

Safetynet Discipleship



Bishop Peter Stuart

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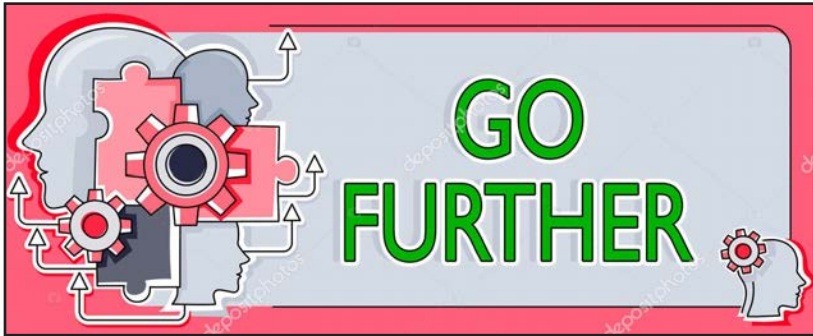
There is a fear amongst some Christians that if they are seen as religious, there is a risk of alienating people or being made fun of.

Jesus never said to follow me would be easy, but he did say that he would never leave us alone. He would always be that safety net for us.

Bishop Peter Stuart has written a very challenging set of studies for us this Lent and to achieve the best from them, we will need to truly focus of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We need to make a time commitment to give more than a cursory read of each study if we want to benefit from the experience.

If we plan to do more than go through the motions in Lent, we need to be assured that the safetynet that Jesus provides will not only challenge and stretch us, but also give us comfort as we move forward in our faith journey.

The Rev'd Max Bowers
Publisher
Grassroots Resources.



Bishop Peter has written sufficient material that groups are able to commence in the week of Ash Wednesday and finish in Holy Week. Seven studies in all.

Additional “Going Further’ material is available on line for these studies at www.grassroots.com.au/Lent2024.html

To help your group gell quickly, there is a suggested outline members could fill out at www.grassroots.com.au/Lent2024.html and this would form a care basis for the group during the Lent Studies.

Providing an empty chair (with a sign on it) is a good way to encourage the group to invite others to join them. Print out of the sign can be found on the “going further’ web site listed above.

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WELCOME

Bishop Peter Stuart

I am writing these studies on the land of the Awabakal Nation. I pay my respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I pray for the Elders cherishing those from the past, honouring those in the present, and looking in hope to those of the future. I am grateful for the soul-healing invitation to reconciliation.

My home is in the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle where I have been Bishop since February 2018. From February 2009, I was the Assistant Bishop.

My approach to these studies is shaped by a number of experiences. I am male, tertiary educated, married, a father, and white. I was born in England and emigrated in 1971. I embraced the Christian faith as a 20 year old. I am writing these studies as a 60 year old.

These studies are influenced by the work I have done to come to terms with the experience of trauma as a child in my family of origin as well as some demanding experiences since then.

My prayer is that there will be something for you to think through each week. I hope these reflections help you to prepare to celebrate the joy of the Risen Jesus on Easter Day.



A TRAUMA AWARE LENT

The scriptures are an essential part of Christian life. In them we encounter the poetry, story-telling, and reflections of God-inspired people.

God has promised to speak to us in these sacred texts. The scriptures become an authority and reference point in our lives. We use them to reflect on our spiritual experiences. They help us discern whether and how we are encountering the Living God in our lives. They provide pivotal guidance in our journey of holiness.

Along with careful attention to scripture, these studies are informed by contemporary neuroscience. It has helped me grow in my understanding of mindset and discipleship. Through it, I have been able to better understand trauma and how it affects us. Our brains are remarkable. Throughout our lives, we can continue to heal, grow, and develop.

There are many aspects of a trauma-aware understanding of life and ministry. Among them is a deep recognition that our bodies are marked by trauma. Whatever has caused us to fear for our existence has moved us to survival. Our body

remembers what we did to be safe and repeats it. Our survival practices are worthy of celebration. They helped us arrive at this point. However, a traumatised person may apply their survival practices in ways that are unhelpful to them in safer environments. It can take a whole lifetime to embrace alternative disciplines. The early followers of Jesus, as citizens under military oppression in a harsh world, experienced trauma. This can be seen and understood in much of the New Testament.

A trauma-aware approach to discipleship helps us distinguish between guilt and shame. When we discern with our mind that we have done the wrong thing, we recognise our guilt. This is a cognitive process. We have a mind map of correct, right or good behaviour. We recognise when we have been incorrect, done wrong or been bad. Shame is different. Our bodies become attuned at an early stage to the expectations of others. A different part of our brain is scanning the environment. It is wanting to know whether we are accepted or rejected, whether we are worthy or unworthy. Many things can develop a sense of shame in us. When it arrives, we feel disconnected and unwanted. Shame is activated in us much quicker than guilt.

