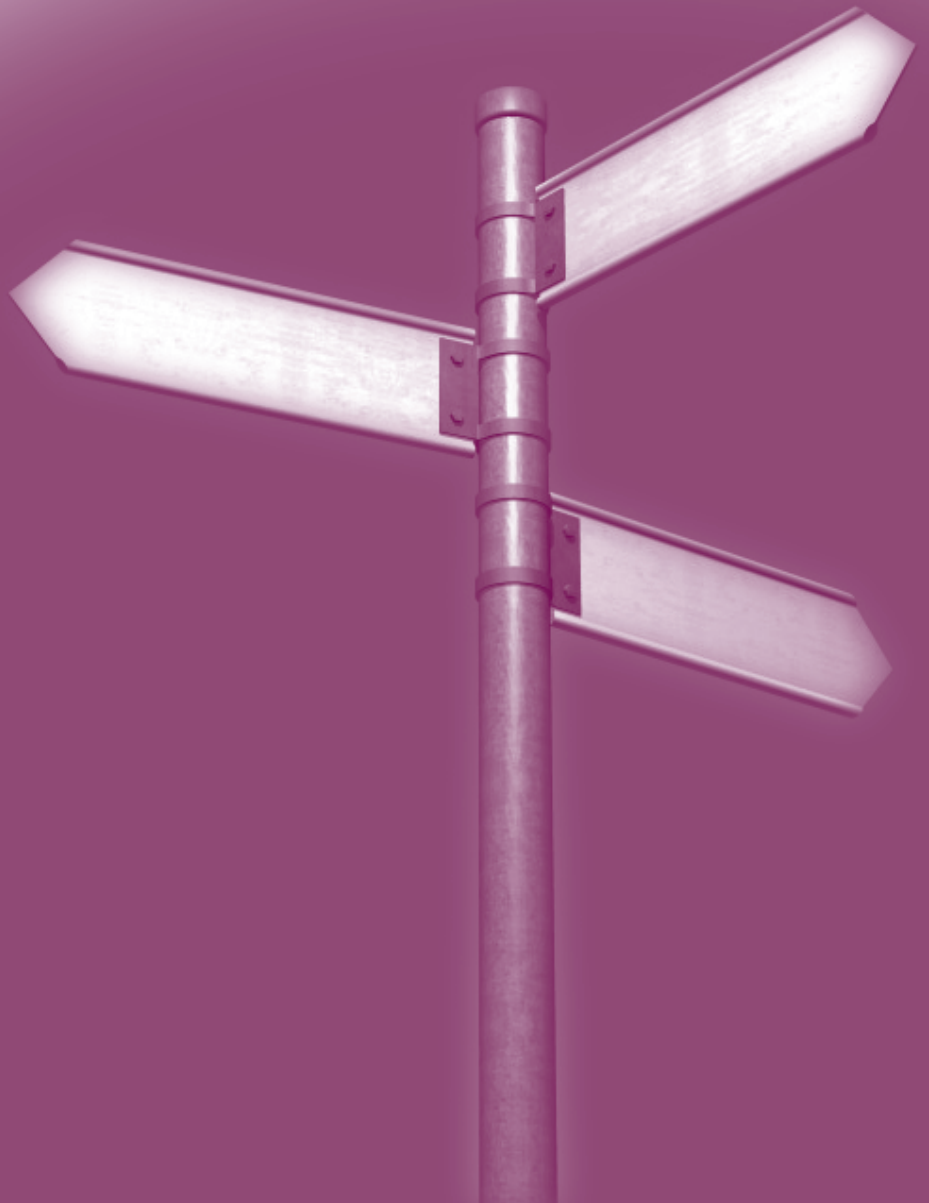




Signs on the Way

Bible Studies for the Anglican Communion
in the Year of the Lambeth Conference



Signs on the Way:

Bible Studies for the Anglican Communion in the Year of the Lambeth Conference

Introduction

These seven Bible studies are designed to complement the Bible studies which the bishops of the Anglican Communion (and their spouses) will be participating in during the Lambeth Conference 2008. Like the Bible studies being undertaken by the bishops, the present studies focus on the Gospel of John.

We hope that they will be used by clergy and lay people throughout the Anglican Communion to join in spirit with their bishops as the bishops prepare for, engage in, and return from the Lambeth Conference being held at Canterbury, England in July and August 2008. They can be used in a number of different ways. Perhaps a local church group might wish to work through them, perhaps one or more of the studies might be explored at a diocesan meeting, or perhaps individuals might like to use them for their own personal devotion and as a way of praying for and supporting their bishops. The studies are structured so that they can be used either by groups or by individuals.

