

Suffolk Postcards : Leader's Notes

Introduction

Postcards encourages conversations between the Gospel and Suffolk today. The six Gospel readings for Sundays in Lent (Year B) are paired with pictures of Suffolk, with related material for discussion, reflection and prayer. It is available as A5 cards and A3 posters, and electronically on CD or via www.stedmundsbury.anglican.org

How to use it

Postcards can be used in a variety of ways, not just as a Lent course. Feel free to 'mix and match', dip in, adapt and add to it. Eg you could

- *Display posters and prayers weekly on the church notice-board*
- *Use the prayers in intercessions on Sundays*
- *Spread all 6 sessions across a Quiet Day/Parish Away Day*
- *Project a picture onto a big screen in church and preach about it*
- *Use the material in a school assembly*
- *Give each congregation member a postcard a week to take home*

Pictures and Bible

Some links between Suffolk pictures and Bible texts are obvious; for others, you may have to work a bit harder! When putting pictures and texts together, these are some of the themes we had in mind, but you can of course make any connections you wish:

- 1 *Beginnings...Launching out...Risk...Adventure...Discipleship*
- 2 *Cost...Sacrifice...Loss...Hope for the future...Witness*
- 3 *Church...Discontent...Change...Holiness...Faith in action*
- 4 *Love...Suffering...Parenting...Generations...Loving communities*
- 5 *World...Work...Mission...Serving God...Fulfilling the task*
- 6 *Travelling...Pilgrimage...City...Celebration...Friends and allies*

Being a Leader

To lead a *Postcards* group, you don't need lots of knowledge, just the ability to get people relaxed, talking, and keeping fairly well to the point! Ensure all have a set of *Postcards*. Go with the flow, as long as people are talking about things which matter to them, and no one or two are dominating. You can take turns to lead if you prefer.

For the conversation between the Gospel and Suffolk to work, you need to attend to each of them. It does not matter which you start with, but both are important. The *Talk about...* and *Pray for...* points are there to help you. You need not cover them all, and should not feel bound by them if other or better questions occur to you.

Looking at the pictures

If you need help to get into a picture, below are some prompts. But you could just let people look, maybe chat in 2s, and see what they come up with. Don't be afraid to allow time to look and ponder.

Try asking 1 or 2 of these questions about a picture:

Is this bit of Suffolk familiar or strange to you?

What is it like to live, work or visit here?

If you were there, what would you see/hear/touch/smell/taste?

How would it have looked 10 or 20 years ago?

How might it look in 10 or 20 years from now?

What connects it with other parts of the world?

What does it say about life in Suffolk today?

Looking at the Bible texts

Postcards does not expect or need you to do detailed Bible study. There are brief notes on each text at the back of this booklet to which you may like to refer, and of course the Sunday sermon will probably help. See also under *Resources* later in this booklet.

The important thing is to encourage everyone to listen to the text with fresh ears and respond to what they hear it saying. Reading a familiar Bible text in a different version might be enough to get people's imaginations and ideas flowing.

Below are more ideas you might try to help you engage with the text, whether using *Postcards* with a group or on your own.

Swedish method

You each need a copy of the Bible text to write on (all the same version), and a pencil. Read the passage aloud slowly. Ask people to take time to reflect and to put

- * by what they think are the most important bits
- ? by bits that are puzzling or they want to question
- 💡 by especially illuminating or penny-dropping bits

After 5-10 mins, take the symbols one at a time and share what people have marked that way and why. With a lot of people, you can work in pairs or small groups. You learn a lot from each other.

Share the Gospel

Ask people what Gospel message they hear as the text is read: perhaps *encouragement? challenge? promise? judgement? comfort? warning?* Then invite them to speak the Gospel they have heard, in a word, phrase or short sentence. It might be fruitful to try this with a church congregation, especially one with a good mix of ages.

Meet the people

This works with a text with several characters in it. Allocate/choose a character each and 'be' that person in your imagination as the story is read aloud (repeat the process, each taking a different character, if there's time). This gives you a 360 degree view of the story. Share thoughts, feelings, questions and insights that arise. If you have a lot of people, then *groups* can take on a character.

