

## Introduction

### **This is our Story: Journeys of Faith**

As human beings, we love to tell stories. We like stories that have a clear shape, with a beginning, a middle and an end. We like to be able to identify with the characters we read about. Some of the stories we enjoy most – from James Bond to Lord of the Rings – are imaginary. Others, like those we often tell about our families and ourselves, are based on remembered history.

The Christian faith gives us a great story. It tells us about a loving God, who creates the universe and creates us. It tells us of human sin and failure; of the trials and tribulations that human beings like us have gone through for generations. It tells us about Jesus, the one human being in whom God was seen with such clarity that he could be called ‘The Messiah [or Christ], the Son of the living God’ (Mt 16:16). By the way he lived and died – and was raised from the dead – Jesus opened a new way for humanity to return to God. The Christian faith speaks of the destiny of humanity, which is to find eternal happiness and peace in God, in whom the whole universe is brought to its fulfilment. This is the great story summed up in the church’s creeds. When we recite the creed, we are saying, publicly and together, ‘this is our story’.

This story comes to us from the Bible, taken as a whole. The books of the Bible (*‘biblia’* means ‘books’ in Greek) include law, poetry, proverbs, letters – a variety of written material. Many of the books are ‘histories’ – not in the modern sense, where ‘history’ excludes all reference to God’s activity, but in an older sense where the prime mover behind everything that happens is God. When we think about history today, we want to know ‘what happened’ at the human level. Those who told, edited or wrote the histories of Israel or the histories of Jesus that we find in the Bible wanted to show how, in the events that took place, God was at work.

Modern critics have thrown a great deal of light on the biblical texts by asking questions about ‘what happened’. They ask about the events that the text presents and about the way the texts, which are often very puzzling, have been assembled. They have shown how the text we read in the Bible is the product of a complex process of editing. Various sources, with different emphases, written down at different times and in different places, have been woven together. There continue to be lively debates about the best ways to read Scripture and about ‘what happened’. Scholars have different ideas about what historical events lie behind the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, or Moses receiving the tablets of the Law at Sinai, or Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, but our interest in these stories – certainly if we read them as part of this Lent Course – does not depend on history alone.

For this course, I have adopted another, and in many ways older, approach to the biblical texts. It's the way Scripture has been read for hundreds of years by people of faith, who believed that these 'remembered histories' were written down primarily to help us – the readers in later generations – hear the Word of God, spoken to us in the Scriptures and interpreted in the light of Christ. When Paul shows the Roman Christians how Psalm 69:9 ('The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me') applies to Christ, he goes on, 'For whatsoever was written in former days was written *for our instruction*, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.' (Rom:15:4).

The stories we shall study 'speak to us' about the experience of the Israelites, about Christ, and about our own lives. They speak to us in different ways, so there is much to be learnt by comparing the different ways in which they speak to different people. We are not the first to read them in this way. We are only the latest in a long line of people, both Jews and Christians, who have read these stories for illumination about the way God deals with humanity, and now deals with us. In doing so, we say 'this is our story'.

The stories we shall study in this Lent Course very definitely have a beginning, a middle and an end. The narrative of the escape of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt, through a mighty act of God, can be seen as the beginning of 'the people of Israel' who in a unique sense become 'the people of God'. Their identity is forged in the wilderness, especially when God enters into covenant with them at Sinai. 'The people of Israel' returned again and again to their wilderness years, remembering them as a time when they learned how to trust and be faithful to God in the most testing circumstances. The story of the creation of 'Israel' through their 'journey of faith' ends with the entry into the promised land – which is also a new beginning.

For Christians, the story of the Israelites' great journey through the wilderness is a vital part of the pre-history of the Gospel story. The four Gospels assume that if we know how God dealt with Israel, we can understand the story of Jesus better. God's dealing with humanity is consistent: Jesus gives us the key to a clearer and deeper understanding of passages in the Jewish Scriptures he would himself have known and thought about many times. We are told that after the resurrection, Jesus – as yet unrecognised by the two disciples making their way to Emmaus – 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets ... interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures' (Lk 24:27), and as he did so, the disciples felt their hearts 'burning' within them (v. 32). The way the New Testament refers to and reinterprets stories from the Jewish Scriptures suggests that Christians can also say 'This is *our* story': we can see these stories as, in anticipation, stories about Christ.

