

A Story to Tell

Sharing Stories – Suggestions for Group Discussion

If you lead a Bible study, Cell Group or House Group or similar discussion setting, you are welcome to use these notes for leaders which are based on *A Story to Tell*. These notes are not intended to be handouts for group members and should be used in conjunction with book.

Each of the stories in *A Story to Tell* focussed on two particular aspects of the encounter with Jesus. Thus, each of the sessions are divided into two parts. Each part is structured as follows:

- **Preface:** Comments to consider when preparing for the meeting. Being sensitive to the needs of the members of the group – for example, some of the topics make provoke particular emotions or memories. Not all sessions have a Preface.
- **Opening the Book:** A gentle discussion – light-hearted or serious – to help introduce the particular part of the story. Not all sessions have this section.
- **The Main Heading:** The Bible verses which tell the story.
- **Turning the Pages:** Questions to help explore the theme together.
- **Bookmark:** Taking a break from conversation for a meditative exercise to explore the theme in silence – these occur in some sessions, not all.

Whether you cover both parts in one session is up to you and the group – but to get the most out of the discussion, the stories are probably best done over two meetings.

Use the material flexibly. The stories can be taken in any order and you don't have to do all of them. You don't even have to do both parts. You don't have to answer every question! Think what would work best for your group: and ask them what they want to do. What would help each person to grow in their faith?

Don't be afraid to tackle the more difficult topics but ensure this is done sensitively. You may feel that some are not appropriate for your particular group to discuss (part 2 of Judas Iscariot, for example).

Use the following general principles to make the most out of your time together:

- It may be helpful for everyone to have a copy of *A Story to Tell* (either printed from the website or photocopied from the book) so members can read the relevant story before coming. You can photocopy or print relevant pages yourself; colour printed and bound copies are available for £6 plus p&p through workrestpray.com/books.
- Don't read the stories in full in the meeting itself but whoever is leading may like to briefly summarise the individual parts.
- Add your own questions and if it helps the discussion (and remains focussed on the theme), let conversation digress in to other relevant or related aspects.

Try and ensure that everyone who wants to is able to contribute and that all contributions are listened to without interruption – that can be hard but it does pay dividends. Everyone has a story to tell and every contribution has the potential to be helpful to someone else – and to help others to experience the love of God more deeply.

Mary & Joseph (Part 1)

Preface: Members may have varying views about the Virgin Mary so try to enable all views to be spoken and listened to.

Opening the book: Ask group members to share examples of when they have been introduced to someone who holds an important position.

The Main Heading: Read Luke 2:22-35

Turning the pages:

- Thinking back over what preceded this event (you may like to read or summarise Luke 1:26-39, Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2:1-21), what range of feelings do you think were being experienced by Joseph and Mary as they arrived at the Temple?
- How do you think they understood the meaning of what Simeon said?
- How would it have felt for Mary and Joseph as they left the Temple that day?
- Mary is a figure widely revered in some churches: what was it about her that has made her so significant?
- In contrast, Joseph is sometimes overlooked. What role did he play in Jesus' life?
- Maybe it's a good thing that they didn't know what was going to happen in the future: how has God guided and supported you in uncertain and difficult times?

Mary & Joseph (Part 2)

Preface: Regarding the penultimate question, it may be that some members will feel they have not yet 'found' Jesus again so encourage discussion about what may be helpful and try and tease out any 'trite' comments.

Opening the book: Ask members to share an example of when they looking for someone or had got lost.

The Main Heading: Read Luke 2:41-52

Turning the pages:

- Jesus is in the temple as part of a Jewish 'rite of passage'. What was it about him that held the attention of the teachers?
- What reactions do we observe from Mary, Joseph and Jesus in this incident both before and when they find him?
- Pope Francis once said, 'For this little "escapade", Jesus probably had to beg forgiveness of his parents.' What do you think about the possibility that Jesus had to apologise for doing something wrong?
- In this incident we see the 'Holy Family' experience a very human set of events. What are the differences between 'being holy' and 'being human'? What are the similarities?
- Invite members to talk about times when they had 'lost Jesus' and what they did to enable finding him again?
- What can we learn from this encounter for our own lives?

Nicodemus (Part 1)

Opening the book: This story introduces the concept of seeing someone for spiritual direction or guidance. Ask if anyone has done this and can talk about the value of it.

The Main Heading: Read John 3:1-21

Turning the pages:

- Why might it have been difficult for Nicodemus to go to see Jesus?
- What did Nicodemus learn from his encounter with Jesus?
- Nicodemus went seeking guidance but was issued with a challenge. What might he have been thinking about after he left?
- What are the things that group members 'do not understand' (verse 10) about our belief?