Our families and our communities shape the distinction between right and wrong, worthy, and unworthy. There is a positive element to guilt and shame. It helps us take our place among others. But, there is a negative element. When misapplied they can have long term effects. Misapplication can create trauma when the guilt and shame are based on racism, sexism, ableism, and the like. It usually creates trauma when used as tools of coercive control in family abuse.

My hope is that by the end of the studies you will have a richer sense that you are loved by God for who you are. That you are called to be an ambassador and witness to the reign of God. I hope that you will know that all guilt and shame are

carried into the heart of God in the incarnate Jesus and as he dies on the cross. God, in Christ, wishes us to know how much we are loved and liberated.

In these studies, you will remember various life, work, and ministry settings. These may bring both joy and sadness. I hope that you are able to hold in your mind that ‘remembrance has a future focus’.

We remember Jesus so that we might experience new and eternal life. All our scripture reading, our sharing in the sacraments, our prayer is about remembering or making real God’s life and love in the present. We remember our past in order to find a healthy future. This remembering is joined with the remembering of Jesus. This work, done in community, impels us to live out our experience of new life. We join with God in the mission of transforming the world.



Community Love



GETTING BETTER AT THINGS

There is a well trodden journey of getting better at things. It is found within the Christian tradition and in spiritual and well-being practices across various disciplines.

First, it is **imagination**

then it is an **intention**

then a **behaviour**

then a **habit or practice**

then a **second nature**

then it is **simply who we are**

This process does not follow a simple straight line. We will go around in circles for a while.

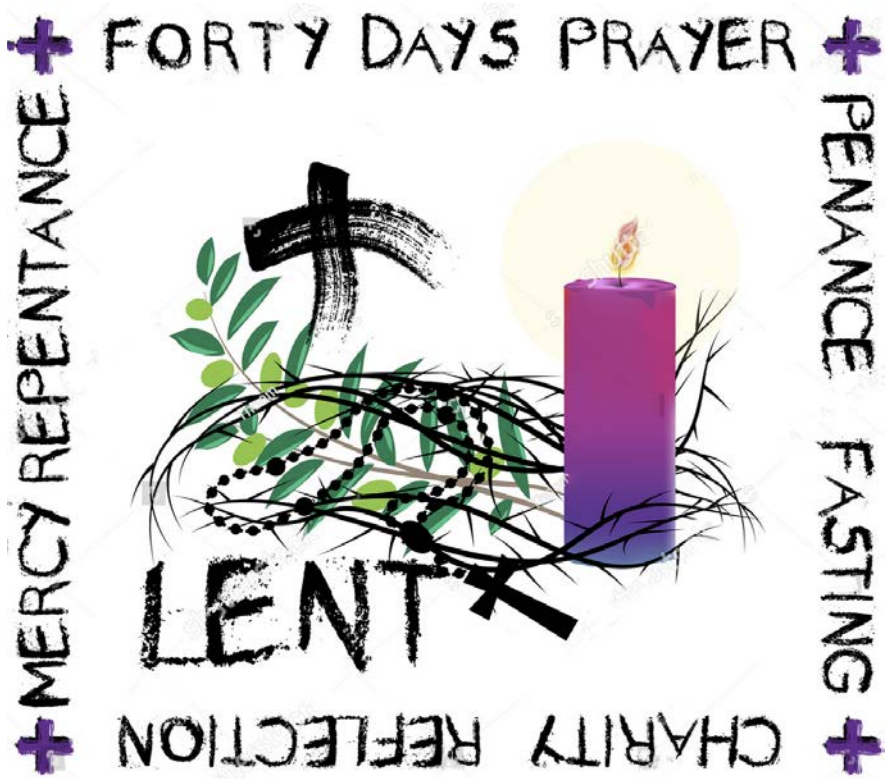
I used to speak about this process beginning with intention. However, I have learned, through knowledge and experience, that the powerful starting point is imagining what I will be like with a new way of being. We continue to imagine ourselves knowing that we are deeply loved by God. Imagination helps us build towards who God, by grace, is helping us become.

We may have many dreams and ideas. They begin to take shape when we make it our intention to pursue a specific focus. We state our intention and try the behaviour. We forget or get distracted. We recall our intention and try again.

Our behaviour might be sporadic and uncoordinated until we set a pattern and give ourselves reminders. In time we move from reminding ourselves about our habit but we may not feel confident. As we grow in our confidence it becomes a practice and then second nature. One day we might feel as if there was never a time when this discipline had not been part of our lives.