There is another way in which Christians say, 'This is our story.' The passages we shall be studying, both from the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament, help us to understand the journeys of faith that we make today. This is why we read and re-read them, both in church and individually: they were written 'for our instruction'. Since the church began, the stories in the Bible have helped Christians see our lives as a journey, like the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness. Our journey begins when we step out in faith, trusting in God alone; as it continues, we experience the ways in which God sustains us, giving us what we need to keep moving on, guiding us by his Spirit and his law, encouraging us on the right path, forgiving us when we do wrong; our journey ends when God brings us safely to the 'promised land' we have hoped to reach all our lives – in that end, there is also a new beginning. This is the story told by the church as a whole and, in some form or other, by every Christian as we make our unique journey of faith.

My aim, in writing this course, has been to help each one of us understand better the journey of faith to which we have been called both as a 'people of God' and individually. By saying, of the story of Israel and the story of Jesus, 'This is our story', we are saying that we want stories like the ones in the Bible, in which we see God at work in the past, to shape our lives today. We want to be part of the ongoing story of God's journey with humanity, the story of the church and of the whole world. In studying the Bible together, we learn more about how we can see our lives as 'journeys of faith' like those made by the Israelites, made by Jesus, and by all those who have gone before us trusting in God.

My prayer, in planning this course, is that the study material will enable members of ecumenical Lent Groups to say together, as we study the Bible and share our experience, 'This is our story'. I hope we shall all find encouragement for our 'journeys of faith' through the variety of Christian experience reflected in the broadcast Sunday Services, on the CTBI website and shared amongst those who meet in small groups. I hope we shall learn more about the extraordinary journeys of faith that many Christians are making today and that are bringing new life to our churches. I hope we shall find encouragement for the unique journey of faith to which each one of us is called by Christ.

**Nicholas Sagovsky**

## Week 1: Rescued through Water

‘Rescued through water’: Exod 14:21-30 (Crossing the Red Sea); Mark 1:9-13 (Jesus is baptized and driven by the Spirit into the wilderness). Discussion: ‘What does it mean to be a baptized Christian’?

Topic for local radio: A personal journey through the wilderness

### Jewish Scriptures

For Jews, this is the story of how the descendants of Jacob (Israel) escaped from Egypt and became one people. The book of Exodus finds the Israelites living as slaves in Egypt. Their burdens have become too heavy to bear. God gives them a leader, Moses, with his assistant Aaron, to confront Pharaoh, and demand that he ‘Let my people go’. Despite terrible plagues throughout the land of Egypt, Pharaoh refuses, until the last and most terrible plague strikes down the firstborn children of the Egyptians. The Israelites are spared by observing the ritual which became that of the Passover: the painting of the blood of the lamb around the doors of their houses to protect them from death by plague and the sharing of the Passover meal. Then they make their escape, pursued by the Egyptians.

The passage describes a great miracle: at God’s command Moses stretches his arm over the waters of the Red Sea. A way opens up for the Israelites to cross safely. The Egyptians follow and are bogged down in the mud. Then Moses stretches out his arm again and the waters close over the Egyptians. ‘Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians.’

### New Testament

The story of the baptism of Jesus comes in all four Gospels (Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-13; Lk 3:21-22; Jn 1:32-34, which only hints that Jesus was baptized, though John 3:22 says that Jesus himself ‘baptized’). All the gospels link the baptism of Jesus with the ministry of John the baptizer, and with witness as to who Jesus is: in Mark, Jesus sees the heavens ‘torn apart’ and the Spirit descending like a dove, and he hears a voice saying, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased.’ There are variations of this at Mt 3:16-17; Lk 3:22 and Jn 1:32-4.

In the three other gospels, by the time we come to Jesus’s baptism we have already been given a good deal of information about him. In Mark, the story of John the baptizer and the baptism of Jesus opens the gospel. Unlike the other three gospel-writers, Mark gives us no pre-history. This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1).

Mark gives us a very brief account of Jesus’s baptism, and then tells us that ‘the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness’. This mention of the ‘wilderness’ or

‘desert’ and the mention of his being there ‘forty days’ (or ‘a long time’) turns the story of the baptism of Jesus into an echo of the crossing of the Red Sea. It is clear that the time Jesus spent in the wilderness ‘tempted by Satan’ is all part of the good news. The Spirit is guiding Jesus just as the Israelites were guided by God to pass through the Red Sea so that they might be rescued from slavery in Egypt.

