

ROOTS response to Covid-19 pandemic

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20 - 26 September 2020 [I don't know what to choose](#)

Related Bible reading(s): Jonah 3.10-4.11; Philippians 1.21-30; Matthew 20.1-16

Bible study

A selection from this week's resources to help you plan and run a Bible study.

Welcome and opening prayer (5 mins)

A prayer of praise

We praise you, Lord, for all that you are,
for the creation that is yours,
for its beauty and wonder, its diversity and richness.

We praise you for your presence and comfort
that swaddle us in your purity and enrich us with your
abundance.

We praise you for your steadfastness
that perseveres with us, faltering disciples and failing followers.

We praise you that, day by day, you amaze and enrich us
and reveal yourself in new and unexpected ways.

We praise you that you are the same yesterday,
today and for ever – and yet forever new.

O Lord our God, you are indeed,
from the depth of our being,
highly to be praised.

Amen.

Read the text (10 mins)

Consider different ways to read the text. For example, sharing parts between several readers, or hearing it more than once using different versions, or using/adapting this suggestion.

Present the New Testament

A dramatized reading for two actors

Use simple props to indicate a prison cell (from where Paul wrote the letter) e.g. [project an image of prison bars](#), or mock-up bars from cardboard.

You will need two actors (Paul and Timothy), dressed in plain cloths (e.g. black t-shirt and jeans, or a grey tracksuit). Timothy sits at a table, writing; Paul is dictating. A third person imaginatively describes/sets the scene – script below.

Paul 'dictates' his letter, by reading the text from a modern English version (e.g. *The Voice* or *The Message*). Ideally, if you have time, read the whole of chapter 1 so that the greetings are included.

Script

We are privileged today to be able to eavesdrop on Paul and his right-hand man, Timothy. They have been persecuted and imprisoned for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. They are facing possible execution. Despite their troubles – perhaps because of them – Paul is writing to the Christians of Philippi in Macedonia, Greece.

Philippi was the first place, as far as we know, that Paul visited in Europe. The Philippians are going through tough times, too. They live in a prosperous city of the Roman Empire. But many of them are Greek by birth, so they do not have the citizenship rights of Romans (including Paul). They could not vote. They could not own land. A good proportion of them were slaves. Disabilities were common. Infant mortality was high. Life expectancy for most was no more than 30 years. As a consequence, there were a lot of widows and orphans.

Thanks to his visit, Paul was dear to them, and they to him. As you listen to Paul dictating his letter, try to imagine how Paul's words will sound to those ears in Philippi.

Explore and respond to the text (30 mins)

Use the Bible notes as a way into Bible study. For example, you could read a section, then allow time for people to discuss issue raised and respond.

Bible notes

Old Testament: Jonah 3.10–4.11

The ancient city of Nineveh was in modern-day Iraq (then Assyria), on the outskirts of Mosul. Jonah is not keen on his job as prophet and quite angry with God. At first, he didn't believe the Gentile Ninevites were worth saving. But he was also pretty sure that God would forgive the people of Nineveh anyway (see Psalm 145.8) – so he thought his role was a bit of a waste of time, and he would be made to look a fool. Even so, God continued to interact with Jonah. A plant grew and Jonah became attached to it. Then the plant died. Jonah was sad, and angry with God again. But God still persisted with Jonah, and reproved him for being more upset about the fate of a plant than the 120,000 inhabitants of Nineveh. As the verse from Psalm 145 says, God is ever merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love.

New Testament: Philippians 1.21-30

Philippians was written by Paul from prison, though we don't know whether from Caesarea in the late AD 50s or Rome in the early 60s. As we have it now, it is a composite of at least two letters that he wrote – 3.1a is clearly the end of one of them.

We pick up the letter after Paul's greetings to the 'saints' in Philippi (v.1), and an assurance of his prayers for them. In the rest of the first chapter, Paul explains his personal struggles to the Philippians, and says that their struggles are like his (v.30). He wants to appear encouraging and commends them for their approach to life in the faith, even when he's not sure himself if he should stick at it or not (v.22). Paul knows what these struggles are like and how intimidating opposition can be (v.28). He needs the support of the Philippians just as they need his.