We have made the Bible studies as accessible as possible, using a series of questions in each case as the basic format of the Bible study. There are no right answers to the questions! Through the questions we invite you to engage with the biblical text and your context. Each question is designed to take you deeper into the biblical text or deeper into the engagement between the biblical text and your context. In each Bible study we have also offered some input so as to enable the voice of John's Gospel to be heard distinctly. This form of Bible study draws you into dialogue with John and your context. So we do encourage you to follow the format of each Bible study, allowing sufficient time for engaging with the questions and the input. If you use these Bible studies in a group setting, it will be useful to appoint someone as a facilitator, whose task it will be to enable everyone to participate and complete the Bible study within a given time period. There are many wonderful books on John's Gospel and some of you may want to dip into these as you work through the Bible studies. Two recent commentaries that we would recommend, both written by Anglicans, are *John: The People's Bible*

Commentary (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 1998), written by Richard A. Burridge, and *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of John* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2007), written by Cynthia Briggs Kittredge. They are accessible to a broad range of readers.

The Bible studies we offer to you are produced by the same international team of people who were also responsible for the Bible studies at the Lambeth Conference. In the Bible studies written for the bishops and their spouses the focus is on the 'I am' sayings in the Gospel of John. These present studies, however, focus on the 'signs' carried out by Jesus in the Gospel of John. The signs take us to the heart of Jesus' ministry and mission – indeed John 20:30–31 suggests that it is through such signs that we come to discover that 'Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing ... have life in his name.'

The signs reinforce the central message of the Gospel of John that in and through Jesus Christ human beings can engage directly with God's great gift of life, 'in all its fullness'. Life, in this Gospel, includes material, physical and spiritual dimensions. Near the beginning of his Gospel John offers us the stunning proclamation, 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory'. Through the human, material body of Jesus Christ we have caught a glimpse of God. John is not surprisingly determined to remind us that we cannot separate out, or choose between, the spiritual and the physical aspects of our faith. Woe betide us if we attempt to do so. The signs, in which a physical or material action of Jesus is generally accompanied by a reflection by him on the significance of what is happening, help to reinforce the ways in which the many aspects of Jesus' life-giving work are intertwined. This insistence on holding together the spiritual and material dimension of our salvation is perhaps a special characteristic of our Anglican Way. Certainly the Gospel of John has been deeply cherished throughout Anglican history, and continues to speak profoundly and passionately to the needs of many parts of our Anglican Communion today.

It is no accident that the Gospel of John begins with the words, 'In the beginning was the Word', thus echoing the start of Genesis. For John is offering us a 'new creation', an opportunity to complete what was uncompleted, to get right what went wrong in the story of Genesis. If we count up the number of specific signs in the Gospel of John we seem to come to the number seven. This is surely intentionally reminiscent of the pattern of creation in Genesis 1. As we work through the various signs we find ourselves discovering the richness of this new creation that the Son 'working with his Father' (John 5:17) is graciously offering to us and to this our world, which God so loves. And there is one – literally crucial – aspect to this new creation. Unlike Genesis, where human desire for power, control and knowledge resulted in death, this new creation is finally finished and perfected through a death freely and sacrificially offered – Christ's own. Jesus' words on the cross in John 19:30, 'It is finished', are not merely a human cry of relief at the end of suffering, but a shout of triumph

by the Word of God that at last creation is completed. Throughout the Gospel the signs – and other incidents in the life of Jesus – gradually but increasingly point us towards this moment. They act like 'signposts' helping us to draw ever nearer to the mystery at the heart of the Gospel of John, the 'greater love' which lays down life for one's friend, and which like the seed dying and sown in the ground can then bear much fruit.

So we invite you to travel with these Bible studies through the Gospel of John using the signs as signposts for your journey. As you do we would ask you to pray for all bishops and others preparing for the Lambeth Conference, with its particular focus on enabling bishops as leaders in God's mission in the Church. Such a vocation is both awe-ful and joyful. Such a calling, John's Gospel suggests, requires us to be willing to follow Jesus closely, and through following to discover our true home in him.

The Sign of the Wedding Feast at Cana

John 2:1–11

Open the Bible study with a brief prayer.

If you are working in a group, ask someone to read the passage aloud. If you are working by yourself, read the passage through slowly and carefully.

Allow for some silence, and then read the following note:

Each of the four Gospels tells the story of Jesus' ministry in its own unique voice, and each highlights different aspects of the mystery of his death and Passion. Christian theologians have taught since the third century that it is only in relation to each other that these four Gospels can be properly understood as Scripture. In fact, the Church rejected early attempts to create a single Gospel that harmonized Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. One of the challenges in studying the Bible, then, is to identify the particular ideas in the pages that are open before us, and to be attentive to the ways that they affect us.

A distinctive feature of John's Gospel is the way that it folds theological meanings into what appears to be a simple narrative. In the details of the story John often seems to invite us to read his Gospel on more than one level. He makes us constantly aware that we are reading a story not only about things that happened long ago, but also about the resurrected Jesus whose presence we already know in our lives. At the end of the Gospel he addresses us directly to say that how we read these signs really matters (20:30).