## **The Church**

From early days, the church made links between the rescue of the Israelites through the Red Sea and the rescue of Christians through the waters of baptism. When new Christians are baptized by total immersion, it’s easy to see why. Baptism – passing through the waters – represents ‘death and resurrection’ – death to the old life and the beginning of a new life in Christ (cf. Rom 6:4). In baptism, believers are seen to be adopted as children of the Father: this is the moment when God says to the new Christian ‘You are my daughter ...’, or ‘You are my son ... the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased’. In that moment, our lives are opened fully to God’s Spirit, who begins to guide and strengthen us in a new way through life’s difficulties and temptations. It’s the beginning of our journey towards the promised land.

## **Questions you may wish to use in discussion**

1. The story of the Crossing of the Red Sea story is of great importance for the Jewish people. Why do you think this is so?
2. Why do you think Jesus chose to be baptized?
3. Some Christian churches baptize infants and some baptize only adults. What is the advantage of baptizing infants, and what of baptizing only adults?
4. How do you think an Egyptian Christian would read the story of the crossing of the Red Sea?
5. It is said that when Martin Luther doubted whether he was on the right path, he wrote out in chalk the words ‘baptizatus sum’ (‘I have been baptized’). Why do you think he did this and what can we learn from it?
6. If you were in danger today, would you pray for God to rescue you?
7. Are there ways in which the members of your group can see the stories we have discussed this week reflected in their own journey of faith?

## **Prayer**

Lord God, who led your people safely through the waters of the Red Sea and into the wilderness, give to all who have been baptized into Christ grace to trust you throughout our journey of faith, especially when our path gets harder and we are tempted to turn back, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who was baptized, tempted as we are, and never failed to trust in you. Amen

## Week 2: Guided by God's law

'Guided by God's law': Exod 20:1-20 ('Ten commandments'); Rom 13:8-10 ('The law of love'). Discussion: 'What laws do Christians have to keep?'

Topic for local radio: A personal journey towards a different life

### Jewish Scriptures

More than three months after escaping from Egypt, the Israelites come to Mount Sinai which has traditionally been identified with Jebel Musa in the Arabian peninsula. This is where the events which constituted the Israelites as, in a unique sense, the 'people of God' take place. In Exodus 19, we read of thunder and lightning, cloud, fire and smoke, and the blast of a trumpet on the mountain, when the Lord descends to meet with Moses and Aaron. This is where they are given the ten commandments (Exod 20:1-17) to guide the people.

In the Exodus story, a more detailed series of commandments is given (chapters 20-23) before the pivotal account of the establishment of the covenant between God and the Israelites. The Israelites commit themselves to keep the law of God, and Moses and Aaron, with seventy-two of the Israelite leaders (24:9) receive on the mountain a vision of 'the God of Israel' in his heavenly glory (24:10). Moses is also told precisely how to make the tabernacle or 'tent of meeting' in which God is to be worshiped and how to consecrate priests who will pray and sacrifice on behalf of the whole people.

Moses is away so long that Aaron and the people turn to idolatry (a sin against the first commandment). They make a golden calf and begin to worship the idol they have created (32:1-8). On his return, Moses is horrified: he smashes the stone slabs on which the commandments are written and pulverises the golden calf (32:19-20). Israel must be totally purged from its sin. Only then can Moses return to God in penitence on their behalf and receive, once more, the tablets of the law. The Israelites must now set out from Sinai, having renewed their covenant with God, carrying with them their 'tent of meeting' or 'tabernacle', guided by God in a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night (13:21-2, cf. 40:38), and committed to the keeping of God's law.

### New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus shows immense respect for God's law, but he also shows a freedom of interpretation that means (despite Mt 5:18) he is not bound to the 'letter of the law'. His actions – such as healing on the sabbath (cf. Mark 3:4) – show he is committed to observing the 'spirit of the law', using the law to guide him and his followers in doing God's work (Mt 5:17ff.). Paul follows this line in his extended discussion of the relation between law and grace in the Epistle to the Romans (and



more briefly in Galatians). A Jew himself by race, he claims that in what he now says about Christ, 'we uphold the law' (Rom 3:31). In speaking of his 'kindred according to the flesh', he says, 'They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah' (9:4-5).

