

The Isaiah Journey: seeking truth, bringing hope, finding healing

A parish retreat or safeguarding session:

Reflection on the Word of God in verses from the prophet Isaiah as inspiration for our care of one another, especially those among us who have been abused

Resource content

1. Leader's pack – 'How you might use this resource.' Individual, leader/group, face-to-face, or zoom,
2. Session Process
3. Additional material handouts:
 - Why Isaiah? pdf
 - Lectio 'How to' for those less familiar with praying with Scripture. pdf
 - Handouts or screen-shares for Isaiah texts, image of candle and closing prayer
 - Contacts page & safeguarding information

Leader's Guide to include:

- **Goals** of this scripture-based reflection, inspiring our care for one another, especially those who have been abused.
 - To welcome and build trust and a sense of belonging in this conversation – each person brings their life experience – may this time provide a place of nurture and encouragement.
 - To be aware that survivors of abuse are part of us in the Church, and there may be unidentified survivors, or family members with us in our session. Everyone is helped to feel welcome, included and respected. Safeguarding in place.
 - We are reflecting on human suffering through abuse. If anyone at any point is upset, uncomfortable or needs support, ensure there is someone present (identify) to listen – either, during the session, if someone wishes to leave at any point to check they are OK, or after the session, again to check out are you OK. (Point out Parish Safeguarding Notice displayed, with contacts).
 - Guided by the prophet Isaiah, this is a quiet retreat-type experience, to reflect on the journey of human suffering, survival and resilience, connecting with the impact of abuse. To observe where God is at work in ourselves and others, guiding and encouraging with great mercy and compassion, with the potential to reveal inner strength and hope, even in the most challenging, painful times.
 - God is love and promises to be present in our learning to love and care. We seek to grow in our understanding, connecting our everyday language and experience of healing & caring for one another with our care and concern for those who have been harmed, and in our safeguarding responsibility as a community.

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- **Preparation** If in group, face-to-face or on line, creating a 'safe space' for either setting:
 - Decide when, where and how you are going to use this prayer resource – face-to-face, or online. Download Leader's Guide
 - Prepare the welcome (space and words) and opening prayer
 - Focal point Bible, large candle, basket of T lights. Or use image of candle provided for use on screen (or invite Zoom participants to have own candle)
 - Ensure safeguarding support/ listening team present and/or contactable after the session.
 - Download ready to make available handouts – or prepare for sharing on screen - scripture texts, closing prayer, and Safeguarding Contacts page, alerting to support.
 - Set up your phone or device with speaker if you want to have a piece of music playing for welcome, creating friendly calm space/atmosphere.

Leader's Guide

Isaiah: seeking truth, bringing hope, finding healing.

Reflections on the word of God in the prophet Isaiah as inspiration for our care of one another.

Shape of the session

- Welcome and introductions, purpose of our time together (drawing on 'goals' above); simple ground rules and finish time.
- Opening Prayer
- Our own experience
- Introducing Isaiah the prophet, through whom God speaks
- Lectio divina with Isaiah Scriptures – and first responses
- Making connections – second response time connecting with experience
- Closing Prayer

Leader's Guide for SESSION IN FULL

Welcome: Gather in prepared space. Welcome. Invite very simple introductions from those present (e.g. name, what drew you to come along). Invite sharing of some ground rules – e.g. what is said here stays here.

Goals: Share aims/purpose or goals of our time together:

This is a scripture-based reflection and prayer time, to pray for victims and survivors of abuse, and to help us to seek truth, bring hope, find healing – for survivors, their families, our communities and the wider church. In the light of Isaiah, to lament, and seek God's healing for all.

- To welcome and build trust and a sense of belonging in this conversation – each person brings their life experience – may this time provide a place of nurture and encouragement.
- To be aware that survivors of abuse are part of us in the church, and there may be unidentified survivors, or family members with us in our session. That everyone is helped to feel welcome, included and respected. If anyone feels uncomfortable at any stage, we have listening support, either for during the session or for afterwards before you leave. (Identify Listening support person(s))
- God is love and promises to be present in our learning to love and care. We seek to grow in our understanding, connecting our everyday language and experience of healing & caring for one another with our safeguarding responsibility as a community.