The first of the seven signs is the only one that is unlike any miracle in Matthew, Mark or Luke. It is in a way a pattern for the whole ministry of Jesus in John's Gospel, for it is unmistakably about transformation. The central image is the transformation of water into wine, which on the surface at least is what the story is all about. When the host runs out of wine, Jesus provides an extravagant abundance; verses 6–7 say that there were between 120 and 180 gallons of wine. Moreover, the climax of the story in verses 9–10 tells us something important about the wine that makes the abundance even more startling! What would this particular miracle mean to the disciples, particularly if we take into account that their expectations had been formed by words and images from their Scriptures (our Old Testament)? Our first task, then, is to explore these images so that we can begin to glimpse the events at Cana the way John tells us the disciples saw them. Reading Amos 9:13–15 and Isaiah 25:6–9 can help move us a bit out of our context into that of the disciples.

Question 1: *In light of these words of the prophets Amos and Isaiah, what might the transformation at Cana have meant for the disciples?*

What do you think they believed (verse 11)?

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

The first Christians who read John's Gospel would have recognized the significance of the bridegroom and the wedding feast from traditions about Jesus as well as from his teaching. To explore these traditions in the next question, read Mark 2:18–20 and Matthew 22:2.

Question 2: *What do these traditions add to your understanding of the setting of Jesus' first sign?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

The short exchange between Jesus and his mother in verses 3–4 is another example of the way that John encourages us to find more than one meaning in his Gospel stories. These stories describe *what* Jesus did and

how different people responded, but they also proclaim *who* Jesus is. So, for example, verses 3–4 contain hints that more is going on than a simple conversation about the wine. John refers to Mary four times as ‘the mother of Jesus’, yet Jesus calls her ‘woman’. This was a respectful way for a man to address an unrelated woman in the Greek world, as we can see in John 4:21, 8:10 and 20:13 as well as in Matthew 15:28 and Luke 13:12. However, it was not customary for a son to address his mother in this way. Is John calling our attention to the unusual title ‘woman’? There is only one other occasion when Jesus calls his mother ‘woman’, and his words to her in verse 7, ‘My hour has not yet come’, direct our attention to that occasion. John is again inviting us to ponder the mystery that everything in the ministry of Jesus, right from the beginning, is oriented toward the cross. (For the meaning of the ‘hour’, read John 8:20, 16:23 and 17:1–5.) Now read John 19:25–27, when Jesus again calls his mother ‘woman’.

Question 3: *What does the presence of Mary in the story of Cana mean for you?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

Verses 6–10 tell in detail what happens behind the scenes. What is not put into words is the miraculous transformation that takes place unseen between verses 7 and 8. Instead, John directs our attention to the human transformations.

Question 4: *What transformative effect does Jesus’ presence at the wedding have on the various characters in verses 6–10?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the questions, read the following note:

John’s readers, unlike the disciples, of course know the ending of the story. We have seen throughout this passage how John uses words and images as markers to guide his readers, but in verse 11 he seems to address us more directly. Of the three markers in verse 11, the one about glory needs a word of explanation. In the Old Testament, glory is the outward and visible manifestation of the invisible LORD’s holiness and power. Examples are the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16:7–10) and the cloud and fire that accompanied them at each stage of their journey (Exodus 40:34–38). John’s phrase ‘he revealed his glory’ draws us back to the Gospel’s Prologue, especially 1:14. At the same time it anticipates the last sign, which is the only one besides the first to mention glory (see 11:40). Especially important is the way this early glimpse of Jesus’ glory already points to the cross, on which Jesus will be enthroned in glory (see for example 17:1–5).

Question 5: *What do each of these markers in verse 11 say to you as readers of the Gospel:*

- *the first of his signs*
- *and revealed his glory*
- *his disciples believed in him?*

When you have had sufficient time to discuss this question, close the Bible study with this prayer:

Lord Jesus, give us eyes to see and hearts to know when your transforming glory is being revealed to us. Amen.

The Sign of the Healing of the Royal Official's Son

John 4:46–54

Open the Bible study with a brief prayer.

If you are working in a group, ask someone to read the passage aloud. If you are working by yourself, read the passage through slowly and carefully.

Allow for some silence, and then read the following note:

Among the seven signs of the Gospel of John, this one – the healing of the son of a royal official – sometimes tends to get a bit overlooked. Yet it opens our eyes to something that is extremely important if we are to have a proper understanding of signs. Like the first sign, this story is set in Cana of Galilee and it is told in a way that clearly links it to that earlier sign. When Jesus had transformed water into wine at a wedding feast he set out the pattern for his future ministry. So, with this healing of the royal official's son, we have an example of transformation in action. Sickness becomes healing and death is turned to life. In both of the two signs the importance of hearing, having faith in and obeying Jesus' word is made clear. In 2:5 Mary, Jesus' mother, tells the servants at the feast, 'Do whatever he tells you.' In the present story the royal official 'believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way' – back to Capernaum, which was a day's journey away. And it wasn't until he neared his home that he discovered his dying child had been healed, at the exact moment when Jesus had pronounced the healing words in Cana!