What he goes on to say, though, is that he is now concerned not so much with the 'flesh' as with the 'spirit'. What concerns him, in discussing the law, is the 'spirit of the law'. This he sums up in Romans 13:8-10 in one word: 'love'. In saying this, Paul is echoing what Jesus says, when he is asked 'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?' and he replies, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" And a second is like it: "'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets' (Mt 22:36-40).

Paul echoes Jesus's teaching on the first commandment in Romans 12:1 ('present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship') and then he echoes Jesus's teaching on the second commandment when he says, 'Love does no wrong to a neighbour... for love is the fulfilling of the law' (13:10).

## The Church

From the early days of the church, those who were going to be baptized as adults were prepared very carefully, to make sure they understood what the church teaches about Jesus and about the Spirit before they publicly committed themselves by being baptized into Christ and opened themselves publicly to share in the Holy Spirit. Much of this teaching concentrated on the Apostles' Creed, which begins 'I believe' and which summarises what it is that someone who becomes a Christian gives their free assent to: in summary, that 'Jesus is Lord'. An important part of this teaching was – and still is – teaching about how to follow Jesus in daily life. This is where the teaching of the 'ten commandments' comes in. All our lives as Christians we go on learning, often through our mistakes, how God's commandments – such as the ten commandments and the ethical teaching of the New Testament – can be our guide in life. We learn by experience how to identify when we have strayed off the path that they show us. Sometimes, we can't see how they apply in particular difficult situations and we are genuinely uncertain how to follow the 'way of love'. At such times we need to pray for the guidance of God's Spirit. At other times, the way to follow God commandment is quite clear but we don't want to obey. Then we need to pray for the strength of God's Spirit. The New Testament teaches that God's law is a gift to all

people, and especially to those who are bound in covenant to him, but that, if we are to be guided by God's law, we need God's Spirit to keep us on the right path.

### **Questions you may wish to use in discussion**

1. Should religions be telling us which laws we have to keep today?
2. Is it right that the ten commandments are a gift to all people, or are they only for Jews and Christians?
3. What does it mean, in practice, to 'love God'?
4. Saint Augustine said, 'Love and do what you like.' Was he right?
5. What should be taught about 'God's law' in church schools?
6. Do Christians always have to keep the law of the land?
7. Are there ways in which the members of your group can see the stories we have discussed this week reflected in their own journey of faith?

### **Prayer**

Lord God, who gave your covenant people the gift of the law to guide them on their journey, may we go on learning, as we journey on in faith, how to love you with all our heart, soul and mind, and our neighbours as ourselves, through the power and guidance of your Holy Spirit, *Amen*



## Week 3: Fed by the Bread of Heaven

‘Fed by the Bread of Heaven’: Exod 16:2-5; 13-21a, 35 (Manna); John 6:30-35 (‘I am the Bread of Life’). Discussion: ‘What does it mean to us to share in the eucharist?’

Topic for local radio: A personal story of hunger and being fed

### Jewish Scriptures

The Israelites who crossed the Red Sea safely must have moved very slowly through the heat and barren land of the Sinai desert. After three days, they badly needed water, but the only water they could find was undrinkable. In Exodus, we read that God provided a piece of wood for Moses to throw in the water and then they were able to drink it. When the Israelites needed drink, it was provided for them. At Elim (15:27), they found ‘twelve springs’ of water – water in abundance.

When, after six weeks in the desert, they had moved on again, as they looked back on the plentiful meat and bread in Egypt, they were full of complaints against Moses and Aaron for bringing them out into the wilderness to die. God’s response is to promise ‘bread from heaven’, with enough for each day’s need and on the sixth day enough for two days.

This is what happened: in the evening small birds called ‘quails’ that could be eaten came around the camp; then, in the morning, the ground was damp, and there was an edible substance which looked like frost and tasted like ‘wafers made with honey’ (v.31). The Israelites called this ‘manna’. In this way, God provided both the drink and the food they needed to sustain them in the desert.

### New Testament

In John’s Gospel, Jesus offers a number of ‘signs’ to show who he is. When the five thousand people are fed with five barley loaves and two fish (6:11) this is interpreted as a ‘sign’. The crowd who follow Jesus are reminded of the way their ‘ancestors’ were fed with manna in the wilderness. Now, Jesus is giving people ‘bread from heaven’. (In Mark’s story of the feeding of the four thousand [8:19], the disciples ask, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus tells the crowd, it wasn’t Moses who provided ‘bread from heaven’, but ‘the Father’.

