

lent activities

INTRODUCTION

Does your church run a Lent Course? Who is invited? Are the children involved? Perhaps there are activities related to Lent in your children's programme, but you do not think of them as a 'Lent Course'. This booklet is an attempt to capture in our children's work that sense of structured preparation over a six week period which is a feature of the traditional Lent Course. Susan Sayers in her book *Come and See* (see page 8) explores the idea of running parallel courses for children and adults, with times of sharing between the two groups. Some of the following material contains practical suggestions for activities with children, but many of the sections are sketches and focuses, rather than fully worked session plans – in this way they could perhaps provide inspiration for parallel adult sessions.

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THE DESERT EXPERIENCE

The desert has very negative connotations. It is not only seen as a place of suffering, but also as a barren, lifeless place. And yet the Spirit led Jesus there and Jesus emerged from his experience 'filled with the power of the Spirit' (Luke 4:14) ready for his ministry – far from a negative outcome. Jesus regularly sought solitude, and the first monastic communities withdrew to desert places – so there must be something to be said for 'the desert experience'! These six suggestions aim to explore what some positives might be.

1 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?

Ask children to express their feelings about 'desert' in a variety of media – painting, drawing, collage; poetry or story writing; drama or movement; making a sound picture with made or 'found' instruments, including voice. Finish with a multi-sensory 'desert experience' – stories/poems/dance/drama performed to a sound collage accompaniment in an environment decorated with the artwork.

(NB Don't start the sessions with photos of the desert unless the children are absolutely stumped for ideas, otherwise their imaginative response will be channelled by what they have seen).

2 THE WILDERNESS YEARS

Tell the story of The Lost Son (Luke 15:11-31) using a modern or dramatised version. Using the story as an example, discuss the way that sometimes going through difficult experiences can help us learn things. Leaders could give some examples from their lives, and then ask if the children have had any experiences of learning through a difficulty.

3 THE SCOURING SAND

Explore feelings of guilt and forgiveness. Share examples of times when you and the children have felt guilty about things – how does it feel physically (feeling hot, sweaty, blushing, thumping heart, not wanting to look at people)? Share examples of those feelings being taken away by forgiveness. How did the forgiveness work? What did you do? What did other people do? Did it help to spend some time alone? Did those physical feelings of being hot/worked-up go away? How? Use a sand tray and ask the children to write a word in the

sand to represent something they wish they hadn't done (It doesn't matter if one child's word goes across another child's).

Tell the children how the desert sands shift in the wind and wipe out all marks, and as you are talking, smooth the sand with your hand to take away all the marks the children have made. Get the children to close their eyes and imagine being alone in the desert in bright light with beautiful smooth, clear sand stretching for miles. Imagine they have shared their 'mistakes' with God and said they are sorry, and he has taken the mistakes away as the wind smooths the sand. Perhaps say some simple words of absolution using the 'us' rather than 'you' form.

4 INNER SPACE – INNER DESERTS

Read some of the examples of times when Jesus went to be on his own. Discuss why he might have done this. Do the children like to have times to be alone? Do they have friends who like time alone? Do their teachers at school ever give children 'time out' if there's been a problem in class? How many adverts can they think of that show people on their own (lots of holiday ads do this)? Why do we value time to be alone? If we can't withdraw physically to a mountain top or a desert, what opportunities are there to withdraw into quiet inner space in our busy lives? Can we find more opportunities just to be still and quiet. Spend a few still quiet moments together to end, perhaps with some gentle music.

5 'OZYMANDIAS'

This is the title of a poem by Shelley, and well worth a read! It paints a picture of an ancient ruler's wrecked statue in the midst of a desert waste. The inscription on the statue reads, 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' The message of the poem is clear – the desert reminds us that even the most powerful cannot make lasting marks on earth. There is a popular exercise which invites children to stand barefoot in a sand tray, look at their footprints, then consider what 'mark' they would like to leave on the world. You could do that, then smooth the sand and discuss the way that 'things don't last'. Perhaps look at old photos of your neighbourhood if they illustrate the disappearance of buildings, streets etc. Discuss what they think *might* last. I Corinthians 13:13 tells us that when all else fails 'faith, hope and love' remain – how could that be?