Read from page 8: two paragraphs from: 'So, as with Nicodemus...' to 'dig up a few weeds'

- There are 'many ways through the garden'. What are the factors that sometimes stop us from exploring other expressions of Christian spirituality?
- What would help in exploring the garden in order to understand more fully?
- John 3:16 is a very familiar verse. What do these words actually mean?

Bookmark: Give everyone a piece of paper and a pen. Ask each person to re-write John 3:16 in a way that reflects their own faith and belief. Give people time to do this in silence (maybe between 3-5 minutes). They can write as much or as little as they wish.

- Ask those who wish to to read out what they have written.

Nicodemus (Part 2)

Opening the book: Ask people to share examples of when they didn't tell someone who they were straightaway (or not at all!)

The Main Heading: John 19:38-42 (to be read at the point shown below)

Turning the pages:

- Read John 7:43-52. Nicodemus' belief has moved on since the encounter in the night. What does this later incident tell us about him now?
- Why was it difficult for Nicodemus to make it public that he believed Jesus was the Messiah?
- Read Matthew 27:57-60, Mark 15:46 & Luke 23:50. And then John 19:38-42. Combining these passages, what do they tell you about these two men?
- The burial had to be completed before sunset. How is this symbolic of Nicodemus' own spiritual journey?
- In what ways has your journey through faith and belief turned from darkness in to light?
- What changes have you seen in your own faith as years have gone by?
- Overall, from both parts of this story, what can we learn from Nicodemus that is helpful for our lives?

The Woman from Samaria (Part 1)

Preface: In this session, members will be asked to write down their prejudices. It is possible that any that are subsequently read out may be 'light-hearted' or 'minor' but there may be some which offend or raise issues for other members.

Opening the book: Ask members to share examples of when they have misunderstood or misjudged something or someone based on initial impressions.

The Main Heading: Read John 4:3-7a

Turning the pages:

- In what ways is this encounter different from the story featuring Nicodemus?
- What are the similarities?
- How do you think the woman felt when this man at the well crossed so many social barriers?

Bookmark: Give everyone a piece of paper and a pen. Ask each person to write down their prejudices. Explain that they do not need to read them out unless they wish to. Give people time to write in silence (maybe between 2-3 minutes). They can write as much or as little as they wish.

- Ask those who wish to to read out what they have written.
- Why do we have prejudices and put up barriers?
- What needs to be done to challenge and overcome them?
- What else can we learn from this encounter for our own lives?

The Woman from Samaria (Part 2)

Preface: The rest of the conversation between the woman from Samaria and Jesus (John 4:16-28) is valuable but it is not covered in this session.

Opening the book: Using the suggested imagery from page 13, ask members if they think they are a fountain or a spring?

The Main Heading: Read John 4:7b-15

Turning the pages:

- In verse 13, Jesus turns the discussion from the practical to the spiritual. What opportunities do we have to talk to others about our faith?
- What else does this encounter tell us about the nature of day to day conversation?
- Jesus doesn't offer the woman an immediate solution to the position she finds herself in. While we might want one (and sometimes deceive ourselves into thinking there will be one), finding answers to our own difficulties are rarely quick and easy. Why is that?
- In what ways do you feel the water of eternal life gushing up inside of you?
- What are the areas of your lives in which you thirst? What are the dry areas?
- In the practicalities of ordinary, everyday life, how do you keep 'drinking the water so you are never thirsty again'?
- What else can we learn from this encounter for our own lives?

Martha & Mary (Part 1)

Opening the book: Share examples of when a meal – any type: yours, another's, restaurant etc – didn't quite turn out how you'd expected.

The Main Heading: Read Luke 10:38-42

Turning the pages:

- What are the positive aspects of what Martha was doing and her attitude towards the situation?
- What does Jesus mean when he says Mary 'has chosen the better part'?
- Ask for a quick show of hands – who are you most like: Martha or Mary?
- For the Marthas – what are the things that distract you from spending time listening to Jesus?
- For any who are like Mary (if there isn't anyone, open it to whole group!) – when you sit at the feet of Jesus what are wanting to hear or experience?
- In what ways do you see God in the ordinary, everyday things in life?
- What else can we learn from this encounter for our own lives?

Martha & Mary (Part 2)

Opening the book: Share examples of when you have received a generous or unexpected gift. What was your reaction? How did it make you feel?