Opening Prayer: Leader Invites silence. Let us pray

As we gather to pray for victims and survivors of abuse, and our common responsibility to love and care for others, we open to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit with us, each person here showing the face of Christ.

We bring our wisdom and life experience, our joys, our vulnerability and pain, our relationships, our resilience and ability to hang on in there when the going gets tough.

May our hearts be open, grateful, humble, ready to listen, to receive, to be touched, and be changed. May the continuing work of our Redeemer bring us peace and joy.

We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen

We Begin With Our Own Experience: (Leader invites participants to think on their own for a moment, using the questions below. On a signal, leader invites sharing (only if a participant wishes), face to face in 2's and 3's, or on zoom, in the 'chat')

- What in your own experience of life does it mean to 'care for others', in your family or friends, or community? What do you do when the going gets tough? What do you need? Who do you turn to?
- What about our concern for victims and survivors of abuse within the church? What would you expect or like to see for them?
- If you think of 'safeguarding' as caring for others, as in the Gospels 'love one another as I have loved you', what sort of words would you use to describe it? Why should safeguarding be important?
 - Invite some feedback for those who feel comfortable/would like to share.

We Hear God Speak – opening to the Word of God in the Isaiah Texts

First, a background word about the Prophet Isaiah (You may like to draw on the words below from 'Why Isaiah?')

- The prophet Isaiah describes himself as 'A voice of one calling, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3)
 - This invites us on a journey to face the truth of the anguish of those who have been impacted by abuse
- Isaiah gives the words that Jesus uses at the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:16-21 quoting Isaiah 61:1-2)
 - Jesus embodies the words of the prophet Isaiah and we, as baptised members of his Body, the Church, are called and anointed by the Holy Spirit to do the same.
- Isaiah writes that the Messiah (and by implication those who follow him) is a healer: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. (Isaiah 42:3-4)
 - Many in the Church have been broken, their faith rocked, even extinguished. Here and now we are very aware of this pain; we trust in God's power to bring healing and hope, and with r sensitivity and care – to listen, stand with them, and ensure justice.
 - For safeguarding within our community to be lived out as the responsibility of every person, as a sign of our love for one another and for all who come.

Word of God in Scripture: A Lectio Process using the texts from Isaiah

Note: For zoom, you may wish to share the separate text Handout on screen, and ask those present to read a line each, by invitation or hand raising, allowing a pause/silence between each. The person may say, 'Pass' if they prefer to just listen. In a face-to-face group, there is the option for individual handouts with texts. Again, invite round the circle - say pass if you don't wish to read.

God Speaks – opening to the Word of God in the Isaiah texts (Printed below for ease of access but also available on Participant Handout and a separate large-font handout)

Invitation to Participants:

- Sit quietly. Allow silence to settle, become aware of self, breathing, and sense of anticipation. Come Holy Spirit ...
- Come with a beginner's mind, to listen as if for the first time, even if the lines from Scripture are very familiar. God will speak with a fresh voice into this place at this time, to this group of people gathered today.
- I invite you to take turns in reading the verses slowly and carefully. Allow a short silence between each phrase. (Simply say 'Pass' if you would prefer not to read).

The Word of God – from the Prophet Isaiah

1. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. (9:2);
2. Making God's people whole. (e.g. 61:3 or 65:17 and following, or 35)
3. You are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you, (43.4).
4. The Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, (25)
5. Fear not, for I am with you; I will strengthen you, I will help you. (41.10)
6. Behold, I am doing a new thing; I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (43.19)
7. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. (49.16)
8. Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. (55.1)
9. The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted. (61.1)
10. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. Is 35: 1-6
11. In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (40)
12. A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law (42)
13. Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear. (65:24)
14. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come. (35.3)

After the first 'hearing' of the Word, the leader invites participants to think on their own at first, then to share anything they wish to: a first thought or comment about what caught their attention/spoke to them personally.

