives of those recorded, what is the significance of this for us?
6. What do you expect Jesus's promise to look like in your life?
7. What do you think about God being just as powerful in the still small voice, or the seemingly small, and ordinary, as much as in the extraordinary?
8. How can you speak to non-Christians about the power of God in the ordinary? Is it difficult for you speak of God in your life without using a big, extraordinary story?
9. What do you think about reframing what is viewed as ordinary as so much more?
10. When for you is it most difficult to see how God is with you?
 - a) You may like to think or pray only sharing if comfortable of times God may have felt distant, thinking about where you may have overlooked God in that
11. Where have you noticed God with you this week?
12. How easy do you find it to forget to acknowledge God with you in the good times?
13. When do you read the Bible and why do you read it?
14. Keith spoke of the poem Footprints in the sand, here it is:

One night I dreamed a dream. I was walking along the beach with my Lord. Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand, one belonging to me and one to my Lord.

When the last scene of my life shot before me I looked back at the footprints in the sand. There was only one set of footprints. I realized that this was at the lowest and saddest times of my life. This always bothered me and I questioned the Lord about my dilemma.

"Lord, You told me when I decided to follow You, You would walk and talk with me all the way. But I'm aware that during the most troublesome times of my life there is only one set of footprints. I just don't understand why, when I need You most, You leave me."

He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you, never, ever, during your trials and testing's. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."

- a) What do you think about it?
- b) Is it easier to look back and see God in your life or do you doubt whether he was there by one set of footprints?
- c) Bethany spoke of seeing how God is with us in the present too, what do you think about that?

YOUR QUESTIONS, 30/01/22**Q3. Who made God?****Genesis 1:1-5 & John 1:1-5**

1. What do you enjoy about being creative?
2. Have you ever thought about the beginning of creation?
 - a. What thoughts did you have?
3. What did you think about the philosophical and scientific reasons given for the universe having a beginning?
4. Does it make sense that the creator of creation would need to reside outside of space and time?
5. The readings were from Gen 1:1-5 and John 1:1-5 and both deal with the beginning of all beginnings.
 - a. What are the similarities of these passages?
 - b. What are the differences?
 - c. What strikes you most about either passage? (What makes you think / say wow?)
 - d. What are the differences between our creativity and God's ability to create, (Hebrew verb "Bara" only ever attributed to God)
6. Read Psalm 90:2
 - a. What in this verse is described as created and what is described as everlasting to everlasting?
 - b. What is the significance of this?
7. Spend some time reflecting on the Hebrew word used in Psalm 90:2, "Olam" meaning forever, everlasting, time out of mind past and future, eternity, perpetual, without end.
 - a. What does it reveal about God?
8. Richard described everything in creation (mountains, nations, leaders, wealth, relationships, intellect, strength).
 - a. Do you agree?
 - b. In this context, why does it matter to you that God is perpetual, permanent, reliable, steadfast, and trustworthy

YOUR QUESTIONS, 23/01/22**Q2. What does it mean to 'fear the Lord'?****Deuteronomy 10: 12, 20-21. 1 John 4:7-18**

1. How have you previously understood what it means to 'fear the Lord'?
2. The Bible shows us that a right fear of the Lord is both healthy and life-giving. But we need to accept that there can be damaging, unhealthy and life-less ways in which some may choose to exploit wrong ideas about the 'fear of God'. You may want to consider (privately) what these are, the impact they can have, and how healing and learning from such misuses of the 'fear of God' can be achieved.
3. Both God (especially in His relationship to his people Israel/now us) and Jesus often speak of God as the father and we as his children. This beautifully captures the intimate relationship we have with God. But how can this father/child image be problematic for some? In (privacy) you may want to consider whether this is problematic for you.
4. Keith changes the words of the committal at a funeral service from, 'As a father is tender towards his children, so is the Lord tender to those that fear him' to 'As a **good** father is tender towards his children, so is the Lord tender to those that **revere** him.' Is this acceptable? Discuss why/why not? (This part of the Committal is taken from Psalm 103:13. Note most translations use 'fear' though some [The Living Bible, The Bible for Everyone, etc] use 'reverence' or 'awe')
5. Leviticus 19:30, Numbers 20:6, Judges 13:20, and 1 Chronicles 21:1 all define reverence as having a deeply profound, awe-inspiring respect of God. Work through the following readings, identifying what of God is being revered. Consider how we might similarly revere God in a way that is life-giving. Joshua 4:23-24 (power), 1 Samuel 12:24 9 (goodness), Revelation 14:7 (judgement), Psalm 130:4 (forgiveness).
6. Can you identify fears that you have that if left to dominate could lead to poor choices?
 - a. How can fearing the Lord above all other fears, be life-giving, freeing, good, healthy and even joyous.
 - b. How can such fear of the be the 'beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 1:7)
7. If we love God, then the ultimate fear is to lose God, His goodness and His love in our lives. Read and consider the Parable of the Prodigal Son; consider all that Jesus did, overcame and won on the cross for you and all of creation; consider John 3:16, John 11:25-16, Isaiah 41:10, and Deuteronomy 31:8. What reassurance to these all give? What, therefore, do we have to fear? (...that we stray from the Lord)
8. It is helpful to look at where Jesus brought about fear in those around him. Read Matthew 14:23-27, Mark 5:25-34, Mark 11:15-18, Luke 8:22-25, Luke 23:39-43. Who is fearful? Why are they fearful? Do they love Jesus? How do they respond? How does Jesus respond?
9. Is it right, healthy, helpful to use the fear of the Lord (judgment, damnation, wrath) as a means by which to bring people to faith (or, as the church is often seen to do, to bring people to right behaviour)? Is it the right place to start from? Why/why not?