But there is also another connection between the two episodes. In both passages there is a point where Jesus seems to speak surprisingly crossly and abruptly to someone – at the wedding to his mother, and in this story to the father who was asking for his son to be healed. At the wedding his first reaction to his mother's comment about the lack of wine is to suggest that it is none of her business. In the case of the father, Jesus' initial response to his request for healing is to state, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe' (verse 48). Yet in both cases the person to whom Jesus is speaking perseveres – and Jesus then acts to grant their request.

In fact we need to take seriously Jesus' apparent words of rebuke – 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe' – to understand what this second sign in John's Gospel is trying to tell us. In the Synoptic Gospels 'signs' are often seen in negative terms – in Matthew 12:39, for example, it is because they are 'an evil and adulterous generation' that people ask Jesus for a 'sign'. In the Gospel of John, on the other hand, 'signs' are normally seen positively – in fact they are linked to the very purpose that lay behind the writing of the Gospel: 'these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and believing have life in his name' (20:31). The reference in John 4:48 is the one clear instance in John's Gospel when the word 'sign' is used in a negative way. But coming as it does in this story, in which the healing of the royal official's son happens at a distance, it teaches us something important about the real meaning of signs. The father actually accepts Jesus' word of healing before he has the opportunity of 'seeing' the result of it; the story makes it clear that he believes *without* seeing signs and wonders! The Gospel of John is well known for its 'irony' – and perhaps this is a brilliant example of such irony.

What John wants us to realize – and perhaps he wants us to get this right before we travel on too far into the Gospel of John and see too many signs – is that the 'signs' of Jesus are *not* divine parlour tricks designed to force faith on people. Throughout the Gospel it is made clear time and again that believing in and through Jesus involves people in a free, yet intimate and personal relationship with God. Through the development of this relationship gradually eyes are opened, and God's ongoing work within creation can be discovered. The ability to 'see signs' and belief *do* go hand in hand – but it is not a question of human beings being coerced into belief through 'signs'. Equally, Jesus seems to have no patience with those who demand sensational miraculous demonstrations – for any 'faith' that resulted from that would be false and flawed. Rather, the characters in John's Gospel and we the readers are being called into life by God, by being invited to participate with Jesus in a new creation that is both truly transforming and transformed.

Discuss or reflect on the following questions:

Question 1: What transformations take place in this story?

What can we, in our churches, learn from this story about God's transforming power?

Question 2: The passage ends by telling us that in addition to the boy's father 'his whole household' believed. Why is this a significant part of the story?

Question 3: Do you think that 'seeing signs' is helpful for Christians? Can 'signs' sometimes be dangerous for our faith?

When you have had sufficient time to discuss these questions, close the Bible study with this prayer:

Almighty God, enable us to believe in your word and seek your help whenever we feel helpless. May our bishops and their spouses be transformed through all they are sharing in the Lambeth Conference. And enable us to support them on their journey.

The Sign of the Healing at the Sheep Gate

John 5:1–18

Open the Bible study with a brief prayer.

Read John 5:1–18. If you are working in a group use four participants to read the text dramatically by assuming the roles of the narrator, Jesus, the sick man, and the Jews/Ioudaioi. If you are working by yourself read the passage through carefully.

Discuss or reflect on the question below:

Question 1: What is the most common interpretation of this text in your community?

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

Throughout this Gospel, John refers to various Jewish festivals. For example in 2:13 and 4:45 there is the festival of Passover; in 6:4 the festival of Passover again; in 7:2 the festival of Booths; in 10:22 the festival of Dedication (Hanukkah); and in 12:1 the festival of Passover once again. In each case John shows how Jesus fulfils and exceeds the objective of the festival. Here, in 5:1, John does not indicate what particular festival it is. Perhaps he is using 'festival' in a representative sense. While we do not know what this festival is about, we do know who it excludes. As Jesus enters Jerusalem, the temple city, his attention is on those who will not be attending the festival, namely 'the blind, lame, and paralysed' who congregate at the pool of Bethesda.

Question 2: What is common about the politics of festivals in this text and your context? Who is included and who excluded? Whose interests do the festivals serve?