Jesus goes on to hint strongly that he is God’s gift to the Israelites of his day: ‘For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ ‘Sir’, they say, ‘Give us this bread always.’ This is when Jesus says, ‘I am the bread of

life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’

Unlike the other three gospels, the Fourth Gospel gives us no account of the Last Supper, with Jesus’s words ‘This is my body’ and ‘This is my blood’ (and in Matthew 26:26, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’) The equivalent in the Fourth Gospel is the continuing discussion in chapter 6, where Jesus says, ‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh’ (v. 51). For Christians, who share in the eucharist regularly, it very hard not to see this as a reference both to the manna and to the bread of the eucharist.

## **The Church**

In I Corinthians 11:23-25, Paul introduces his account of the words of Jesus at the Last Supper with the words, ‘For I received from the Lord, what I also delivered to you.’ He then goes on to quote essentially the same words as those in Luke (22:19): the Lord ‘took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it [and gave it to them saying], “This is my body which is [given] for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Both Paul and Luke speak of Jesus’s words as a command to remember him in this way. There has, of course, been much debate as to what Jesus meant, and how sharing the bread and the wine of the eucharist brings us into communion with Jesus and with each other. What almost all Christians agree on is that the eucharist is a sacrament: it is a means of communion – or communication – between God and the church. Sharing the eucharist brings us together as ‘the body of Christ’.

What we need to sustain us on our journey of faith is Christ, and in the eucharist we are nourished by Christ; we ‘feed on Christ’. In this sense, we can speak of the bread which we share in the eucharist as the ‘bread of heaven’ and we can be confident that as we feed on this bread, we receive the nourishment we need for our journey through the wilderness of this life to the promised land.

## Questions you may wish to use in discussion

1. The story of the Manna in the wilderness is of great importance for the Jewish people. Why do you think this is so?
2. Why do you think the Fourth Gospel tells us that Jesus said, 'I am the bread of life'?
3. The understanding of the eucharist (or Lord's Supper) is different in different church traditions. From your experience of your church tradition, could you speak of the bread of the eucharist as 'the bread of heaven' and, if so, what does that mean for you?
4. If you could never share the eucharist again with your Christian sisters and brothers how much do you think you would miss it? How much, then, do we miss by not sharing the eucharist with all our brothers and sisters in Christ?
5. What is the link between the idea of the 'bread of heaven' and the petition in the Lord's Prayer: 'Give us today our daily bread'?
6. Are food banks and similar initiatives God's way of feeding the hungry in Britain today?
7. Are there ways in which the members of your group can see the stories we have discussed this week reflected in their own journey of faith?

## Prayer

Lord God, who provided food for your covenant people to sustain them in the wilderness, give us the bread we need to nourish both our bodies and our souls, and make us generous in caring for all who go hungry because of human greed and indifference, through Jesus Christ, our living bread, Amen.

## Week 4: Singing in the Wilderness

‘Singing in the Wilderness’: Exod 15: 20-22 (‘Miriam’); Luke 1:46 -53 (‘Magnificat’).  
Discussion: ‘What do Christians have to sing about?’

Topic for local radio: A personal story of how music and faith helped overcome difficult times

### Jewish Scriptures

The women who took part in the Exodus and journey through the wilderness are, in the biblical story, almost entirely invisible. If we are to think in terms of ‘forty years’ there must have been a whole generation of women who grew to adulthood, many who married and gave birth, parents who cared for children and young people who grew to adulthood, all in conditions of extreme difficulty. What did they have to sing about? At one key point, after the terrifying crossing of the Red Sea, we glimpse Miriam, held by tradition to be the sister of Moses and Aaron (Num 26:59; 1 Chr 6:3), taking a tambourine and leading the women in singing and dancing as they praise God. We are told almost nothing about her except that she is a ‘prophet’, which indicates that she has been given a special gift of openness to God’s spirit and speaking or singing about the works of God. Moses is also, later, spoken of as a ‘prophet’ (Dt 34:10).

It is possible that Miriam is to be identified with the unnamed elder sister of Moses who watched over him as a baby when he was left among the bulrushes and rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter (Exod 2:4-7). Her song appears to echo the song of Moses (Exod 15:1-17), and it may be that what we have is merely the remnant of a longer song of praise for God’s mighty acts, which was originally very like the song of Moses. Two other women in the Jewish Scriptures have lengthy songs: Deborah, who is also a prophet (Jg 5:1-31) and Hannah, who perceives the gift of her son, Samuel, as one of God’s ‘mighty acts’ (1 Sam 2:1-10).

