From Liturgy to Life – Leader’s Notes

# Week 2: Holy Conversation

Each heading below relates to a slide

## Prayer

## Bible and News

Someone – I think it was the Swiss theologian Karl Barth – said that Christians should pray with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other. I want to go further than that. Part of what it means to be a disciple is to read the news – to respond to the news – with the stories and teachings of Scripture in our heads and hearts, and to hear the Bible read with the news and events of daily life on our minds. What does this story mean for the world we actually live in? What’s the right thing to pray for? What’s the right thing to do?

## Two calendars

Another way of putting that is to think in terms of a tale of two calendars. We superimpose the calendar of God’s story onto the calendar of daily life. In the past, quite a lot of our daily calendar was influenced by the church’s story calendar, but increasingly Christmas and Easter are resembling the smile of the Cheshire Cat left behind after the body has become invisible. Reminding ourselves of the ongoing story of salvation takes more work than before.

## Our annual calendar

You may or may not have seen this way of thinking of the calendar before. Rather than a single year, this shows two seasonal cycles, the Christmas and Easter cycles, floating in a sea of green, of Ordinary Time. Broadly speaking, at these times of year we might think in terms of the story of salvation setting our agenda more heavily: this is where we need to make time to prepare, to set aside time to celebrate, to renew our grasp on the deep themes of our faith.

Then there’s ordinary time. The Roman Catholic church (and the original version of the lectionary we use) doesn’t go in for naming these Sundays as “after” or “before” any particular Sunday like Trinity Sunday or Pentecost. It just numbers them as Sundays of Ordinary Time. While those who work out lectionaries need to know the details. Most of us don’t. I think you have to be pretty far gone before you say to yourself on some Wednesday in July – oh, yes, today’s the 6th Wednesday after Trinity. No in ordinary time we tend to take our orientation mainly from the diaries and calendars we all follow. Ordinary time is when we probably need to be much more attentive to how we bring our faith to bear on the agenda set by work, family, community and common life.

And let’s not forget the circle round the outside that goes with the ordinary run of calendar dates. The commemoration of the saints is part of our ordinary calendar.

## Holy companions

It’s worth saying a further word about the saints: there are countless ways in which we have to work out what it means to live as a Christian here and now. The saints provide examples of how some people have worked that out in their situation. In the centre, in an age when all theology was written by men in Latin, we have a woman, probably forced to it by her lack of formal education, becoming the first theologian to write in English, and to write a very different kind of theology that continues to inspire people 600 years after she died. On the right, the figure of Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan friar, who sheltered Jews from the Nazis in his monastery until it was shut down and he was sent to Auschwitz. There after an escape attempt, the commandant selected a random 10 men to be starved to death. one of the selected men, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out, "My wife! My children!", Kolbe volunteered to take his place, and died there. Gajowniczek and his family were alive and present in 1982 when Pope John Paul declared him a saint. Finally, the most complicated – for some a martyr, for some not – on the left, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who felt compelled by his faith to join a plot to assassinate Hitler and resist tyranny, and was executed for it. There is no one way of following Christ, but there are countless examples and in the lives of the recognised saints we see some of that variety. A better knowledge of how some other people have followed Christ can sometimes fire our imagination for what it might look like for us to follow Christ more faithfully.

## Groups

Spend a couple of minutes making sure you all know each other.

How do you balance the Bible and the News, the sacred and secular calendars, in your daily life and in your prayer? Who are the examples who inspire you? There will be no reporting back of this session, treat what is said in the group as confidential to the group, but make any notes you find helpful. *(12 minutes total)*

## The pattern of readings

It’s worth noting that the principal service lectionary originates in one that was designed as a lectionary for the Eucharist. That means that the gospel reading is really the dominant one. What was new in this lectionary was the introduction of Old Testament reading and psalm (think back to the way the BCP only gives you an epistle and gospel at Holy Communion).

The gospel is dominant both because Jesus is seen as in some sense present in the stories about him, and because he is the heart of the scriptures.

## Relating the readings

The psalm is always chosen to respond in some way to the Old Testament reading (or in Eastertide, the reading from Acts that takes its place). The Old Testament reading is always chosen to link in some way to the gospel – sometimes because of a traditional interpretation, sometimes because it is directly quoted in the gospel. It’s worth noting that this is the most direct example of what is true of much liturgy: we respond to Scripture in the words of scripture. God helps us shape our conversation with Godself, by giving us words to inform, shape and create our prayers, as well as many examples of prayer.