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

John groups the ‘blind, lame, and paralysed’ under the term ‘invalid’. As scholars have noted, in the Mediterranean culture of Jesus all sickness reflected social taboos, and the physical invalids were social invalids as well. They were, in a sense, ‘in-valid-ates’. In such a culture, the invalids were the marginalized and rejected of society, its refuse. At one level, we are made aware of how a religiously organized community can manifest social sickness. The blind, lame and paralysed were excluded from the festivities of their community and left to their own fate. At another level, we can focus, as do John and Jesus, on the relationship among the invalids themselves. What is disturbing about the story of the man who has been sick for 38 years is the lack of cooperation among the invalids; they compete rather than cooperate. John 15:7 records the sick man’s complaint to Jesus, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’

Question 3: *Does the text offer any clues concerning why there is this lack of cooperation among the invalids?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

John’s narration of the helpless sick man is framed by stories involving two boys. In John 4:45–54 (the story preceding this text) the royal official’s son is portrayed as someone who has the resources of much political and economic power and strong family support. There are many people arbitrating and advocating for the sick boy’s healing. In John 6:1–14 (the passage immediately after the sign we are studying) we find another boy, and this time it is the boy himself who has resources, five loaves and two fish, which he is clearly willing to share with the hungry masses. It also appears that he has some support from Andrew. The Gospel of John sandwiches this event of the healing at the pool by the Sheep Gate between these two stories where there are forms of cooperation that enable Jesus to bring about ‘life’ (John 4:53) and ‘satisfaction’ (John 6:12).

Question 4: *What does this narrative ‘frame’ say about the relationship between resources, power, Jesus, community and Christian mission?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, conclude the Bible study with the following prayer:

Gracious God of life, we thank you for the many ways in which you compassionately approach us with the gift of restoration and healing. Remove from our communities our malicious and selfish strategies that weaken solidarity and promote rivalry among the invalidated ones. Give us imaginative hearts and minds to identify and harness local resources for tapping into the healing that you want for your afflicted children. In all our activity may we serve as instruments to usher in your promise of fullness of life, which is a sign that your Son and our Lord Jesus Christ is at work in the world. Amen.

The Sign of the Feeding of the Masses

John 6:1–15

Open the Bible study with a brief prayer.

If you are working in a group read John 6:1–15, slowly and dramatically. Use five reading voices: a narrator, Jesus, Philip, Andrew and the people. If you are working by yourself read the passage through carefully.

Allow for some silence, and then read the following note:

This is the only miracle from the ministry of Jesus that is told in each of the four Gospels.

Question 1: *What has this story meant to you in your life?*

When you have had an opportunity to share your memories of this story, move on to the following questions, which engage with the biblical story in more detail.

Question 2: *In verse 5 Jesus asks Philip a question. What do we already know about Philip from John's Gospel? (Read John 1:43–51.)*

Question 3: *Why do you think Jesus addresses his question in chapter 6 verse 5 to Philip specifically?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the questions, read the following note:

Notice how Jesus asks a question about *place* ('Where are we to buy bread ...?'), but that Philip responds with an answer about *resources*. Philip comments that 'Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread ...'. A denarius was a day's basic wage. The disciple Andrew then comments that there are resources, but that they are clearly too little. So both disciples focus on the lack of resources. Jesus then proceeds to show them that there are sufficient resources.

Question 4: *What are the resources that are available in this scene? List each of the possible resources in the text.*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question read the following note:

Notice how these resources multiply, so that when the crowd have been 'satisfied', there is still plenty. There is actually an abundance of resources!

This story can be understood on at least two levels. It can be understood on the material level as a story about providing real food for hungry people, and it can be understood on the symbolic level as a story in which Jesus is equal to and even surpasses Moses. On the material level Jesus is clearly concerned about the actual hunger of people, just as he was concerned about the actual illnesses of people in chapter 5. Jesus has come to bring life to the sick and the hungry – real life!

Question 5: *In your context, who are those who need actual healing and feeding? And what resources are available to feed and heal them?*

When the group has had some time to discuss the question read the following note:

This story can also be understood symbolically. Notice how this story follows the account of Jesus in Jerusalem (chapter 5), in which he comes into conflict with the leaders of the Jews because he has healed someone on the Sabbath. Jesus challenges them, arguing that they did not really understand the Scriptures or God's purposes. He concludes by saying that though they claim to be followers of Moses, it is Moses (and the Scriptures associated with Moses) that is accusing them! 'If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me' (5:46).

If we follow the larger story in John's Gospel, you will notice that Jesus has been in Jerusalem, but that in chapter 6 Jesus has moved from Jerusalem to Galilee. It is now in Galilee where Jesus is being followed by a large crowd, some of whom would have witnessed his healing of the sick man in Jerusalem (in chapter 5). Notice the similarities between what happens in chapter 6 and what happened in the story of Moses in the Old Testament. Just as Moses crossed the sea in order to reach a specific mountain, so too Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee in order to reach a mountain. Just as Moses was followed by a large community of people, so too Jesus is followed by a large crowd. Just as Moses ascended the mountain, so too Jesus ascends the mountain. Just as the journey of Moses took place after the first Passover, so too this journey of Jesus takes place at the time of the Passover. But, notice that Jesus is greater than Moses, for as Jesus reminds the crowd in verse 32, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.' In feeding the crowd, the masses, Jesus is doing what Moses could not, demonstrating both that he is greater than Moses and that he and the Father are doing the same work (see Exodus 16:1–5 and Psalm 105:40).