The Main Heading: John 12:1-7 (read when shown below)

Turning the pages:

- In the previous part of this story there was a degree of tension. What do you think the atmosphere is like on this occasion?
- Nard is known today as spikenard and is still a valuable item – in essential oils it's £400 per litre. In Jesus' day, the amount Mary had was worth 300 denarii, the equivalent to a year's salary. Was Judas right to challenge what Mary did with it?

Bookmark: Explain that there is now going to be a short meditative exercise based loosely on the imaginative Gospel approach used in Ignatian spirituality. Ask the group to sit comfortably and to close their eyes. Read the following (slowly and with pauses between each sentence):

Imagine you are sat in the house – perhaps just as we are gathered here today. Be aware of the people around you. Friends. Disciples. Lazarus. Martha. Mary. Jesus. Take in the smell of the food. The noise of conversation. You watch as Mary carries a jar. You get a whiff of its perfume as she walks past you. She kneels at Jesus' feet and releases her hair from its covering. Think how you feel as pours the nard over Jesus' feet. Read John 12.1-7. (Allow a minute or so of silence) Now imagine yourself doing the same as Mary. Read John 12.1-7 again.

After a minute or so of further silence go on to the next question:

- What struck you in that meditation?
- We can liken the smell to being representative of God's love reaching out to others and filling our lives. In what ways do you see that happening?
- As Tom Wright put it (page 17) , what kind of smell are you giving off?

The Man from the Gerasenes (Part 1)

Preface: Both parts of this session cover some very sensitive and potentially uncomfortable and distressing topics. It is suggested that this session should be discussed only when the group is well-established and has been meeting together for some time.

Opening the book: Share examples of how members have encountered people who would be said to be on the margins of society (e.g. homeless, criminals, hooligans etc)

The Main Heading: Read Mark 5:2-9

Turning the pages:

- What are the different factors that result in some people living as outcasts from society?
- The man's name was not Legion – that is the name the demons gave to themselves. Why is it though that we label/'name' people by their situation or symptoms?
- What do people think about demon possession and deliverance ministry?
- He was somebody's son. Why is it that for some people life can take such a difficult path?
- In verses 6 and 7 we read that the man both ran to Jesus but was also fearful. Why is asking for help sometimes difficult?
- In what ways does Jesus bring healing and wholeness in our lives?

The Man from the Gerasenes (Part 2)

Preface: As with part one, this session covers some very sensitive and potentially uncomfortable and distressing topics. It is suggested that this session should be discussed only when the group is well-established and has been meeting together for some time. It is important that it is led by someone who can both control the conversation so it does not become a 'group therapy session' and be sensitive to what is disclosed. There may be some benefit in asking someone (prior to the meeting) to tell their story of an experience of depression or anxiety or similar and what aided their recovery.

Opening the book: What do group members do to keep fit and well?

The Main Heading: Read Mark 5:14b-20

Turning the pages:

- In the reading from Mark, the crowd turn on Jesus. This wasn't just because of what had happened to the pigs (see verses 9-14a). Why else do you think they did so?
- The man from the Gerasenes may or may not have been mentally unwell but why is mental ill health still so misunderstood?
- Depression and anxiety can sometimes result out of feelings that we 'ought' or 'should' be able to do or cope with particular things. Why do we put so much pressure on ourselves?
- What do we learn from Jesus' lifestyle in dealing with pressure?
- A lot of people spend a lot of money, time and energy in looking after their physical health (e.g. keeping fit, diet), what can we do to look after our mental wellbeing?
- What can we learn from this encounter for our own lives?

The Daughter of Jairus (Part 1)

Preface: This session is not intended to be about healing – but do be sensitive to any members who have (or had) children who experienced serious illness.

Opening the book: Ask the group to share examples of when they were kept waiting.

The Main Heading: Read Mark 5:22-24a, 35-43 (you may like to ask someone else to read verses 24b-34 to help provide further context)

Turning the pages:

- While they were waiting for Jesus to come to their house, how would Jairus and his wife (back at home) have been feeling?
- Why do you think it was that Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, believed that approaching Jesus would help?
- Why do you think the crowd laughed at Jesus? What other examples can you think of when people laughed at someone who ultimately was correct?

Bookmark: Ask the group to sit comfortably and to close their eyes. Ask them to imagine they are in the house. Jairus and his wife are there together with Peter, James and John. Jesus sits beside the bed where the sick girl lies. Ask someone to read the text on page 25 (slowly and with pauses) from 'He sits. She lies there' to 'The stranger leaves'.