6 DESERT JOURNEYS

In the Old Testament, the desert is a place of transition and travel. The most striking example of this is, of course, Moses and the Children of Israel on their way to the Promised Land – to the land of their dreams. Perhaps the desert is a place to dream dreams

about the future and a better life. You could ask the children to produce some 'dreams of a better life' – for themselves, for their families and friends, for their city, for their country, for their world. Do the dreams look different if they are for different people? Are there parts of them that are the same whoever they're for? What do they think God's dream for his world and his people might be?

These desert ideas are drawn from the Lent section in:

Alternative Worship, Jonny Baker & Doug Gay with Jenny Brown, SPCK 2003

Resource Section W0.1 – Worship Reference and Theory

POSITIVE FASTING

Fasting is a traditional part of Lent but, like the desert, it can be seen as a very negative thing. It can also be quite superficial, as Isaiah 58 points out. In verses 6 and 7 the prophet tells us that God chooses 'fasting' that does positive good to others. The conclusion we draw from Isaiah 58 is that making yourself hungry is not as important as 'spend(ing) yourself on behalf of the hungry' (vs 10). With this in mind, a six week programme might concentrate on different ways of taking away ('fasting from') the negatives in life – that's a double negative which, as any good grammarian or mathematician will tell you, makes a positive!

1 SPRING CLEAN

As we move through Lent, so we move into spring. A good opportunity, perhaps to get the children involved if fettling the children's room, supply shelves etc – perhaps even doing some work in church (not during the service, of course!). The physical work can be linked to our lives – what things have we been meaning to put right in our lives for ages and haven't got round to? Have we been meaning to be more helpful or friendly, or less cross and moody with someone?

2 GOOD INTENTIONS

Following on from the previous week, the children could be asked to 'firm up' some good intentions for the coming weeks. They could decide how challenging to be to themselves – one intention a day, one a week, two or three a week for the rest of Lent. Design some way of marking progress through Lent – perhaps a road on which every Sunday children could stick a footprint for every good intention carried out during the previous week; or a tree with a branch for each week, on which a leaf could be stuck for every good intention carried out. Part of the session would entail making the

road or tree or other progress marker, but there should be some quiet time for thought about some realistic intentions.

3 HUNGER FOR JUSTICE

Having started this section by emphasising the needs of the hungry rather than the importance of our own hunger, there is still a place for voluntarily doing without something as a reminder of those who have to do without through force of circumstance. This could be a session to be reminded of the injustice of poverty in a world which has enough for all, to decide on some luxury we can do without for the rest of Lent, to decide how much money that will save us and therefore how much money we can put aside to give to others, to decide which organisation(s) to donate the money to. You could conclude by making a decorated collecting box/tin/jar – either one per child, or a corporate one for the group. The next three sessions could start with the children (and leaders!) putting their money in from the previous week. The following Grace from Iona is good at this time of year: ‘God bless to us our bread. Give bread to all those who are hungry, and hunger for justice to those who are fed. God bless to us our bread.’

4 LOVE GOD

Hopefully, week two produced some quite specific and measurable intentions. A more general good intention might be simply to live more the way that God wants us to live. This is also a long term aspiration, and Lent should be about laying foundations for the long term. Jesus gave us some very clear and concise instructions on this, the first of which was to love God. A session could be spent investigating what is loveable about God. Try to allow the children the space to come up with responses they truly feel, rather than the ones they ‘ought to give’ which may have the weight of theology behind them but aren’t anchored in the children’s own experience. Ask the children how they show their family and friends that they love them, then go on to wonder about how we can show love to God.