Question 6: *What are some other symbolic meanings of Jesus feeding the multitude?*

Question 7: *In what ways do these symbolic meanings relate to your context?*

When you have had some time to discuss or reflect on these questions, explore the concluding question.

Question 8: *How has this Bible study spoken to you personally?*

When you have had sufficient time to discuss this question, close the Bible study with this prayer:

Gracious God, you sent Jesus to us as a sign of your commitment to humanity. May we, together with our bishops and their spouses who gather at the Lambeth Conference, work with you as you reach out to the sick and hungry around us.

The Sign of Walking on the Sea

John 6:16–21

Open the Bible study with a brief prayer.

If you are working in a group, ask someone to read the passage aloud. If you are working by yourself, read the passage through slowly and carefully.

Allow for some silence, and then read the following note:

This memorable event comes immediately after the feeding of the 5,000. Unlike that very public sign, this one is quite private. It occurs in the dark of night on a wild sea, and is witnessed only by some of the disciples. Consisting of six verses, it is the shortest of the signs passages.

Question 1: *What has this story about Jesus meant for you in the past?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

Like the feeding of the 5,000, today's episode evokes the wonderful story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. John told us in verse 4 that the Passover was near, indicating that he wants us to keep the book of Exodus in mind as we read. That's because he, like the other Evangelists, used the vocabulary of the Scriptures, which is to say our Old Testament, in recording the stories about Jesus. It's helpful, therefore, to keep the Old Testament at hand when we study this passage. First, then, read Exodus 14:21–27.

Question 2: *What details of John's account about Jesus on the sea remind you of the Exodus event?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

If the sign involves Jesus walking on the sea, what does it signify? Here two Old Testament traditions can add to our understanding. The first originated in the widely influential religious traditions of Mesopotamia, the birthplace of Abraham. According to the Mesopotamian creation account, vast primordial waters that filled the universe had always existed. These waters were personified as a fearsome, consuming dragon that intended to destroy all the younger gods. One strong young god conquered this dragon of chaos by piercing it, standing on its back and finally splitting it in half like a shellfish. He then set about creating the world in the open space he had made between the two watery halves. This very ancient and well-known creation tradition was poetically adapted by the Israelites to praise God, as we can see for example in Psalm 74:12–17 and Psalm 89:5–11. Even more pertinent for us in this Bible study is the poetic picture of the LORD treading on the back of the sea monster in Job 9:8, and walking on the sea in Psalm 77:16–20. The Israelites were using the language of their time to express the mystery of God acting in their lives. For them, it was the LORD who had divided the waters on the second day of creation (Genesis 1:6–8), and the LORD who split the Red Sea in order to redeem his people.

Now the breathtaking claim of our Gospel story can be heard. It is not about a showy miracle to prove that Jesus is not bound by the laws of nature. No, John is telling us something much more profound about who Jesus is: 'Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen' (Psalm 77:19). The point is not that Jesus can walk on water, but that he rules the sea. This earthly Jesus makes visible the glory of the Creator of the heavens and the earth who is the Redeemer of Israel.

Jesus' startling revelation of his identity continues in the words that he speaks to the disciples in verse 20. His greeting, 'It is I', is in John's Greek literally, 'I am', which is of course the name that God gave Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:13–14). Jesus identifies himself with these words a number of times, and they become a kind of title or name throughout John's Gospel (see for example John 8:58 and 18:6). The words 'Do not be

afraid' are often said in the Scriptures when a divine being first appears to a human being (Genesis 15:1; Judges 6:23). Jesus' disciples, then, would have heard his words, 'It is I. Do not be afraid', both as a form of human reassurance and as a form of divine proclamation. John seems to encourage us to hear Jesus' words on multiple levels.

Question 3: *What is the sign in this Gospel story? What does it mean for you that God's glory is revealed at night on a stormy sea?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

The conclusion in verse 21 shifts our attention from Jesus to the disciples and their boat. What is the force of the word 'immediately'? Once again John simply sets out the ingredients, inviting his readers to put them together for themselves, so that 'through believing you will have life in his name' (20:31).

Question 4: *How do you understand the conclusion to the story in verse 21? What is the relation between the two parts of the sentence?*

When you have had sufficient time to discuss this question, close the Bible study with this prayer:

Grant us wisdom and patience, Lord Jesus, that we may recognize your presence in storm and darkness. Amen.

The Sign of the Man Born Blind

John 9:1–41

Open the Bible study with a brief prayer.

If you are working in a group read John 9:1–41 slowly and dramatically. You will need a narrator, a disciple, Jesus, a neighbour, the blind man, a Pharisee, a Jew and a parent. If you are working by yourself read the passage through carefully.