After a minute or so of further silence go on to the next question:

- What struck you from that meditation? Did it provoke any particular thoughts?
- What do you think this experience was like for the daughter?
- What story will she have to tell as she gets older?
- What was the impact on her parents?
- What can we learn from this encounter for our own lives?

The Daughter of Jairus (Part 2)

Preface: The topic of children in church can raise strong views and opinions. Allow these to be voiced but bear in mind the need to ensure some do not dominate.

Opening the book: Ask for examples of when a child did or said something that took members by surprise (in a pleasant way!) or showed them something about God's love.

The Main Heading: Read Mark 10:13-16

Turning the pages:

- Why do you think the disciples tried to stop children coming to see Jesus?
- What strikes you about the nature of Jesus' response to the disciples?
- What strikes you about the nature of Jesus' response to the children?
- Why do some congregations have such a problem with children being in services?
- In what ways, does your church provide ministry to children and who else could help?
- In what ways can your church improve his ministry to children or should it be focusing its efforts elsewhere?

Judas Iscariot (Part 1)

Preface: Both sessions about Judas are potentially very 'heavy' topics and could give rise to strong feelings and also disclosure of what some members may view as 'weaknesses' or 'failings'.

Opening the book: Ask the group to share examples of when they have felt let down by another person or organisation (ask that these be described anonymously).

The Main Heading: Read Luke 22:4-6 & 22:47-48

Turning the pages:

- What do you understand by the word 'betrayal'?
- Why do you think Judas betrayed Jesus?
- If we had a better understanding of Judas and knew more about him, in what ways might that have changed his reputation?
- In what ways do we sometimes betray ourselves?
- If the antidote to self-betrayal, is to love ourselves – in what ways do we love ourselves and how can we love ourselves more?
- What else can we learn from this part of the story of Judas for our own lives?

Judas Iscariot (Part 2)

Preface: This session covers a very sensitive and potentially uncomfortable and distressing topic. It is suggested that this session should be discussed only when the group is well-established and has been meeting together for some time. It is important that it is led by someone who can both control the conversation and be sensitive to what is disclosed.

The Main Heading: Read Matthew 27:3-5

Turning the pages:

- What led Judas to take his own life?
- What was the impact on the remaining disciples and followers?
- People sometimes use the phrase 'commit suicide'. Assisting a suicide is a crime in the UK but attempting suicide has not been a criminal offence since 1961. Why do we sometimes talk about the act of taking one's life in such terms?
- Nearly 6,000 people take their own life in the UK each year (one per cent of all deaths; the highest rate being among men aged 45-49; for women it's aged 50-54; men account for three-quarters of all suicides).¹ What might be some of the reasons why people take or attempt to take their own life?
- What can we do to support people who survive an attempt?
- What can we do to support those who have been bereaved to deal with feelings of guilt or failure?

¹ From 2017 statistics:

www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2017registrations

Mary Magdalene (Part 1)

Preface: This session probably does need everyone to have read the first part of Mary Magdalene's story on pages 32-33. Alternatively, the opening paragraphs which describe the historical aspect could be read to the group (up to 'But even so the reputation still lingers.')

Opening the book: Share examples of being taken in by 'fake news' or being part of something which gave a 'spin' on the facts to portray a particular viewpoint.

The Main Heading: Read Luke 8:1-3

Turning the pages:

- It can be easy to overlook the fact that Jesus had female followers, what does this say about his affirmation of women in the society in which he lived?
- There is no Biblical evidence for Mary Magdalene's fabricated past, but the Gospel of Philip says Jesus 'loved her more than all the other disciples and used to kiss her.' What reactions do you have to the possibility that Jesus may have had a relationship with a woman?
- What does Jesus' involvement of Mary Magdalene and other women in his ministry say about the ministry of women today?
- Manipulating information has always existed but seems more prevalent today with the wide range of news sources available (TV, press, internet, social media etc). How might we draw back from living in a so-called 'post-truth society'?
- How do we ensure that we understand the truth of a situation?

Mary Magdalene (Part 2)

Preface: This session begins by thinking about loss and bereavement so pay particular sensitivity to any group members who have recently lost or are still grieving for someone.

Opening the book: Ask each of the members to say what their name means and what they think about their name.

The Main Heading: Read Matthew 27:55-57, 61 and John 20:1, 11-18

Turning the pages:

- Mary Magdalene had watched Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea prepare the tomb on the Friday. Why did Mary visit the tomb before sunrise that Sunday morning?
- Why do we tend to re-visit the place where someone is interred or to the location of a fatal incident?
- It's common for someone who has been bereaved to think they have seen their loved one in the street or elsewhere. Describe times when this happened and what reactions it provoked?