Immediately after the triumphant crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites set out into the wilderness.

### New Testament

At the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, we meet a young woman called (in Greek) ‘Mariam’ – which would have been in Hebrew or Aramaic ‘Miriam’. She is given the news by an angel that, though she is not yet married, she will bear a ‘Jesus’ (in Hebrew or Aramaic, ‘Joshua’). Just as Mary’s name echoes that of the first woman prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures, so that of Jesus echoes the name of the leader who succeeded Moses and brought the Israelites out of the wilderness into the promised land. When Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the child who will become ‘John the baptizer’, like the women of the Hebrew Scriptures, she sings a song

in praise of the mighty acts of God. The themes echo those of other, earlier songs sung by women: the 'mighty acts' of God, which scatter the powerful enemies of Israel and lift up the 'lowly' in his service. Mary, like the prophetic women who have gone before her, rejoices in the unexpected way God proves himself faithful to his promise. The prophet Anna joins in her rejoicing (Lk 2:36-8). It is left to Simeon, also a prophetic figure, to speak about the cost of parenthood to Mary: 'a sword will pierce your own soul too' (Lk 2:35). Being the mother of a child such as Jesus is, in some ways, a call to set out into the wilderness.

## The Church

The church continues to struggle truly to recognise the God-given ministry of women. It celebrates the prophetic voice of women in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The role of Mary, as the mother of Jesus, is vital for our understanding of what it means, in the power of the Spirit, 'to bring Christ into the world'. Following the tradition of the early church, for many Christians the Magnificat ('Miriam's song') has a central position in Evening Prayer. It gives us words to celebrate the mighty acts of God, and God's faithfulness to his promise as we face the hardships of the wilderness. In our generation, we join in calling Mary 'blessed' (48) because she is such an example of God's faithfulness to humanity and humanity's joy in God. The Magnificat is above all, for women and men, a song of hope, a song to sing in the wilderness.

## Questions for discussion:

1. Why do we learn so little about the experience of women like Miriam in the story of the Exodus and wilderness wandering?
2. What part does Miriam/Mary play in the worship of your own church tradition?
3. Can Mary be a role model for men as well as women, for the childless as well as parents?
4. To what extent was Mary's vocation a call to 'enter the wilderness'?
5. What do we learn in the Scriptures about Mary's 'journey of faith'?
6. How can faith help us through a hard time, for example a time of depression?
7. Are there ways in which the members of your group can see the stories we have discussed this week reflected in their own journey of faith?

## Prayer

Lord God, whose servants Miriam, Hannah and Mary rejoiced in you as their saviour and deliverer, teach us with them to sing our 'magnificat' wherever you may lead us and whatever you may ask of us, through Jesus Christ, in whom all your promises find their 'yes' and we are emboldened to say, Amen.

## Week 5: Saved from Death

‘Saved from death’: Num 21:4-9 (‘The brazen serpent’); Jn 3:4-17 (‘I, if I be lifted up’). Discussion: ‘What sense can we make of the cross today?’

Topic for local radio: A personal story of coming through a crisis

### Jewish Scriptures

Mount Hor (possibly Jebel Madurah) is some fifty miles to the south west of the Dead Sea. To the west of it lies the way to the Red Sea, through which the Israelites escaped many years before the time about which we now read. The biblical narrative suggests that Miriam died shortly before the Israelites reached Mount Hor and Aaron died at Mount Hor. Moses, finding no way forward, caused the Israelites to double back and make a huge detour to the east to avoid confrontation with the Edomites and the Moabites, before they turned west to cross the Jordan north of the Dead Sea. No wonder that the people complained, thinking they would die in the desert like Miriam and Aaron. Despite the miraculous provision of food and water (cf. Num 20:9-13), they grumble against God and against Moses. Then comes yet another trial: an infestation of poisonous snakes. The people regret their complaints and beg Moses to pray for the snakes to be taken away. Not for the first time, Moses is depicted as a powerful intercessor. He is told by God to make a serpent of bronze, place it on a pole. If someone was bitten by a snake, they could look to the serpent and they would live.