Allow for some silence, and then read the following note:

One of the issues that John is grappling with in this Gospel is the problem of suffering. The story of the healing in chapter 5 seemed to express the traditional view – namely that sickness or suffering is due to sin. In that chapter, when Jesus heals the paralysed man at the pool of Bethesda, he also forgives his sins and tells him to sin no more. Here in this passage in chapter 9, John is still grappling with the same problem, but this time through the lips of Jesus' disciples. When they see the man who was born blind, they ask Jesus, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

But Jesus' reply is a shock to the disciples; unlike the man at the pool whose paralysis was associated in some way with personal sin, this time 'neither this man nor his parents sinned'. Rather, this blindness is a way of displaying God's work in this man's life.

Question 1: *In your local Christian community, how do people grapple with the problem of suffering? What views do they hold about suffering?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

We tend to be like the disciples, asking about 'the cause' of suffering or sickness. In this story Jesus seems to avoid 'causal' questions. He focuses not on the cause of the man's blindness but on how God acts to bring healing and wholeness.

Question 2: *How can we avoid focusing on the 'causal' question in our responses to sickness and suffering?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

At the pool of Bethesda, Jesus used words to heal the paralysed man. In this incident however, he uses other resources, namely mud and saliva to heal the blind person.

Question 3: *What local resources does your church/community have to bring healing to the sick?*

When you have had time to discuss or reflect on the question, read the following note:

It is fascinating that in 8:12, Jesus claims that 'I am the light of the world'. In this chapter he demonstrates that he indeed is the light by giving the blind man both physical and spiritual insights. The blind man gains his spiritual insight gradually, for he begins by describing Jesus as a healer (verse 11), then a prophet (verse 17) and, finally, as the 'Son of Man' (verse 35).

Question 4: *What is it in each case that enables the healed man to come to a deeper and deeper understanding of who Jesus is?*

Five groups of people interact with the man born blind: the disciples (verse 2); his neighbours and acquaintances (verse 8); the Pharisees (verses 13); the Jews or leaders of the Jews / Ioudaioi (verses 18, 24); and his parents (verse 20).

Question 5: *What characterizes each of these encounters?*

Question 6: *What do we learn from each of these groups, as well as from the man who was born blind, about how to be or become good witnesses of Jesus?*

When you have had sufficient time to discuss these questions, close the Bible study with prayer, focusing on the bishops and their spouses, praying that they may gain new insights as they attend this year's Lambeth Conference.

The Seventh Sign: The Raising of Lazarus

John 11:1–44

Open the Bible study with a brief prayer.

First read the following comment:

With the raising of Lazarus we come to the seventh and the last sign in the Gospel of John. All the signs have been 'signposts' which point us towards the cross – but this sign does so in a particularly powerful way. When Jesus first hears about Lazarus' sickness and death he is comparatively safe at a distance from Jerusalem, but to offer healing he will need to risk returning to Bethany, very near to the city. The danger that lies ahead for him is foreshadowed by Thomas' dire prediction, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him' (11:16). Then as the story ends we learn that the High Priest is determined to put Jesus to death precisely because of the ferment his raising of Lazarus has caused. This act of love in bringing life to his beloved friend costs Jesus his own death. The story is a concrete illustration of Jesus' words in chapter 15:13, 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' As soon as Lazarus is restored to life and to his family, the passion of Jesus moves inevitably to centre stage.

Read John 11:1–4. If you are working in a group use a variety of voices: narrator, Jesus, Thomas, Mary, Martha. However, ask everyone to join in with the three commands of Jesus: 'Take away the stone' (11:39), 'Lazarus, come out' (11:43) and 'Unbind him and let him go' (11:44). If you are working by yourself pause for a moment as you read each of these three commands.

One of the remarkable features of this story is that it shows both the intimate love that Jesus has for the family at Bethany, and the pain that Jesus bears as a result of this love. This is the only 'sign' in John's Gospel in which all the main characters in the story are personally named – and we are specifically told that Jesus loves them (11:3, 5). It is made clear that this personal relationship comes at a cost to Jesus himself: not only does he weep (11:35) but it is also emphasized how he is 'greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved' (11:33, 38). Although the 'sign' reveals Jesus at his most divine – through his ability to raise the dead – it also reveals him at his most human. This is very important.

The writer of these notes is married to a hospital chaplain who through his work encounters death more often than most people in the western world. Physical death is a universal human reality – which comes eventually to all people in all parts of our world. In some regions it comes far too soon – and perhaps our task is to help to 'take away the stones', and 'unbind' people and nations from those forces that enable death to have such power. Yet all will die – even Lazarus would eventually die a human death again. The experience of those engaged in hospital chaplaincy is that one of the most valuable things any human being can do for another is to care for them intimately and personally while they are dying – to remember that each of us is an individual precious in God's sight, and thus to honour the image of God in human beings. No person ought to die anonymously, or accompanied only by a clinical spirit of impersonality. To travel closely and caringly alongside people who are making the journey towards death lies at the very heart of Christian ministry.