5 LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR

The other instruction for living as God wants us to live is to love our neighbour. This is relatively easy with people we like, but what about people we don’t like? What about ‘the neighbours from hell’ – not just people we don’t feel particularly drawn to but people who do horrible things? Jesus says we have to love them all. Why? Spend some time exploring why Jesus told us to love everyone – again, give space for the children to come up with responses that are meaningful for them rather than the theologically ‘right’ answers. Finish by getting the children to spend some time thinking

of people they don't like and ways they could be more positive about them.

6 LOVE YOURSELF

Last but not least in Jesus's law of love is the fact that we must love ourselves. We are told to love our neighbours as ourselves, so if we don't love ourselves very much then our love for others won't amount to much either. Do some self-esteem building activities with the children. Eg Get the children to write one positive thing about each of the others in the group – if you have six children in your group, then each child will have five positive statements about themselves. You could read them out as a proclamation, give them to the child to copy in best hand writing and decorate like a certificate to take home, or read the lists out and get the children to guess which list goes with which child. Look at some verses of scripture that tell us how much God values each one of us. You could make a big 'It Could Be You' hand, and point it at each child in turn as someone reads one of the verses.

The ideas in this section were largely inspired by:

The 'E' Book, Gill Ambrose, National Society/Church House Publishing
2000

Resource Section P1.13 – Families & Parenting

TEMPTATION TEMPTATION TEMPTATION

Fasting and the idea of Lent as a time of preparation are drawn from Jesus's time in the wilderness. During that time he faced three temptations and these might form the basis of a six week course, with two weeks spent on each temptation – one week looking at it from Jesus's point of view, and one week from our own.

1 & 2 BREAD OR THE WORD

Jesus: Act out the first temptation. The temptation itself is quite short, so spend some time building up the desert scene and Jesus's feelings of hunger. Ask the children what food does for us – builds our bodies, makes us strong and healthy, gives us energy etc. Is there any way that the word of God can have a similar effect? Ask them if there are any stories or sentences from scripture that they particularly value. Have some examples from the leaders' experience to share. Write the verses, or an illustration from the stories on pieces of paper in the shape of loaves.

Us: Get the children to talk about toys that they've become bored with, have broken or grown out of. Ask them to think back to how they felt when they first got them or were waiting to get them (in the run up to a birthday or Christmas). Reflect on how things rarely live up to expectations. Perhaps look at some adverts for toys and talk about the kind of expectations they build up. Ask the children to describe really good times What makes the times good – things or people? Are there times when we can be tempted to value things more highly than people?

4 & 5 WHO DO YOU SERVE?

Jesus: Following Luke's order (chapter 4:1-13) the second temptation is the offer of 'the kingdoms of the world'. Tell the story and get the children to make a panorama picture of the world. Ask them to think of all the characters in fiction that have tried to 'rule the world' and what they have had to do to try and achieve their aim. Older children could be asked if they know any characters in real life who have tried to dominate the world. In fact as in fiction the enterprise has invariably involved evil and suffering. Ask the children if they can think of any ways of having 'authority' over the world, or reasons for wanting it that are not evil and selfish.

Us: This temptation can be seen as the epitome of all temptations – does Jesus serve a selfish drive (symbolised by serving the devil) or does he serve God – the source of all goodness? Ask the children to think of all the situations in life in which they, and others face that stark choice, to serve their own self-interest or to serve God's purposes. How do they, and others combat temptation. It is important to emphasise that our own interests and God's are not always in conflict – they could finish by thinking of examples in which they feel that what they want and what God wants are the same!

5 & 6 TESTING GOD

Jesus: Tell the story. Get the children to imagine the scene if Jesus really had thrown himself off the Temple and been caught by angels. Perhaps act out the scene with full media coverage – you can avoid the need for a falling Jesus and a flight of angels by having a reporter pointing up to an imaginary Temple and commentating on what is happening. The other children can be bystanders, punctuating the commentary with oohs! and ahs! and comments as to whether he's going to jump, and who he is. Alternatively write a newspaper report, or make it a studio TV news item. Emphasise to the children that Jesus didn't take up the devil's suggestion and ask them to discuss a) what might have been 'tempting' to Jesus in the suggestion and b) why he turned it down.