The brazen serpent makes one more appearance in the Jewish Scriptures (2 Kings 18:4) where we are told that, as part of his religious reforms, King Hezekiah broke down the sacred pole and smashed the brazen serpent, now called Nehushtan, which had become an object of worship for the Israelites.

### New Testament

In his encounter with Nicodemus, recounted in John 3:1-20, Jesus specifically alludes to the story of the bronze serpent, comparing himself with the serpent: ‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life’ (3:14). He goes on to say that ‘God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’ (17). The suggestion is that those who look to the Son of Man when he is ‘lifted up’ will be saved, just as the Israelites bitten by snakes were saved by looking at the brazen serpent. It is later made clear (12:32-33) that when Jesus speaks of being ‘lifted up’, he is speaking about his death. His word for the human response that he seeks is that we should ‘believe’ (16): ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ To ‘believe’ is, in this context, to trust that Jesus, even



though he is 'lifted up' in pain and humiliation, is the one who brings healing and salvation from sin. The Fourth Gospel speaks distinctively of the crucifixion as the moment of God's 'glory'. As Jesus approaches his arrest and condemnation, he speaks the events that are to come in terms of God's 'glory': 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.' (12:23-4; cf. 17:1-5).

## The Church

In the life of the church, snakes are associated with the 'serpent' of Genesis 3, who personifies the temptation to disobey God. Given the widespread human fear of snakes, this is understandable, but deeply unfair to snakes. Snakes are feared because they may be poisonous; they bring the threat of death. There is, perhaps, in Jesus's comparison of himself with the 'brazen serpent' the suggestion of his identification with poisonous evil – precisely for the purpose of healing. Like the brazen serpent, he assumes the form of evil, as a way of embracing the evil itself and bringing healing (cf. Phil 2:7-8). This is why Paul was determined to proclaim 'Christ crucified' to the Corinthians. For Paul, the cross – where Jesus is 'lifted up' as though he were a 'danger to society' – is central to the gospel message that he brings (1 Cor 1:17). It was this 'shock therapy', and this alone, that Paul believed could bring healing to the divided Corinthian church (1 Cor 2:2).

The legend that Patrick banished all snakes from Ireland, driving them into the sea, reflects the association of snakes with temptation. The snakes were said to have interrupted his forty-day fast – which could be taken as a dramatization of the snakes tempting him to do evil. They were driven into the sea – perishing in the water like the Egyptians who pursued the Israelites into the Red Sea.

## Questions for discussion:

1. Why do you think there is in the Jewish Scriptures such a horror of idolatry?
2. What, in the Fourth Gospel, is Jesus suggesting by comparing himself with the serpent?
3. Is there a spiritual sense in which human beings need healing today? If so, can you think of examples?
4. Where can we see 'the glory of God' now?
5. How can the story of the brazen serpent help us understand the crucifixion today?
6. Have legends like that of St Patrick banishing the snakes any value for us today?
7. Are there ways in which the members of your group can see the stories we have discussed this week reflected in their own journey of faith?

## Prayer

Lord God, who gave us Jesus to rescue us from all that poisons human lives and destroys human relationships, as we look to him, 'lifted up' and suffering on the cross, may we find in him our health and our salvation, for his name's sake, Amen

## Week 6: Living in Hope of the Promised Land

'Living in Hope of the Promised Land': Deut 34:1-12 ('I have let you see with your eyes but you shall not cross over there'); Lk 19:28-40 ('Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord'). Discussion: 'Can dying be seen as arrival at the promised land?'

Topic for local radio: A personal story of coming close to death and a second chance

## Jewish Scriptures

The vision of the promised land that is granted to Moses is a vision from the south-east. Moses looks across the river Jordan to the west. He looks not only into the land, but also into the future. He sees the land as it will be when the Israelites have taken Jericho, and have spread northwards to the east and west of the Jordan and filled all the land.

Gilead is to the north, east of the Jordan; Naphtali is to the north and includes the later-named Sea of Galilee; Dan takes in the territory even further north; the land of Manasseh and Ephraim stretches north and west as far as the Mediterranean sea; Judah includes the land immediately to the west of the Jordan; the Negeb is the desert to the south-west, stretching towards Egypt. Jericho is on the plain by the Dead Sea, to the west of the Jordan, as Zoar may have been before it disappeared.