Making Connections – the Word of God speaks into our lives and experience

Leader invites participants to read the texts out loud a second time, followed by a moment of silence and question: What caught your attention? The same or something different?

- After a few moments of personal reflection, leader invites some sharing from those who wish to:
 - How does the Voice of God in these Isaiah texts seem to connect with my/your experience, understanding and hopes for caring for others, especially those who are hurting?
 - How do we or can we respond in a loving way, in welcome, care and support of those who have been abused within the church? What do you think or know they need? What do you want for these brothers and sisters of ours?
 - How might we best live out this Word of God in our ‘safeguarding practice’ in our parish? How can we share responsibility to love and care and create a safe space for all, not just as ‘compliance’ but following the example of Jesus?

Gathering Our Experience Together in a Closing Prayer

The really important ‘stop and think’ moments in our lives very often happen in unexpected ways, through unexpected situations and experiences, people we meet, conversations or quiet moments.

In our time together, we have come close to Jesus, the Word of God made flesh as one of us, Jesus, who welcomes all who come to him. Jesus who declared in the synagogue at Nazareth, and declares to us today the words of the Prophet Isaiah: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim Good news’ - to all those who have felt lonely, abandoned, confused, oppressed, abused - for whom the circumstances and situations of their lives have often been overwhelming. Jesus calls us to do the same.

Thankful for all our listening and sharing, let us pray using the words of the Prophet Isaiah once more:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

O Lord, you make your people whole.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy

O Lord we are precious and loved by you – wipe away the tears from all faces and give us your peace.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

O Lord, for all who are suffering from the impact of abuse, on their journey towards healing, make a way in the wilderness, streams in the desert .

Alleluia! Alleluia

O Lord, strengthen the weak. Say to those who have an anxious heart: Be strong, fear not, your God will come!

Alleluia! Alleluia

Symbolic action: Focus on the Candle present in the centre of the gathering, or show the burning candle image on screen. Have a basket of T-lights to hand round if face-to-face.

- To help us respond, when you feel ready, I invite you to take and light a candle (in the room, or on zoom, contemplate the image or light your own candle if you have one) and sit peacefully with it for a moment.
- We notice and recall what stays with us –what God wishes us to notice and recall. Any awareness of the Holy Spirit’s love and inspiration? Anything that caused us to feel troubled? Anything we need to pay attention to?
- Allow this little flame to symbolise whatever you want – whatever you need it to:
- Courage in a difficult time; joy in a moment of healing; freedom; or peace; light for the path; a movement from darkness to light in your life and experience; a movement from darkness to light and bright hope for another; remembering a kindness or an inspiration; to help you hold on to the truth that the light of Christ is present with us in all things and can guide us out of darkness.
- You are invited come and place your candle on the central focus near the larger group candle.
- Closing thoughts: Is there anything you feel called to do now? (share if you wish, or silence)

We pray together (on participants handout or prayed by Leader)

Praise to you Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
the source of all consolation and hope.
Be the refuge and guardian of all
who suffer from abuse and violence.
Comfort them and send healing
for their wounds of the body, soul and spirit.
Help us all and make us one with you
in your love for justice,
as we deepen our respect for the dignity of every human life.
Giver of peace, make us one in celebrating
your praise, both now and forever.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

Leader: As we go our separate ways we acknowledge the Spirit at work in each person – giving strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. You are invited to offer a sign of peace saying to one another: “Blessed are YOU who come in the name of the Lord!”

Why Isaiah?

Introductory material for Leader:

The leader may wish to draw on the following material to introduce 'Why Isaiah' – for comment/discussion