Us: Get the children to share examples of times they have ‘tested’ people that care about them (friends/family) eg asking a parent to do something for them that they can do perfectly well themselves. Has anyone ever done that kind of thing to them – has a friend ever ‘tested’ their friendship by asking them to do something to prove that they are their friend? Can they think of any examples of people ‘testing’ God along the lines of: ‘I’ll believe in you if you do this for me’? The scripture Jesus quotes says God doesn’t want us to ‘test’ him. Why might that be?

I began thinking about the three temptations as a structure after reading:

100 Ideas for Use with Children During Lent, Holy Week and Easter,
Betty Pedley, Diocese of Wakefield 1997
Resource Section Xn4.40 – Festivals – Lent, Easter

GETTING READY

In the days when people would wait until Easter to be baptised, Lent provided a natural period of preparation and that preparation would entail going over some basics of the faith. We could reclaim that sense of preparation by structuring a Lent course around some basic elements of the faith or of Jesus’s story. Easter can still be a time to focus on our baptismal calling by renewing our baptismal vows. This should not be taken lightly (see *Common Worship* pp149-152) but could be a fitting conclusion for those who have undertaken a course of preparation during Lent.

***Come and See* by Susan Sayers (Kevin Mayhew 1990: Resource section Xn4.40 – Festivals – Lent, Easter) provides a six week course which she calls ‘a Lent journey for adults, young people and children using individual study and all-age activities. The idea is that adults and children undertake parallel activities and then come together once a week to share what they have been doing. You could use Susan Sayers’ ideas, or make activities of your own under her six headings:**

WHERE CAN WE FIND HIM?

WHAT IS HE DOING?

WHAT IS HE SAYING?

WHO DOES HE MIX WITH?

WHO CAN HE BE?

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Or you could make six headings of your own either relating to the life and ministry of Jesus, or other aspects of our lives as Christians.

GREAT IS THE MYSTERY OF FAITH

Continuing the idea of Lent as a preparation period, focussing on aspects of Jesus’s life, you could use the run-up to Easter as a time to try out ‘Godly Play’. Jerome Berryman, in the fourth volume of his guides to

'Godly Play' calls his presentations for the spring period 'The Mystery of Easter' rather than the 'Mystery of Lent'. Easter gives meaning to the period that precedes it, just as Easter gives meaning to the life that led up to it, so his sessions take us through the life of Jesus: his birth and growth; being lost and found in the Temple; his baptism; the desert experience; his healing and teaching; his Passion; his death and continuing story.

You could use those headings for your own work with the children, or pick headings of your own for the life of Jesus, or you could use the 'Godly Play' approach, as outlined in Jerome Berryman's book:

The Complete Guide to Godly Play, vol 4, Jerome W Berryman, Living the Good News 2003

Resource Section P1.22 – Schemes of Work ages 5-14

MOVING IMAGES

The desert experience is a time and place of transition to better times and places ahead. This feeling is captured in some of the imagery which can be associated with the movement from Lent to Easter:

Drought to running water = moving from Lenten wilderness to Easter baptism.

Ashes to fire = Ash Wednesday to Pentecost

Making the desert bloom = death to life = tomb to resurrection

This transition between opposites is captured in two famous prayers:

*Where there is hatred let me sow love
where there is injury, pardon
where there is doubt, faith
where there is despair, hope
where there is darkness, light
where there is sadness, joy.*

*Lead me from death to life
from falsehood to truth
from despair to hope
from fear to trust
from hate to love
from war to peace*

**Both these prayers use six pairs of opposites. Perhaps you could structure six sessions around the opposites in one of the prayers, taking a pair a week and exploring the way that we can start to make the transition in our own lives, in the lives of our communities, our country and our world
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