Moses' vision is one of completeness: the complete fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 17:8; 26:3-4; 35:12). Like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses does not see the fulfilment of the promise. Before he dies, he is able to look into the future: to see how the journey of faith through which he has led the Israelites for forty years will be completed.

At this point, he must leave that fulfilment to God. He must accept God's will for himself – which is that it is time for him to die – and for his people – that it is time for them to face the huge new challenge of entry into the land of Canaan. The leadership of the Israelites will now pass to Joshua. Moses's lifework is done. The Book of Deuteronomy ends by summing up Moses' unique place in the history of

Israel: he is the one prophet whom, it is said, ‘the Lord knew face to face’: the Lord spoke with him, ‘as a man speaks to a friend’ (cf. Exod. 33:11).

## New Testament

In the long drawn-out conquest of the promised land, the moment when it could really be said the Israelites had established themselves was when they took over the city that became Jerusalem (1 Chron 11:4-9). This was the place where the tabernacle finally came to rest and was eventually replaced by Solomon’s temple. Jerusalem (meaning ‘city of peace’) was the place where God ‘made his name to dwell’ (cf. Dt 12:10-11) and where the worship of the Israelites was centralised. It was also the place where the great kings of a united Israel – David and Solomon – had their residence. The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey (a sign of peace), rather than on a warhorse must have evoked memories of the great king David, joyfully entering Jerusalem with the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6:15) and so making it both a uniquely ‘holy’ city and his own capital. Hundreds of years later, Jesus is seen as an unlikely king coming in peace to his capital city, to a rapturous popular welcome. Shortly after this, he will be crucified under a sign written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek (Jn 19:20; cf. Lk 23:38), so that all in Jerusalem may read these telling words, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’

In Luke’s Gospel, the greeting ‘Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven’ evokes memories of the song sung by the heavenly host to welcome the birth of Jesus: ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours’ (2:14). Jesus brings peace to Jerusalem (cf. 41), in a totally unexpected sense. When he enters the city like a king, the crowds cry out ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.’ (19:38; cf. Ps 118:26). Yet the peace Jesus brings can only as yet be discerned in faith: by looking into the future, to the establishment of the coming kingdom of God.

## The Church

The imagery of the promised land and the imagery of Jerusalem captivated the imagination of Christian writers, even within the New Testament. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews traces the biblical narrative from the creation through to the conquest of the promised land: speaking of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he says: ‘these all died in faith without receiving the promise’; they were ‘seeking a homeland’ ... ‘they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one.’ (Hebr 11:13-16). What was true of the patriarchs was true of Moses (23-8) and of those who came after him. The ‘promised land’ is, for Christians, a picture of heaven.

These ideas are reinforced by the idea that there is an earthly Jerusalem and a heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:25-6). The earthly Jerusalem reflects the glory of the heavenly Jerusalem. The Book of Revelation speaks of the 'new Jerusalem' which is as beautiful 'as a bride adorned for husband' (Rev 21:2). In the new Jerusalem 'death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more' for the first things have passed away' (v.4). This is a vision of the hoped-for future kingdom of God, in which Jesus, who died like a sacrificial lamb to bring about reconciliation between humans and God, now reigns. In this 'new Jerusalem' there is no temple because the earthly sacrifice of Jesus on the cross has ended all need for sacrifice: 'I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord is its light, and its lamp is the lamb.' This is the city, which is now open to all who wish to enter. In the words made famous by Handel's Hallelujah Chorus: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever' (Rev 11:15).

### Questions for discussion:

1. How should Christians interpret 'the promise' of the land today?
2. Why do you think Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem in the way that he did?
3. Is death the end of our life's journey, or is it a new beginning?
4. Christians have disagreed about whether we can expect everyone in the end to be saved. What do the members of your group think about this?
5. 'Jerusalem' probably means 'city of peace' yet no city in the world has been more of a focus for bitter dispute. What can we do to promote the 'peace of Jerusalem' today (cf. Ps 122:6-9)?
6. What do ideas of 'the promised land' or 'the new Jerusalem' mean for the members of your group on their journeys of faith?
7. Are there ways in which the members of your group can see the stories we have discussed this week reflected in their own journey of faith?

### Prayer

Lord God, who guided your covenant people through the wilderness to their promised land, bring us, we pray, to that place where we shall join in your praise and share your peace eternally, through Jesus Christ whose kingdom shall have no end and whose reign will be for ever and ever. Amen.

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