



Practical input

1. Telling the whole story – teaching about justice at every age

This article is part of a series of resources exploring the relationship between worship and justice and how this specifically applies to children, young people and all-ages together. (Find the others, podcasts and more at www.thesanctuarycentr.org-whereworldandworshipmeet/everysage or www.rachelturner.org.uk)

Like the other practical input sheets in this series, it is structured in two parts. The first provides a brief teaching overview on values, and the second explores practical approaches for parents and leaders to explore in order to apply these principles.

The big questions:

Is the great commission for children too?

Is there a minimum age-limit for talking about issues of injustice and suffering in our world?

Should or can we expect young children to understand injustice?

Is it appropriate for young people to be exposed to knowledge about difficult things in our world?

How do we balance making our children feel safe with teaching them that following Jesus means reaching out to those in need – in service and sacrifice?

Part 1 – Value input:

Have you ever had the experience of watching a book you love adapted for film... and being disappointed or angry? Perhaps the ending was changed, or a key character of sub-plot left out – or perhaps even worse – added in. You knew that there wasn't going to be time for every detail or word that you loved in the book. But this is different. You find yourself feeling cheated – the story is simply not the same.

There is a difference between telling the whole story and every detail of it, and we need to be very careful that we remember this when we are teaching children and young people the truth of the gospel.

We can't expect to cover every intricate nuance of Jesus' imagery in the parables, or to present the full implication of Paul's theology and how it relates to the Jewish foundations of Christianity. But children of every age need to be taught the whole truth – the key elements which make it the same story that they will hear again and again as they grow older, and journey deeper into as they mature in their faith.

It's fine for a ten minute line-drawing cartoon of a beloved story to convey less detail than a feature-length film in HD with amazing special effects. But if the cartoon doesn't contain the pivotal characters and plot which are present in the film, then it simply isn't telling the same story.

Do we end up inadvertently lying to kids by not telling them the whole story?

The problem is that sometimes breaking down the whole gospel story is difficult – and so we find we end up missing out key elements rather than trying to find ways to translate them into simpler concepts. We decide to add them in

later instead. It sounds a harmless enough distinction, but the results are significant; many children growing up in the church are effectively experiencing a shifting, rather than a deepening, narrative.

Very few of us would ever agree that we shouldn't tell children the truth about God and his love for the world. But because of a right desire to simplify things, or to keep our children safe by only thinking about positive things, we can find ourselves missing out some crucial elements.

We tend to focus so much on telling them that God made the world and them; that he loves it and them; and that they can know him and his love that we neglect to also emphasise that the world is fallen, that each of us sins, that there are huge injustices in the world as a result; and that part of knowing God is joining in with his redemption work of changing us, others, and his world, to become more like Jesus, and his kingdom.

If we are honest, most of us shy away from talking about the reality of poverty and inequality; hunger; exploitation; illness and prejudice in our world today when we are teaching children about God's world. And, even if we do, we tend to present this as something that is simply there – something that we would much rather they stayed away from, rather than engaged with.

Does this matter? Isn't there time to tell them about this later, when they are a bit more prepared for the world and can better understand concepts like sin and injustice?

We believe it does matter. Drip feeding detail is a great and completely correct principle, but we must ensure that we aren't drip feeding crucial elements instead – facts that when they are left out, in effect actually change the whole story of the gospel we are telling.

The three-fold negative effects of not telling the whole story

1. Children aren't attracted to a gospel with all the adventure taken out of it.

By telling children only a sanitised version of the gospel, we risk inoculating them to the whole thing, because we reduce it to something so much smaller, and less attractively transformational than it really is.

In *The Sacred Romance* John Eldredge describes the Christian life in the form of allegories and terms such as 'quests', 'beauties' and 'heroes'. Very much like the much older *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, Eldredge creates a sense of the Christian walk as a heroic adventure – with a key purpose that every believer must fulfil, with real enemies and opposition to contend with. He calls it "a story big enough to live in".

Our children and young people live in a big world that has been made small. They are exposed to possibilities; information; and experiences that they would have never have had, even half a generation ago. The world – with its joys as well as its dangers – is literally on their doorsteps. And the story that God invites them to live in – his story – where his purposes and their destiny are intertwined – involves this whole world.

We explore this theme in more detail in our second article, *Learning the way of love – establishing purpose at every age*, but in brief, sometimes, we can end up reducing this story to keep our children safe. The result is a major narrative shift – all the power and adventure is gone. Suddenly, despite the fact the gospel contains the biggest character imaginable – God himself – and takes place literally on the world stage with the whole of creation involve, God's story becomes small... almost stifling. It is limited only to passive emotions or good behaviours, rather than as the inspiration and power behind a generation of history-makers determined to stand up for the truth of the gospel, and transformational love in action.

How can we trust God to keep our children safe, and be brave and determined enough to tell them the whole story?

2. Children are troubled by how their experience relates to what they have been taught

Missing out elements of the story that we consider “troubling” for children doesn’t keep them safe. It simply sets them up for disappointment.