- A prophet is one who is seasoned in spiritual experience, called by God to speak in the name of God, communicating God's faithfulness, justice, love and mercy, calling for conversion of heart and openness to God's Spirit, poured out for all people.
- The prophets accompany the people of God throughout its history, with all its trials and failures, joys and strengths. Jesus and his disciples often quote the Prophet Isaiah
- Isaiah invites all of us in the Church in our time, lay and clergy together, to join the journey; in facing the wounds of abuse, to encounter the living God to feel God's presence and hear God's voice, a voice that speaks into every circumstance, whatever it is, good or bad, that we are experiencing, and to respond with humility, and then to act.
- The prophet Isaiah describes himself as 'A voice of one calling, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."' (Isaiah 40:3)
 - This invites us on a journey to face the truth of the anguish of those who have been impacted by abuse
- Isaiah gives the words that Jesus uses at the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:16-21 quoting Isaiah 61:1-2)
 - Jesus embodies the words of the prophet Isaiah and we, as baptised members of his Body, the Church, are called and anointed by the Holy Spirit to do the same.
- Isaiah writes that the Messiah (and by implication those who follow him) is a healer: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. (Isaiah 42:3-4)
 - Many in the Church have been broken, their faith rocked, even extinguished. Here and now we are very aware of this pain; we trust in God's power to bring healing and hope, and with sensitivity and care – to listen, stand with them, and ensure justice.
 - For safeguarding within our community to be lived out as the responsibility of every person, as a sign of our love for one another and for all who come.
- The desert or wilderness is a place where one can hear the call of God to change and return to the truth of God's ways.
 - The wilderness as a place of truth- seeking; living on the basic essentials, paring down to a simple life & concentrating on what matters.
 - In the desert John proclaims Baptism, as the way to life in God, 'the way of the Lord'. Baptism as the moment of conversion, out of darkness of selfishness to the light of open-hearted love; you are anointed to speak and act with truth and justice as 'prophet', to make sacrifices for love of others, as 'priest' and to serve and support especially those most vulnerable as 'king'.

Simple How to for Lectio Divina

A way of praying with Scripture: Lectio divina or 'reading with God' — a simple 'how to' for those unfamiliar – and tips for the leader and participants

Guide for Leader or individual: You may be familiar with this way of praying with Scripture. If not, be assured you will be guided at every step. Helpful hints: Listen before you speak, speak from the heart. Don't worry if someone else says the same phrase. Don't worry about 'what this means' or 'what it is said to mean' – simply first time, 'What caught my attention?', and second time, 'How do I think this connects and speaks to me now?' There are no right or wrong responses. Everyone will hear the Word differently according to their needs and circumstances. God speaks into our lives. And so we begin.

1. Sit quietly. Allow silence to settle, become aware of self, breathing, and sense of anticipation. Come Holy Spirit ...
2. Come with a beginner's mind, to listen as if for the first time, even if the lines from Scripture are very familiar. God will speak with a fresh voice into this place at this time, to this group of people gathered today.
3. Let's listen to the Voice that is deeper than any other voice we listen to – listen; be open to what catches your attention. I invite you to take turns in reading the verses (on zoom I will quietly say your name – please say pass if you would rather not read. Face to face, take turns round the group.) Read the verse out loud, slowly and carefully, like taking a slow walk through a park, noticing little things.
4. We will have a short silence between each phrase, and at the end of the final one.
5. At the end, the leader invites personal silent reflection, and then asks: What particular word or phrase or image caught your attention? In silence, just go back to that and repeat it quietly to yourself for a moment.
6. Leader invites participants to read the texts out loud a second time, followed by a moment of silence and question: what caught your attention? The same, or something different? Go back and repeat silently to yourself.
7. After a few moments of personal reflection, leader invites some sharing: what caught your attention, and if you'd like to, say why?
8. Begin to talk about the connections for you –for as long as it takes for everyone to share.

Handout or Screen Share for Closing Prayer

Handout or screen share for Lectio

The Word of God – from the Prophet Isaiah

1. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. (9:2)
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3. You are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you. (43.4).
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5. Fear not, for I am with you; I will strengthen you, I will help you. (41.10)
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Closing prayer

Praise to you Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
the source of all consolation and hope.

Be the refuge and guardian of all
who suffer from abuse and violence.
Comfort them and send healing
for their wounds of the body, soul and spirit.

Help us all and make us one with you
in your love for justice,
as we deepen our respect for the dignity of every human life.

Giver of peace, make us one in celebrating
your praise, both now and forever.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen

A Prayer for Healing and Reconciliation from the Diocese of Northampton