Question 1: *Share together or reflect on your experiences of accompanying people on the road towards death. What things were helpful, for you or the dying person? What made the experience more difficult?*

Yet Jesus' encounter with Lazarus and his sisters does not simply offer the promise that 'at the last day' in the future 'your brother (and we!) will rise again'. Jesus responds to Martha's sorrow with words in the present tense, 'I *am* the resurrection and the life'. The story suggests that through the ministry and death of Jesus somehow eternal life comes flooding back into the here and now. Many of us carry a sort of tomb around within us – filled with griefs and disappointments, lost hopes and disturbing memories. We are being invited by Jesus – summoned even – to 'come out' of such tombs and let his own death and resurrection welcome us into the light

of the new life he is offering us even today. *The Cookham Resurrection*, the picture that accompanies the reflection on this sign, offers a view of resurrection invading an English country churchyard. Some people find the painting startling or even shocking, but it invites us to engage with it in a dialogue about the meaning of the resurrection. Its artist, Stanley Spencer, trying to describe why he painted it, said that the churchyard was 'the holy suburb of heaven'. He went on to say: 'This life being the key to the next tells me something of the next life and causes the resurrected life to tell me more of what the resurrection in this life is like.'

But to live our lives under the 'sign' of such resurrection can be dangerous. As Jesus and his followers discovered, though miracles lead some to faith, they also lead others to harden their hearts. In which direction will this signpost lead us?

Discuss or reflect on the following questions:

Question 2: Look at the picture of *The Cookham Resurrection*. What immediate impact does the painting make upon you? It is very detailed – are there particular people or aspects of the painting that you specially notice? What message does it convey about 'eternal life'?

Question 3: Consider these three phrases from the Gospel reading, 'Take away the stone', 'Lazarus, come out', 'Unbind him and let him go'. Name or discuss situations in your own life or the lives of your communities where people have needed to hear these words.

Question 4: Look carefully at the conversation between Jesus and Martha. How does the way Martha is pictured here compare with the way she is described in the Gospel of Luke (10:38–42)? What can we learn from the Gospel of John about the life and ministry of women?

Bring the Bible study to a close by reflecting on the following poem and saying the prayer, as a group or individually:

Poem

Poor Lazarus is sick;
His sisters are afraid.
The world they knew is threatened now,
And Jesus is delayed.

Friend Lazarus, he sleeps;
He sleeps the sleep of death.
The Master knows that Lazarus
Has drawn his final breath.

Dear Lazarus is dead
And buried in the tomb
And Jesus weeps, and after prayer
He says, 'Roll back the stone.'

'Rise Lazarus, come out!'
God's glory soon shall rise
And Bethany shall dance and sing
With open, sparkling eyes.

Yes, Lazarus, we die:
Our deeds, our dreams all fail
But God in Christ shall raise us up
And love's design prevail.
(David Mowbray)

Prayer

Resurrected and resurrecting Lord,
You loved your friends so much,
That, weeping, wounded and suffering, you loved them to your end.
Through this love you have given us a sign.
Point us along your way,
Heal our hearts of stone,
Release us from all that binds us,
And welcome us into the fullness of life. Amen.

Signs on the Way:

Bible Studies for the Anglican Communion in the Year of the Lambeth Conference

Afterword

The seven signs of the Gospel of John have led us up to the cross. Through the cross and resurrection God has confirmed and validated the life-giving nature of Jesus' work and ministry. The new creation has been inaugurated.

But John's story – and ours – does not stop there. For now we are invited to become companions of God to enable this new creation to blossom and bear fruit. Like the first disciples, we are sent by Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to make God's gift and goal real for all people in all places.

The final chapter of the Gospel of John offers us a 'sign' of how this might be. At the heart of this chapter is the story of a miraculous catch of fish (21:1–14). The disciples have returned to Galilee and to their previous occupation as fishermen. Their work has been unproductive until Jesus has come to them, and following his instructions they have caught an immense quantity and variety of fish. The extravagant richness of the new creation is made

clear. It is there for those who seek to live by Jesus' way.

The past is not forgotten. The charcoal fire on the beach on which the fish is cooked, and the threefold question (21:15–19) to Peter, are both intended to remind us of the night before Jesus' crucifixion when Peter warmed himself before a charcoal fire and denied three times that he knew who Jesus was. But though failings are not forgotten, through Jesus' care for his friends there is the possibility of a new day for Peter, and for us. Forgiveness is demonstrated by the task which is given to Peter, 'Feed my sheep'. A fisherman is asked to become a shepherd as well: in this time of the resurrection there is forgiveness and new challenges for all of us to meet. We are invited to be more than we dreamed possible and become Christ's co-workers in the mission of God for our world. And how shall we know which is the way? The final direct words of Jesus in the Gospel, spoken first to Peter, but spoken still over 2000 years to us too are simply these, 'Follow me!'

Notes