If we have only told them that they are loved, special and that God wants only good things for them (all of which are true) but have not prepared them for how those truths interact with the reality of the world, they can feel completely shaken when they begin to experience circumstances and knowledge which are in tension with this. And if we answer their questions with new conditions, permutations and “key elements” of the gospel that we have previously not mentioned, they can feel cheated or tricked.

Whether it’s injustice, exploitation of power or pain they are witnessing in the world, or experiencing themselves, constantly having to shift and re-balance truth and experience that appear to contradict each other becomes too hard for many of our young people.

Children struggling in this way have four options – they can press forward and adapt to each successive “new” version of the story; retreat further into the safety of Christian sub-culture; seek to deny the tension and operate in two parallel realities; or choose a different story to be part of. Sadly many of them choose to retreat from the world, or abandon God.

How can we find a way to root our children in how much they are loved; recognise that not every detail of our world’s brokenness is appropriate for them to learn about; but still tell them the same story from start to finish?

3. The gospel itself is being reduced

Lastly, but in many senses most importantly, we are in danger of reducing Christ’s gospel, which we have been charged to preach in full.

If we create an over-emphasis on some elements of the gospel as being more foundational than others, we can lead to a misunderstanding of faith, or a skewed practice of it – i.e. a sense that following Jesus is all about feeling loved, or all about just “me” and “him”.

Many of us have become aware that our faith has become over-individualised in recent years, and so it is no surprise that the way we teach those we wish to protect and nurture the most, can become the place where this over-emphasis is at its most extreme.

Christians are called to have a personal, intimate walk of faith – to know that they are loved, and to pursue a deeper relationship with God. But loving others, and acting to promote justice, peace, and the increase of God’s presence and kingdom in every context we are in (home, school, community, nation and world) is not an add on doctrine that we should teach children when we decide they are old enough to proactively tackle the world’s brokenness. It is absolutely core.

Jesus answered the question ‘What is the greatest command’ with ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength’ but he did not finish there – he went on to summarise the rest of the law as ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ – neighbour here literally meaning anyone you have anything to do with. To Jesus, expressing love for God is inextricably linked with loving others. Ignoring, or retreating from, the suffering and injustice in our world – whether in our family, on our street, or in a different continent, is simply not an option. Multi-directional love is at the very centre of the Christian faith. (See *Learning the way of love – establishing purpose at every age* for more on this.)

So what is the whole gospel?

We need to ensure that we find ways to frame the whole gospel to different ages.

At every age, we need to translate the gospel story into language and concepts that children can begin to understand. We find using the following five points, which are inspired by the structure and content of John 3:16, a helpful way of making sure we are telling the whole story:

1. God is love. He made all things from his vast creativity and love, and created man and woman to love him back and to love all those around them. God loves and fully knows each individual – us, and everyone else.
2. But the world and its people chose, and keep choosing, to separate themselves from God. Instead of loving him and loving other people we choose to love ourselves; our stuff; getting our way, and only the people who give us what we want.

This makes us move further away from God and further towards evil. Even people who try to love God and other people do this sometimes. It isn't good for us, or for other people. And it affects decisions and the very way we build society because if people in power act this way it has even more impact. It creates lots of bad things in the world such as people in pain; people not having enough to eat; people being treated badly just because of where they live or what they look like; people being isolated; or people trying to fix things themselves with things that don't work but simply make them sadder or more selfish.

This separation between the world's way and God's way is so big that some people don't even believe he exists anymore, especially when they look at the mess we have all made.

3. These things are hard but we don't need to be afraid or give up hope because God is bigger than all of them. Through Jesus, and what he did for us when he died and rose again, we have a way back to love and the relationship with God, and other people that he intended at the start.
4. Knowing God and being his friends, means we can love him; be forgiven for all the bad stuff that gets into our hearts; and love other people again properly. And if we follow him he invites us to work with him to help us, other people, and the whole world, move away from evil to good. That means working with him to share his story with others; stand up for what is fair; care for the poor and hurting; pray for others; be generous; and much, much more.

He gives us his power through his Holy Spirit to join with him in putting love at the centre of everything again. All of that bad stuff in the world is being changed. None of it is as big as God, or beyond being changed by his love as we join in with that work. No one has gone so far that they can't come to know God again.

5. And one day, when Jesus comes again, the whole world will be completely good and loving again and there will never be anything else that gets in the way of us loving God and each other.

We believe this is the whole story. It's still not the full story – there is a lot of depth still to come – but there are no nasty surprises left for later. There is also a clear sense of the purpose of humanity – to love God, and live in community, and of the abundant life Christians are called to in loving God, and working with him to change themselves, and the world.

There will be better ways to summarise, translate and explain the whole story for different ages, backgrounds and personalities – but it's important to ensure that none of these core elements are missing.

And once they are in place, we can begin to unpack specific issues surrounding the world's injustices as well as more personal sin, and how we can be agents of transformation – gradually filling in more detail, as appropriate for different ages. (For an example of how to do this, see *Appendix 1 - Filling in the detail –Starting to unpack outward focused issues across the age groups.*)

Redefining 'age-appropriate'

Are all justice and outward-focused issues age-appropriate? What we are suggesting is a redefinition of the term "age-appropriate" to focus around approach rather than content.