YOUR QUESTIONS, 17/01/22**Q1. What is the place of the law in the New Testament?****Galatians 3:1 – 14; 23-29**

Background

One of the controversial issues at the time the first Christian communities were emerging as the Apostles travelled around proclaiming the Gospel was whether Christians, and particularly the gentiles (ie those who were not Jews but from a Greek/Roman cultural background) should have to adopt established Jewish practices as Christians. This would have included acts such as circumcision; adherence to food laws; not working on the Jewish Sabbath and other ritual practices. The divisions that this exposed can be seen in the discussion at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, where Paul and Barnabas met with James and the other Apostles to hammer the matter out and agreed a way forward. It also comes out in a number of Paul's letters to the churches – perhaps most explicitly in his letters to the Galatians (chapter 3 especially) and Romans (Chapter 7).

Although the discussion may seem to belong in the dim and distant past, the idea of being able to earn God's favour by adherence to a set of laws, or the concept of being able to distinguish those who are 'saved' from those who are beyond the pale by their outward behaviour is still very much with us. Improving our understanding of the place of the law in the NT may still prove very helpful to us today as we seek to be faithful Disciples of Christ. What follows is some potential questions for discussion, based on the passage in Galatians – the parts in italics after the question are pointers to help those leading connect groups. Read Galatians 3: 1-14 and 23-29.

1. Paul uses pretty strong language (he's not exactly afraid of calling a spade a spade!) Why do you think he is so upset with the Galatians? (v 1-5)

Paul understands that the crux of the Good News is that Jesus died on the cross to fulfil the law and to enable us to be transformed by the life-giving Holy Spirit. Reverting to adherence to a set of laws ignores Christ's sacrifice and leaves the Galatians as trapped as the Israelites were in the OT – trying to keep laws that pointed out what was right and wrong, but laws that were powerless to change a person and restore their relationship with God

2. What do you think was involved in 'observing the law' that Paul was so critical of? (Gals 5. v 2 gives a clue and 5:12 gives an indication of how strongly Paul felt about it – not for the squeamish!)

The Pharisees and their followers were very keen on outward expressions to differentiate themselves from their neighbours – circumcision; not working on the Sabbath; observing food laws; ritual washing. Paul points out that it is not physical expression, but 'new creation' that counts (Gal 5 v15) – one that is brought about by the Holy Spirit taking up residence within those who put their faith in Christ. As Jesus advises Nicodemus at his nocturnal visit (John 3) – the Kingdom of God is entirely new and transformational – akin to a new birth – the old ways of doing things no longer apply

3. What does Paul see as the purpose of the Law? (3: v 23-24)

Paul states that its purpose is to lead us to Christ – it points the way by making us aware of right and wrong, and the need for forgiveness, but only faith in Christ can set us free – the law itself is powerless.

4. Why does Paul say that observing the law gets the Galatians precisely no-where? (Gal 3. v10 and the references he makes to Deuteronomy 27.26) Why do you think Paul regards observing the law to be so ineffectual? (Gal: 3 v 2, 5)

Paul, having been taught as a Pharisee, knows that the law in the OT (Deuteronomy 27.26) curses those who do not uphold everything in the law – and he knows that no-one can reach this standard of perfection – so the law condemns. Only with the resurrection of Christ is the Spirit that gives power made available to all who believe

5. In Gal 3: v 23/24, Paul portrays faith in Christ as liberating us from the prison created by the Law. How does Christ achieve this for us? What are the benefits that flow from putting our faith in Christ?

Christ fulfilled the law in every respect – and his defeat of the powers of sin and death through his resurrection enable him to send the Holy Spirit to begin our transformation into new life – a life that begins when we put our faith in him.

We are set free from the condemnation of the law, our relationship with God is restored and the Holy Spirit given to and living within us encourages us to use our God given gifts to love both God and our neighbour

6. What does Paul see as significant in the story of Abraham (3: v 6-9)?

Abraham lived before God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and Moses received the law at Mount Sinai. Paul points out that God's relationship with Abraham was based on Abraham putting his faith in God – so Paul's point is that faith came before the law, and it was always God's long term plan to extend his blessings to all nations, to all who put their faith in him, not just the Jews.

7. Paul took such strong issue with the Galatians as he saw their actions as putting a barrier around the Good News and denying the power of the Gospel. Is this still a temptation that we are prey to? How can we best avoid becoming 'foolish'?

8. How can we best avoid erecting barriers to divide those we regard as 'inside' from those 'outside'? What would you say to someone who feels beyond God's reach because they don't consider themselves 'good enough'?