Benedictine method

A way of praying the Bible, based on the ancient *Lectio Divina*, for individuals, or groups comfortable in silence and relaxed about time. It has 4 stages. *Lectio*: Read the text silently or aloud, once or twice. Individually, note a phrase or word that gets your attention. *Meditatio*: Silently, chew that phrase or word over; see what ideas, pictures, other texts etc it gives rise to. *Oratio*: turn your meditation into prayer (perhaps aloud, if with a group). Finally, *Contemplatio*: rest quietly in God's presence. See www.valyermo.com for more details.

Timing a group session

You may be using *Postcards* over 6 group sessions of c.90 mins. You could perhaps start or end with a simple lunch. A session could go:

- Arrivals. Welcome & Introduction. Opening prayer. 10 mins
- Look at the picture 15 mins
- Look at the Bible text (*or look at text, then picture*) 15 mins
- Discussion using *Talk about...* 35 mins
- Silence/Shared reflections. Prayer using *Pray for...* 15 mins

You could adapt this for groups in church in the sermon slot.

Bible version

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You can use a version other than NIV in church or with a group. *Postcards* works with any Bible version. Sometimes it might be good to read a familiar passage in a version you're not used to, or use Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, or *The Dramatised Bible*.

Resources

For Bible texts: John Fenton, *Finding the Way through Mark/John*; Tom Wright, *Mark/John for Everyone*; *The Oxford Bible Commentary*; New Jerome. For more on Suffolk, see Suffolk County Council website www.suffolk.gov.uk especially under Environment / Facts & Figures. Suffolk Observatory site www.suffolkobservatory.info is good for local information; you must register, but it is quick and free.

Prayer

Prayer points and a short prayer accompany each text and picture. You can use them in church, with a house-group, or individually at home; print them on the pew-sheet, etc. Feel free to adapt them.

These prayers might also be useful, eg to open or close a session:

1. Dear God,
prepare our hearts and minds as we sit down together.
Help us to be open to you and to each other;
show us your vision for our church and community;
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
2. God our Creator,
when you speak there is light and life;
when you act there is justice and love.
May your love be present in our meeting (*or worship*)
so all we say and do may be filled with your Spirit. Amen.
3. Heavenly Father,
you see how your children hunger for food, fellowship, and faith.
Help us to meet one another's needs of body, mind and spirit,
within the love of Christ our Saviour. Amen.
4. Almighty God, we thank you for the gift of your holy word.
May it be a lantern to our feet, a light to our paths,
and a strength to our lives.
We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
5. May this Lent be a time of risk as never before:
the risk of being still; the risk of listening;
the risk of being vulnerable, and open to the touch of love;
the risk of meeting Jesus
as he walks the roads and streets on his way to Jerusalem;
the risk of following him; the risk of trusting him;
the risk of calling others to his cross and to his empty tomb.
Lord, set us free this Lent to be your people, your church. Amen.

Sources: 2, 3: New Zealand Prayer Book; 4: Common Worship; 5: Roots.

Bible Study Notes

(1) Mark 1:9-18

Try to read Mark's accounts of Jesus's baptism and temptation on their own terms, without importing details from the other Gospels.

Mark says nothing of Jesus's birth (just that he came 'from Galilee'). This opening section of the Gospel introduces Jesus as God's Son, empowered by the Spirit (v9). John is not said to have recognised Jesus as the 'more powerful one' he had foretold, and it is unclear if the voice (v11) was heard only by Jesus. The important thing is that Jesus is declared to be God's Son, in terms which the OT uses of God's relationship with his beloved Israel (Exodus 4:22, Deut. 1:31, Hosea 11:1).

Like Israel, Jesus is tested in the wilderness, 'sent out' by the Spirit ('sent out' is the forceful word used when Jesus drives out evil spirits). This Gospel describes Jesus's ministry as a battle against evil powers, whether they speak through the

'possessed' (as in 1:21-34), or a disciple (see Postcard 2). This conflict begins here. Jesus's authority is shown in his implied resistance to Satan (v12-13) and in people's immediate response to his call to follow (v16-18).

In these stark, energetic verses, Mark not only tells how Jesus began his ministry, but also shows his readers (or hearers) what discipleship is like. The temptation story shows God's work involves risk, discomfort, conflict, and God's protection: wild beasts *and* angels. Disciples share Jesus's struggle with evil forces opposed to God. They have to make life-changing decisions - to 'repent' (v15), to travel - 'follow me' (v17), and to 'leave' old securities (v18).

What kind of Christian community lies behind Mark? We can't be sure. But these verses would have challenged and encouraged them. They show you can't be a Christian and remain unmoved, or unmoving. So begins a Good News story which has no end because it continues in the life of disciples today.