Bookmark: Ask someone to read John 20:1, 11-18 again (slowly and with pauses, leaving a longer pause after 'Jesus said to her 'Mary!') After a couple of minutes silence, ask a second person, perhaps of another gender, to read the same. Then, after a further minute of silence continue below.

- What thoughts or feelings did that meditation provoke?
- Mary fell at Jesus' feet, how might you have reacted if you had been her?
- What does the calling of our name say about Christ's love for us?
- What else can we learn from this encounter for ourselves?

Thomas (Part 1)

Preface: There may be some reluctance from some members of the group to disclose their personal doubts. That's fine. Try to ensure that doubts that are expressed are not dismissed or mocked – and discourage the offering of 'immediate solutions'.

Opening the book: Ask group members to share times when they had doubts about a situation (not church or faith related).

The Main Heading: Read John 20:24-25

Turning the pages:

- Why do you think Thomas was very open about the fact that he doubted Jesus' resurrection?
- What must it have been like for Thomas in the week after the resurrection?
- Why do we sometimes feel that it's not OK to have doubts?
- In what ways is it reassuring to know that everyone has doubts?
- What do members of the group have doubts about in relationship to faith, belief and the Bible?
- What place does having doubts play in other aspects of our lives?
- What else can we learn from Thomas' initial reaction?

Thomas (Part 2)

Opening the book: Last time (or earlier) we considered our doubts: ask members to share examples of when evidence countered doubts they had had (not faith related).

The Main Heading: Read John 20:26-29

Turning the pages:

- Thomas could have easily left the group in the preceding week. Why do you think he stayed?
- He is sometimes referred to as being like a scientist. He wanted to see the evidence. Why was that important to Thomas?
- Jesus did not condemn Thomas for doubting. Why was that?
- Thinking back to the doubts that members talked about in the last part, what evidence would help deal with them?
- We are blessed because we have not have seen Jesus but have come to believe (verse 29). What response does that create within you?

Bookmark: Ask the group to sit comfortably and to close their eyes. In the silence ask them to reflect on their own lives and what causes them to respond 'My Lord and my God'. After 2-3 minutes of silence ask:

- Would anyone like to share what they were thinking?
- What else can we learn from Thomas' experience?

John (Part 1)

Preface: Be aware that there may be some people who do not feel they are loved or they believe they are difficult to love. Some members may not have experienced the *eros* form of love.

Opening the book: There's often more to people than meets the eye. Share examples of when a first impression of someone proved not to be an accurate one.

The Main Heading: Read John 20: 30-31, 21:25

Turning the pages:

- Read Luke 9:49, 54 and Mark 10:35-45. Why do you think Jesus persevered with John?
- John may or may not have been the author of the Gospel or the three New Testament letters that bear that name. He may or may not have been the 'disciple whom Jesus loved'. For the purposes of this discussion we will assume he was in both cases. Why do you think John knew he was loved by Jesus?
- What was it about John's experience that led to him writing a Gospel that is very different in nature from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke)?
- Discuss the four types of love in turn and what they mean:
 - *Eros*: sensual or romantic love.
 - *Storge*: family love, the affectionate bond that develops naturally between parents and children, and brothers and sisters.
 - *Phileo*: love for and from fellow humans: care, respect and compassion for other people.
 - *Agape*: divine love that comes from God. Agape love is perfect, unconditional, sacrificial, and pure.
- We'll come to thinking about *agape* love in the next part. Taking each of the other three one at a time, in what ways do we experience each of them from and towards other people?

John (Part 2)

Preface: Be aware that there may be some people who do not feel they are loved by God.

The Main Heading: Read 1 John 4:7-12, 16

Turning the pages:

- What does the phrase 'God is love' mean?
- Thinking back over all the stories that the group have considered so far, what do they tell us about God's love?
- Thinking about *agape* love, in what ways do we experience that as coming from God?
- In what ways, can we still know God's love in more difficult times?

Bookmark: Ask the group to sit comfortably and to close their eyes. Ask someone to read 1 John 3:1 (slowly and with pauses) . After three minutes of silence, ask a second person, perhaps of another gender, to read the same verse. Then after another three minutes of silence, invite members to say a word or phrase that particularly struck them. Have the verse read a third time and invite members to use the final period of silence (five minutes) to meditate on their word or phrase and use it as a way of praying to God.

- After that final period of silence ask members to say what it was about their word or phrase that made it special and what if anything they heard from God through it. This is done without any comment from other members.