This means that the New Testament reading floats free of the others. One practical consequence of that is that if you are going to omit one of the readings, the New Testament one is the easiest to leave out, if both preacher and congregation want to make sense of how the readings fit together. On the plus side, that ensures congregations get to be familiar with some of the Old Testament. And the Old Testament covers a much wider range of stories about the world, and what it means to live in the world, and the psalms offer us some strong ways of praying about the things that go wrong in life. On the negative side, it means the parts of the Bible that most directly wrestle with the problems of how churches live out (and more often, perhaps, fail to live out) what it means to be a minority faith in a pluralist culture – those parts can get left out.

## Other provisions

If one of the potential gaps is that we don’t look enough at the letters, and the struggles of working out what it means to live as a minority faith in a pluralist world, another is that the lectionary doesn’t include topical preaching. It may be helpful to take advantage sometimes of the flexibility that Ordinary Time brings. The provided examples in Common Worship are all interesting, but perhaps we need to let the world’s topics set the agenda sometimes, and select biblical passages to help us think about them. I note that this departure from the lectionary is not for individuals to decide, but for incumbent, colleagues and PCC to plan carefully where there is good reason. There’s no reason you can’t suggest it to your vicar, though. Quite a lor of the time we need to recognise that we come to listen to the texts of the Bible with some very different questions about life in a post-industrial, post-Christian globalised media-rich world, which would never have occurred to the writers of scripture.

## A word about creeds

In some ways the creed can seem a bit of an odd imposition to a service that would flow naturally from readings to sermon to prayers. So how can we think about its role? I’m going to suggest five possibilities: It offers us a way of responding by recommitting ourselves to our faith. It gives us a framework for reading the Bible. Like some psalms, rehearsing what God has done and who God is, is a form of praise. The readings and sermon may have only focussed on one aspect of faith – the creed puts that into a broader context. It also gives us a way of checking whether the preacher is a heretic!

## Groups

How easy do you find it to relate what you read in scripture to our society, and life today? What helps you? What makes it difficult?

If you were to ask for a series of readings and sermons that would most help your church engage with your community (parish, town, village, city) or help you engage with your workplace, a volunteer activity, or daily life, what would the topic(s) be? (15 minutes)

(If on Zoom, note your group number, and be prepared to report back briefly to the whole learning session.)

## Prayers

When it comes to the prayers, there are two conventional patterns that are often used. The main one printed in the Common Worship Eucharist has an order church, world, local community, those sick or in need, those who have died. The alternative pattern, which owes something to the way earlier prayer book revisions drew on the old BCP *Prayer for All Sorts and Conditions of Men* goes world, church, individuals. It seems to me that there’s an advantage sometimes of starting with the world, and its needs, rather than diving straight in with our own needs as church.

## Things we pray for

There are a number of things we pray for regularly: Parliament, the Queen, doctors, teachers are examples that come to mind

## Things we don’t pray for so much

A huge number of occupations tend to be unmentioned. Dock workers, checkout staff, taxi drivers, refuse collectors and so on, If we don’t bring the daily world of thousands into our prayers, how will we find ways of making God seem relevant to their daily lives and occupations?

## St Evagrius

A fourth century saint born in Turkey who moved to the Egyptian desert to be a monk, Evagrius said this “If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian.” I hate to mention the T-word, but it seems to me that this is where all Christians actually do that thing called theology: simply by asking what are the right things to pray for.

In our prayers for others, and especially for the world and for society, that means finding out what’s going on in our community, keeping up with the news, learning what jobs people do, what fills their lives, what needs to change for their job to be fulfilling, for their pay-packet to be sufficient, for them to feel valued and appreciated for the work they contribute to society.

Just think about your daily routines, whether at work, out and about in the community, or at play and rest. How much of that gets a mention in the Sunday prayers of the church? Or indeed, in our own prayers? To put it bluntly, if we don’t speak to God about what’s going on in the world, how will we know how to share God’s love with the world, or put it into word and action in our everyday life? We’re back in a sense to where we were last week: seeing that worship or prayer, and mission, are two sides of the same coin, two lungs of the body of Christ.

## Groups

So, how well do you think you connect prayer and daily life, a) as a church at prayer and b) as an individual at prayer. What sorts of things could you do as a church community to bring a wider range of topics, occupations and needs into the prayers of the church? What sort of difference do you think that might make to the way your church then goes out to engage others. Bring at least one suggestion for improving the range of your church’s prayer back to the group. *(15 minutes)*

(If on Zoom, note your group number, and be prepared to report back briefly to the whole learning session.)

## Prayer

If on Zoom, invite everyone to unmute and join in the final response.