

MCCIA Bible Study Series 2022

Covid lockdowns have produced an existential and spiritual challenge to our churches that has been quite severe. How do you maintain the faith when gathering together is forbidden by the government for health reasons?

In order to address the spiritual dimensions of this reality, we have turned to three of our congregational leaders to help us bring to awareness the resources of biblical tradition that have proved to be important.

This introduction and commentary is by the Rev. Dr. Sandy Yule.

Bible Study 1

This study was led by Fr. Jo Dirks, of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation and St. Francis Church.

Fr. Jo's presentation is set out in the attached file.

Rather than take us into a specific text, Fr. Jo gave us a personal account of his experience of COVID lockdowns which highlighted his health challenges and the effectiveness of the resources formed by his spiritual practices (lectio divina, the breviary, the divine office and evensong).

He listed the psalms that he had found most helpful, which covered the areas of Adoration and Praise, Thanksgiving and Gratitude, Lamentation and Sorrow, and Petitions.

He also quoted the Canticle of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79) and the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) as expressions of faith with which he could identify.

His testimony struck a chord with me, as it highlighted the importance of our long practices of worship and devotion in providing us with spiritual resources that are there when we are feeling quite lost and empty.

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Bible Study 2

This bible study was led by the Rev'd Grant Edgcumbe, Vicar of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, East Melbourne.

Grant pointed us to the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11) as an instructive model as we encounter sickness, failure and frailty.

The story begins with the fact that Lazarus is ill.

Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus to let him know that Lazarus was ill. Jesus did not respond immediately, and we are not told why. This reflects the reality that our prayers are rarely answered at the moment that they are uttered.

Jesus then invited the disciples to accompany him to Judea, where the authorities were planning to kill him. It seems that he knew that Lazarus had died. He expressed his intention to raise him. Thomas invited his fellow disciples to accompany Jesus, even though expecting to join him in death.

Both Martha and then Mary greeted Jesus with the reproach that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had come in a more timely fashion. Martha still held out a hope that Jesus would be granted whatever he asked from God and was the first (in John's gospel) to acknowledge him as the Messiah of God.

Jesus was greatly disturbed, in response to the weeping of Mary and the mourners. He wept.

They took him to Lazarus' grave site. Jesus told them to take away the stone at the grave mouth. He called, 'Lazarus, come out!'

Lazarus came out, still wrapped in funeral cloths. Jesus said, 'Unbind him and let him go'. And it was so.

Grant suggested to us that this story provides a template for dealing with illness, failure and death.

The fact of the illness, failure or death needs to be acknowledged (before God).

There is time for acknowledgement of the loss in mourning and weeping.

The person can be called back into life.

Once the person responds to this call, there is need for untying them and letting them go.

This presentation led to significant discussion around experiences of loss through Covid lockdown. Examples included the difficulties with eucharistic practices in the light of Covid health concerns and with the forced isolation. We noted that what came in to replace our traditional church habits have often proved to have important benefits, so that our churches have continued to incorporate these changes in an ongoing manner.

The spiritual dimensions of suffering, loss and death came into sharp focus for me through seeing them in the light of the story of the raising of Lazarus.