Paul makes a good contrast with Jonah. Jonah was afraid to look foolish; Paul presses on with complete fearlessness. Jonah is so miserable he wishes he could die; Paul is so happy in Christ he wishes he could die, in order to be with Christ. Jonah cared nothing for the people of Nineveh; Paul cares so much for the people of Philippi that he would prefer to put off his own final glory if only he can stand by them.

There is also a similarity, for in both books God seeks to address those who have become enemies with a sign. In Jonah, it was Jonah himself, preaching in sackcloth. In Philippians it is the faithful church, confounding its enemies. Paul sees the church's enemies as lost, but also believes that God is not abandoning them but addressing them through the unity of the church.

Gospel: Matthew 20.1-16

Matthew's is the only Gospel to include this well-known story of Jesus' about social and economic issues in first-century Palestine. The vineyard is a common symbol for Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures and in some of Jesus' other parables, and the landowner is sometimes to be understood as God. But we do not need to make such direct links here. It is not an allegory, depicting life in heaven or on earth (Matthew uses 'kingdom of heaven' where others say 'kingdom (or reign) of God'). Rather, it is a story (a parable) using imagery familiar to the audience.

The landowner hires workers according to the 'steadfast love' principle and generosity of Psalm 145, rather than the usual worldly/human way of treating workers at the time (or now). This undifferentiated pay policy makes some of the workers angry, and their reaction is just as understandable today. But this is not teaching on how to run a business, it is a parable to illustrate what true compassion means: that no worker's family should be deprived of their food for the day. It is a message and a challenge as relevant to contemporary economics and 'zero hours' contracts as it was 2,000 years ago.

The links between the lectionary readings

Work links our three readings: Jonah isn't keen on his job as a prophet, and some of the workers in the vineyard complain about theirs; meanwhile, Paul tries to encourage the Philippians even though they face struggles. The life to which we are called doesn't always work out as we thought it would. The kingdom of God is generally midwived by prophets. Who are the prophets doing this around us today?

For more discussion ideas, and practical and active ways to explore and respond to the readings, choose from: [Sermon ideas](#); [Active worship](#); [Picture pointers](#); or [PostScript](#)

Pray together (10 mins)

Prayers of intercession

*Response after each bidding: **God, be with them.***

Eternal, ever-living, ever-present God,
in the struggles and joys of this day, we pray:
for those who are overburdened, weighed down, demoralised,
fearful or desolate because of what life has thrown at them...
For those engulfed in pain and anguish, facing illness and death...
For those troubled in mind and spirit, who find no peace or calm...
For those alone and lonely, without friend or comfort...
For those frightened and bewildered, who see no direction
or purpose in their lives...
Eternal, ever-living God,
bless them all in this and every hour,
in this and every step of life's journey.
Amen.

End the session (5 mins)

A personal prayer

In trial and tribulation, God of comfort, be near me.
In loss and devastation, God of grief, grieve with me.
In uncertainty and confusion, God of the way, show me a path.
In want and in need, God of provision, provide for me.
In times of sluggishness and laziness, God of patience, wait for
me.
In comfort and in joy, God of love, let me not forget you.
Amen.

Live your faith

Send a message (e.g. by letter, text, email, phone) of
encouragement to someone (or to a group or cause dear to you)
that needs support and encouragement to stand firm in the face
of obstacles and challenges at this time.

The ROOTS resources include a range of materials that can
be put together to plan and run a Bible study, either leading
up to a service based on the reading or in the following
week.

The Bible study above is a selection of this week's resources
and the timings are based on a Bible study session lasting
one hour. This can be printed off and used as it is, or
modified to suit your situation.

If you prefer to make your own selection from the weekly
materials, please see our [guidance on preparing a Bible
study](#). You will also need to include a copyright
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