(2) Mark 8:31-38

This passage comes at a turning point of Mark's Gospel. Until now, the focus has been on Jesus's energetic, controversial ministry. From now on, it is on the Cross. This is the first of 3 'Passion predictions' that Mark attributes to Jesus, each linked with teaching about discipleship (see 9:31, 10:33-34).

The declaration of Jesus as God's Son at his baptism had led to conflict with Satan in the wilderness (Mark 1:9-13; see Postcard 1). So here, Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ again leads to conflict with Satan, who speaks, ironically, through Peter (8:33).

Jesus addresses 'the people', not just the close circle of the disciples (v34). So his words clearly extend to Mark's fellow Christians, and other followers of Jesus after the resurrection. The setting is Caesarea Philippi, Gentile country, site of a sanctuary of Pan, god of mountains, forests and fields, linked with fertility. Is this location significant?

The key paradox is about 'saving' and 'losing'. There can be no true 'life' (salvation) without 'death' (the Cross, renunciation of self). 'Renounce self' (v34, NIV) is better than 'deny himself' in some other versions. It means not being ruled by self-interest - more drastic than the limited 'self-denial' of giving up chocolate for Lent. The Cross reminds us of Jesus's crucifixion, though that is not actually mentioned in the 3 Passion predictions.

Jesus is uncompromising. His clarity is more than Peter can bear (v32). We remember that the Twelve did not follow Jesus when the test ultimately came. For Mark, there can be no half-hearted disciples, or divided loyalties. His play on 'life' and 'save' in v35-37 is worthy of John's Gospel! The passage ends darkly on a note of judgement, though the angels (v38) remind us of the angels who cared for Jesus in another conflict with Satan (1:13). Does Mark want to encourage those suffering for their faith, or to jolt over-comfortable Christians out of their complacency?

(3) John 2:13-22

John's Gospel has a different timetable from the other three. The 'cleansing of the Temple' comes in all 4 Gospels, but in John it is set near the beginning of Jesus's ministry, while in the others it comes at the end and triggers Jesus's arrest.

The point of John's story (like the preceding Sign at Cana) is that Jesus and union with him supercede what was given by the Temple and all it stood for. The next chapter makes a similar point, in a private not public event, when Jesus is visited by Nicodemus, a sincere but perplexed Jewish ruler.

John's 'cleansing' is a Passover story (v13), like his feeding of the 5,000 (6:4), which has many ideas in common with 2:13-22. So both cleansing and feeding are linked with Jesus's death and exaltation, which also take place at Passover (13:1).

John works on different levels. While the general point of the story is the inadequacy of the Temple and its worship in the

light of the access to the Father offered through Jesus, the basis for Jesus's violent action is unclear. Selling animals and birds for sacrifice was normal. Money changers were there because people could not use coins with the Emperor's image in the Temple court. This was well-regulated in the time of High Priest Caiaphas, when the Temple was still being built (see v20). Perhaps Jesus's protest was similar to that of the OT prophets, who condemned outward piety when it went along with inward faithlessness or lack of discernment.

John wrote before Christians had churches or clergy. He seems familiar with baptism and eucharist, but how far he or his community had a sense of 'Church' beyond themselves we can't say. Their experience was unlike ours in many ways. But the challenge for us and them, and Jesus's hearers, is how to distinguish love of God from love of aspects of religion which, though sincerely meant to point to God, get in the way, and so have to be demolished for people's faith to grow.

(4) either Luke 2:33-35

These two short readings need to be seen in their contexts.

Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles. Luke-Acts, beginning in the Jerusalem Temple and ending in Rome, tells how the Gospel spread beyond Israel into the Roman Empire.

In Luke 2:22-38, faithful Jews Simeon and Anna recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of their hopes. He is light not just for Israel but for the world (v32, familiar from the *Nunc Dimittis*), the goal reached in Acts.

Yet as we see in Acts, this revelation of God is divisive. It brings pain, to those who are judged, to the child and to his mother. Simeon's words to Mary (v34-35) are discerning, unsentimental and Scriptural (eg Isaiah 6:9-10, 8:14, 49:1-7, 53:3). At the end of Acts (28:26-28) Luke will return to this theme. The Lost Child story which follows in Luke 2:41-50 gives us insight into Mary's pain. But Luke also tells us in Acts 1:14 that Mary was among the first members of the Church.