9. Fun Question – a cunning plan! In his talk, Mike mentioned the Tudor law introducing a tax on beards. Given the current state of the country's finances, do you think this should be re-introduced, and if so, should it be based on the length of beard or the greyness of the beard?

YOUR QUESTIONS, 09/01/22**Introduction: Intentions and Questions.****Matthew 22:15-22 & Mark 10:17-22**

1. Do you think it is right that we ask questions of faith and God?
 - a. Are there any limits on this?
2. Can you think of a few examples of people asking questions from either the Old or New Testaments? (e.g. Exodus 3:13 Luke 20:27-40; Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 18:21)
 - a. What do we learn from their questions and the response they receive?
3. What does it tell us about God that he allows us to question?
4. A bit like a spot the difference puzzle, what differences can you see between the two scenes from Sunday's passages?
 - a. Why are they important?
5. Why do you think Jesus still answers the Pharisees even though he knew they were trying to trick him?
 - a. What might this show us about the nature of God?
6. How do we typically ask questions?
7. How might we develop our questioning and listening skills
 - a. Do we sometimes ask, already "knowing" the answer?
 - b. Do we make sure we listen once we have asked?
 - c. Do we ask and then wait for our chance to speak?
 - d. Do we allow our minds to be open to learn and be refined?
 - e. Do we actively listen? – What might active listening look like?
8. Pray together for good discussions and conversations this year, that we might all develop, grow, and nurture our faith and the faith of those around us.

YOUR QUESTIONS, 02/01/22**New Year Service; Remember, Refocus, Regroup, Revelation.****Hebrew 10: 19-25**

1. [Remember] What do you want to remember of 2021 with joy and want to give thanks for?
2. [Remember] What do you remember of 2021 that has been difficult, painful, sad, sapping, or remains unresolved? (You may want to consider this silently, or write it down)
 - a. How can these things that cause lament within us, be brought to God? How do we seek God in these things? (Lament in the Bible: Psalm 102:1-2, Lamentations 1:1, Psalm 130:6, Mark 14:36. Encouragement in the Bible: 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 4:13)
3. [Refocus] In what way/area of life might you need a fresh encounter with God? (Again you may want to consider this silently, or write it down)
 - a. How do we seek/avoid such encounters? (Consider how people in the Bible hungered for and sought after God/Jesus or avoided God/Jesus. Eg Mary and Martha, Lazarus, the prodigal son and his brother in the parable.)
4. [Refocus] The words of the Methodist Prayer of Covenant with God are written below:
 - a. In the 2nd line we say 'Put me to what you will' How can/do we discern what God is willing for us?
 - b. In a culture in which the focus can be about seeking our own pleasure and using things and others at our own disposal, how do we show that 'freely and wholeheartedly yielding all things to [God's] pleasure and disposal' is the better way? (What are the possible negatives/consequences of the former, and the positives/consequences of the later? And how do we then, as individuals and a church, show this difference in a liberating and affirming way?)
 - c. Note the prayer is a covenant between two parties; you and God. What are you promising? What is God promising?
5. [Regroup] How are/can we spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another? (Hebrews 10:24-25) What can you (continue to) do at the start of this year to ensure you are supporting other Christians and being supported by others? [This may be a bit of a redundant question if you are in a CG. Maybe the better question is to consider those, about 60% of our church, who are not in a CG. How do you/your CG, support them?]
6. [Revelation] 'While a new year can bring with it a sense of hope for the future, our ultimate hope lies not in a new year, but in a new age. [...] And we are called to get the balance right of living both in the now, and living for the not yet. We live fully in the now, embracing each God-given day of 2022, whilst living for God's coming Kingdom.'
 - a. We tend it either be more about living in the now (and therefore not considering eternal consequences of our daily lives) or living for the not yet (and therefore either being of no earthly use, or dismissing/minimising our earthly lives and creation) What are the missional consequences of being more one than the other? What is your tendency? How do you get the balance right?
 - b. Recalling the 5 Marks of Mission (proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom with your neighbours, to respond to human need with loving service, to challenge and transform unjust structures in society pursuing peace and reconciliation, and to

safeguard creation), which one of these are you, your group, St James being called into (or to continue with) this coming year?

7. [Refocus] At the end of the service, during open prayer, Cat shared about putting the following quote from the poet and journalist Iain S Thomas at the front of her Bible: “And every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, “This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this!” And each day, it’s up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, “No. This is what’s important.”
- a. How do you understand this quote?
 - b. What do you have written/could you write in the front of your Bible as an encouragement in 2022? (I[Keith] have these words written in the front of my Bible: “Lord as I come to your Word help me to be attentive to it; guide me by the Holy Spirit to see your truths and give me wisdom in bringing your Word to life in my life, my family, my neighbourhood, and your church.” The last 3 words were added when I got ordained.)

The Methodist Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will,

rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing,

put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you,

or laid aside for you,

exalted for you,

or brought low for you;

let me be full,

let me be empty,

let me have all things,

let me have nothing:

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things

to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.'