We can apply this approach to gratitude, fasting, exercise, donating, volunteering, prayer, environmental action, and the like. We can apply this approach to reminding ourselves we are bearers of the image of God, that we are God's beloved, and that we are called and sent by God as his witnesses.

Be gentle with yourself as you embrace new approaches to your life with God. They take time.





ASH WEDNESDAY

Read

Christians count the Bible as the most important book in their lives. We begin Lent by reading **Matthew 5:48 to 6:21**

Consider

We are privileged to be overhearing Jesus address his inner group of followers. Jesus is speaking to the disciples. Immediately before the Gospel set for today in our churches, we hear Jesus say to them, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5: 48).” It comes just after Jesus renews the disciples in their understanding of Jewish law. He then encourages them in three spiritual practices – donating, praying, and fasting.

We often think of the word ‘perfect’ as without flaw or blemish. We may imagine replacing it with the word ‘pure’.

The pursuit of perfection can draw us into cycles of shame or guilt. We have an idealised version of ourselves, and we recognise where we fail to reflect that picture. We know our imperfections. Our self-assessment and spiritual discernment is then focussed on our flaws.

We are more likely to come to the intention of the original statement by hearing it as “Keep maturing. Become more and more like your heavenly Father.” Jesus is urging his followers to devote themselves to holy living.

In this approach, we accept that in this life there will always be spiritual, psychological and wisdom work to do. We are invited to focus on the work, not on the perceived flaws.

As you read this, remind yourself that you are human. You have made some wrong turns in life and will do so again. Imagine Jesus saying to you, “so where do we go from here? You have this knowledge about yourself. You have embraced the call to holy living. So, what next?”

Jesus gives some solid examples to his audience. He says, we will misdirect ourselves if we focus on generating wealth of ourselves. We will cause great harm to ourselves if we are focussed on beauty and lust. Being holy is about making choices.

We hear Jesus draw on the familiar world of the disciples to teach them that they will experience blessing and peace if they

- donate secretly,
- pray in private,
- and fast without fanfare.

These are good actions which focus on God.

The connecting point in the injunction is to do things privately. We will be distracted if we undertake any action for show. The celebration of the other person or the crowd distorts our objective.

The practices that Jesus reminded the disciples have stood the test of time. People know themselves to be different if they focus on God and focus kindly on others. There may be other practices that help you. Some people have practiced a ‘plastic free Lent’ to enable them to care for creation. Some people have intentionally volunteered in a caring ministry one Saturday a month.

We are helped if we embrace Shakespeare's injunction in Hamlet, "To thine own self be true."

Are there spiritual habits which would help you deepen your relationship with God and with others? They begin with reimagining ourselves and stating our intentions. Ash Wednesday is a great place to begin renewing your life with God.

It is about turning towards God. We observe ourselves and rejoice at our growth. But, we also recognise where we have more work to do.

As people of the resurrection, we know that Jesus is ever embracing our shame and guilt. Jesus is always healing and renewing us. We know that God's love has transformed us. So what next? We take our place in making the world a better place for others.

Explore and discuss

1. What do you think contemporary Australians affirm about donating, praying, and fasting? Where does that align with the teaching of Jesus and where does it differ?
2. How is it different to fashion your behaviour in private compared with doing this in front of an audience?
3. What might being true to yourself look like as a disciple of Jesus? How do you imagine your future as a disciple?
4. Do the readings or reflections today invite you to behave differently.

Reflect

Maybe you are thinking about the way you give money, the way you engage with God, and the way you remind your body of your spirituality.

Today, choose one thing to consider and work on. This becomes your intention.

How would you create private space in your life to explore this new intention?

Write your intentions down in your journal, in the notes app on your phone, or on the fridge.

Your Journal

You can use the journal at the back of this study book or you can download and print a larger version of the journal at www.grassroots.com.au/Lent2024.html

Extended reflection

The post-traumatic journey is a complex road. The New Testament is written by people who had experienced trauma to a traumatised community. How does this insight change the way you read these sacred pages?

Pray

Almighty God, through the work of the Holy Spirit you draw us into your divine life. Help us to identify and fashion good intentions that enable us to mature in our discipleship. May your good work begun in us continue each day, that with our lips and with our lives we may glorify you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Cuppa and Fellowship

Maybe the group could take turns to bring something for the cuppa and fellowship each week to share in this ministry.



LENT ONE

Recall

On Ash Wednesday you were invited to imagine your future as a disciple and set a new intention around your spiritual practices. How did you go? Did you choose donating, praying and fasting? Did you choose something else?

How did your behaviour over the last few days reflect your intention? Was this the right intention? Do you want to reset or restate it? Write your thoughts in your journal now.