(4) or John 19:25-27

These verses, unique to John, have inspired many rood screens and moving works of art. The four Gospels differ over who was at or near the Cross. John does not call Jesus's mother Mary here, or in ch.2. Tradition identifies the Beloved Disciple with John, pictured often as a youth in contrast to an elderly Peter.

We naturally ponder the grief of Mary and John at the loss of their son and friend, and Jesus's care for them even in his dying moments. But the evangelist probably intends a broader meaning. At the Supper (chs 13-17) Jesus had said that his 'going away' would bring his followers into a new relationship with him and with each other, based on a love which transcends earthly ties and shares in the love between Father and Son (see especially 15:7-17).

Now this is embodied for the first time. Mary and John are the beginnings of the Church, a new community, across 'natural' boundaries, rooted in the love that flows from the Cross.

(5) John 12:20-33

This is a tricky text. It seems at first like several unconnected sections. The story (v20-22) of Greeks who 'want to see Jesus', words preserved in many a sermon, seems unresolved.

The key is Jesus's statement 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified' (v23), ie for his death. But the Cross is the means by which salvation is offered to *everyone* (v32). The Greeks (some versions say 'Gentiles') were proselytes visiting for Passover. So they represent the 'world' (in Greek, *kosmos*) which God loves and Jesus came to save. But this same world has to be judged, its ruler expelled (v31). Now the Greeks have arrived, the final act can begin, fulfilling the purpose of Jesus' work (v27).

Jesus's words in v23-26 resemble Mark 8:35-38 (see Postcard 2), which also has a Gentile context and comes on the threshold of the Passion Narrative. Saving/losing life, the world's sinfulness, God's glory, costly serving and following,

occur in both texts; 'will be ashamed' (Mk 8:38) mirrors 'will be honoured' (Jn 12:26).

John's Gospel is deeply ambiguous about 'the world'. It is the 'world' that God loves, and into which Jesus comes, fully sharing our experience (1:14, 3:16). This Gospel shows the truth about Jesus *through* the things of this world: wine, water, bread: the work of the shepherd; experience of illness, birth and death; the power of light and darkness in our lives. Yet the 'world' hates Jesus and believers (7:7, 15:18, 17:14) and breeds misconceptions and ignorance (8:15, 23, 16:8, 17:25). This ambiguity reaches a climax in the talk between Jesus and Pilate about kingship (18:33-38).

But 'worldly' life is the only one we know, this side of death. As John emphasises, this 'world' is where we can know God and choose to love and serve him in our lives, work, relationships - or to ignore him. And as Philip and Andrew find, it is this same needy, enquiring 'world' which gives us the opportunity to share in God's mission.

(6) Mark 11:1-11

Jesus's entry into Jerusalem is in all the Gospels. As with other Mark texts, we need to read his account without letting later Gospels' stories (or church traditions) get in the way.

Other Gospels see Jesus as claiming by this action to be the Messiah/Christ, a claim which is recognised by the crowds. In Mark this is not so; he omits the key proof-text (Zechariah 9:9) which links the riding of a donkey with the Messiah's coming to Jerusalem.

There are several puzzling features. People waved green branches at the Feasts of Tabernacles and Hanukkah (or Rededication of the Temple), not Passover. Maybe pilgrims, near the end of their journey, were just celebrating a Festival, not acclaiming Jesus as king; though the carpeting of the road may show some kind of recognition of Jesus's status, as it was usual for pilgrims to walk, not ride. Mark seems to make 'Hosanna' a cry of praise; it literally means 'Save now!'

In short, the precise meaning of the event at the time is unclear. Maybe it is inseparable from the meaning it had for Mark. Just before, Jesus had been called Son of David (a messianic title) by a blind beggar whom the crowds, ironically in view of the noise they make later, had tried to silence (10:48).

Jesus now nears Jerusalem, on what is explicitly part of the same journey 'on the road' (10:32, 10:52). The story has typical Marcan motifs: an enthusiastic, but only partly-comprehending crowd, and the meaning of the unfolding events being clear to outsiders like Blind Bartimaeus, and to those who know the story's end and read it with the eyes of faith.

'Journey', being 'on the way', are always significant in Mark. Jesus's followers literally walk with him, at times terrified (10:32). Some, like Bartimaeus, meet the challenge. Others, like the rich man (10:17-22), cannot. Only the women make it all the way to the Cross (15:40-41).

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