Read

Mark 1: 9 - 15

Consider

1. What is your view on evil? Do you perceive it as a force or activity? Do you think evil can be evident in a thing or a person?
2. When we engage the New Testament we encounter people who were certain that evil exists. They had no doubt that it could be personified. We also see that when people are encountering evil, they are not alone. There are messengers from God, angels, who become their soul companions.

Is this something you have experienced and if so maybe you would like to share it with the group?

The Gospel for Lent 1 tells us that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness following his baptism. We notice that the wilderness is a place of tempting and testing. Evil comes close to Jesus in the person of Satan. As we reflect on this, we must not walk past the other side of the story. The wilderness is also a place of care.

Towards the end of World War II the Nazi regime martyred a Lutheran Pastor. His name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer saw and experienced the impact of atrocities committed by people. He saw politicians, armed forces, and secret police engage in denigration and dehumanisation. Bonhoeffer named the evil he saw. He described evil masquerading as light and bringing havoc. In the pursuit of goodness, he confronts people who perceive that reason will win out. He names the ingenuity of evildoers setting traps for the unwary. He warns about the emotional and spiritual exhaustion that comes with confronting evil. He confronts those who think blind obedience is justifiable. He does the same with those willing to accept false compromises. Bonhoeffer suggests the approach for a responsible person. They should “make their whole life a response to the question and call of God.”¹

We can apply a range of words to the way humans behave. We see misjudgement and misbehaviour. We see accidents but also intentional harm. We observe wrongdoing and criminality. And, with all this we know of worse. Human history has horrendous stories of slaughter and genocide.

In Mark’s Gospel we hear that Jesus realises more fully that he is God’s beloved at his baptism. Mark tells us that the Spirit then hurls Jesus into the wilderness (Photo Page 18). Jesus is thrust into the lonely and desolate place of learning what it means to be Son of God. He has new eyes to see himself and the world.

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Letters and Papers from Prison Fontana Books 1953 p137.

He has new insight into his life and work. There are messengers from God, described as angels, who tend to him during this time.

For many people their wilderness experience is centred around a traumatic event or events. Trauma is grim for those who have experience it. Something threatens their sense of survival. That experience lives on in their bodies. Very simple things can remind their bodies of their trauma. This results in a flood of chemicals coursing through their system with huge impact. Like with shame and guilt, the cognitive dimension is secondary to the limbic system.

When we come to terms with our trauma it may also feel like someone is throwing us into the wilderness. There is the agony of self-doubt. There is the reliving of bad experiences. There is the recognition of different sensations in our bodies. And, so much more.

As you read this, you may be a person who is coming to terms with the experience of trauma. The testimony of the first witnesses to Jesus is simple. We are never alone as we go through the dark valleys. That safety net is always there. Jesus has been there and is there with us. We find meaning as we look for and question God. We can find hope as we hear God and respond to God's call.

There will be angels ready to minister to you – who might they be? I am grateful for supervisors and counsellors who helped me. I have been sustained by friends and family who loved me, especially when my world seemed overwhelming.

You may not be a person with a trauma story. Your vocation may be to be a soul companion for another. As a messenger of God, you lovingly sustain one who is grappling with their experience. You are an angel as they learn about themselves and make sense of God.

Whether you carry a trauma story or not, our shared vocation is to name evil when we realise it has been present. We move consciously towards what is good and holy. We travel through the wilderness together.

Explore and discuss

1. How familiar are you with the ongoing effects of trauma in a person's life? Where might you go to learn more?
2. As you reflect on some of the atrocities reported in the news, would you describe them as evil? Why or why not?
3. What does the call to be an angel to someone in the wilderness mean for you?

Reflect

- (a) Today, what is your intention about looking for an angel or being an angel?
- (b) What is your intention about naming evil for when you learn of it?
Make a note somewhere, perhaps in your journal, so you can recall your intentions.

Around 75% of adults have experienced a traumatic event. Many have this experience before they are 18.8 in 100 people will experience post traumatic stress behaviours with around 1.5 people in 100 having some form of confirmation from a health professional ².

- (c) What might the experience of your circle of acquaintances be?
- (d) We know that particular groups in the community have much higher incidences of trauma. This includes the exposure to criminal or evil conduct. How might we respond to them?

² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/stress-and-trauma>

Pray

Gracious God, be present with those who are in the wilderness of life. Call forth people who will be messengers of love and hope. Enable us to name darkness, sin, and evil whenever it is present. Assure us always of your sustaining grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Cuppa and Fellowship

A cuppa and relaxed fellowship are special ways for the group to bond even further. While not going over the top, maybe members of the group could take turns at providing the food for the cuppa. Being a little creative here can also be a great talking point.