We have established that injustice, and our role in combating it, is a crucial part of the whole story of the gospel. Similarly, when choosing what elements of need or necessary change to focus on, we should be comfortable with taking the same kind of approach. I.e. it is important to present a wide range of justice content from the start, but in ways that are safe, healthy, and accurately paced for the children at each stage in their emotional, physical, and spiritual development. We can then build in the detail of these things later. (See *Appendix 1* for examples.)

We believe this is a much more helpful approach, both for children, and for the centrality of these issues to God's heart, than selecting "age-appropriate content issues" which can lead to us avoiding difficult issues, or stopping at a tokenistic stage where we feel we have ticked off having an outward focus because we talked about fair-trade or explored raising money for a school in Africa. Instead, we need to build a deep understanding in children of how they can partner with God to restore right relationships, particularly because at any one time there may will be children in our churches who are experiencing poverty, pain, or injustice themselves.

Part 2 – Doing things differently

Families

- Do a family assessment:
 - Do your children know the "whole story" of the gospel?
 - What areas on the chart in *Appendix 1* are you and your family particularly passionate about? Are there other areas that you want to explore, or feel strongly about? What are you already doing that you can discuss with your children?
 - What areas on the chart are the next areas that you feel you would like to fill in more with your children? How will you take that step?
- Watch a movie, television show, or read a book with your children that highlights a particular area on the chart. Discuss how they feel about the issues; chat about how the characters responded, and what you would have done in the same situation. Talk about God's character and heart about that issue*, and spend some time reflecting together and in prayer about anything God would like you to do next as a family to grow in that area.

* You will probably find it helpful to first look at the third article in this series, *Exploring the word on justice – reading the Bible at every age*, and at the Sanctuary's *An overview of the Bible, justice and poverty* resource (available to download at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles in the workshop notes section).

Children's work

- Do a ministry assessment:
 - Are you teaching the "whole story" of the gospel and proactively tying in different stories and topics to this?

- What areas are you and your church particularly passionate about? What is your church or group already doing that you can tell your children more about, and/or include them in?
- Looking at the chart in *Appendix 1*, what areas are the next ones that you feel you would like to fill in more with your children? How will you take that next step?
- Also spend some time surveying your curriculum:
 - Have a look at your curriculum. Does it shy away from justice issues when covering key passages?
 - Are there any adaptations needed to make your curriculum more fully reflect the “whole story” instead of treating suffering, justice, love in action or evangelism like add on topics?
 - Are there any areas on the chart of justice issues in *Appendix 1*, or in the “whole story” of the gospel which are not being covered?* How might you bring these through?

* You might find it helpful to first of all read the “note on content versus application” on page 4 in the third article in this series, *Exploring the word on justice – reading the Bible at every age*.

Youth work

- Divide the group into pairs and give them some time to practice telling the story of the gospel – ideally against a time-limit set by a stop-watch or the time it takes for a match to burn. Bring the group back together and get them to tell their versions to each other and compare and contrast the different themes that come through. As a group plan a version which includes all the key elements of the gospel story and then get the pairs to practice this new version together.
- As a follow-on to the above activity, or as a stand-alone session, encourage your group to explore different analogies and/or creative media for telling the “whole story” of the gospel. Give them time to work on developing these symbols in art, song, drama, dance, craft or creative writing, as different ways to communicate, and remember, the key elements of the gospel.
- Spend some time looking at the chart in *Appendix 1* and the content of the third article in this series, *Exploring the word on justice – reading the Bible at every age*. Consider which topics on the chart, or scriptures, relate to different curriculum topics, or areas you have been planning to cover. How can you weave them in to standard curriculum, as well as handling justice as a separate issue?
- Plan a session, or series of sessions, on justice issues. Have an initial discussion about what causes injustice and evil in the world, and work through the different areas from the chart in *Appendix 1*, looking at what the Bible has to say about how God views these issues and our role as Christians in response to them * and working through specific, modern applications of them. Try to discern what issues or areas individuals in the group feel strongly about, and then ask them to lead sessions, or shorter input talks, on these issues and why they feel so strongly about them.

* You will probably find it helpful to first look at the third article in this series, *Exploring the word on justice – reading the Bible at every age*, and at the Sanctuary’s *An overview of the Bible, justice and poverty* resource (available to download at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles in the workshop notes section).

All-ages together

- Take some time to assess key tellings of the gospel story – particularly at key occasions in the church year, such as Christmas and Easter. Are you covering the whole story with children? How can you build on what you are doing to help children understand as much as possible about all the key elements of the gospel?
- Do a drama of the “whole story” or create a tableau/series of pictures for each of the main points as you tell it. Hand out large pieces of paper A3 size with “Why?” written on one side and a statement about a justice issue written on the other. Have a child or adult read “Why” and the statement on the other side and then place it at the appropriate place up front explaining why that statement is linked to there. (For example for the question “Why does God care so much about the poor?”, the participant would put it by the picture/tableau at the beginning, explaining as they did– “because he loves each of us so much, and them as much as me”. Or for “Why does God want me to protect people?”, the participant would put it at the picture/tableu near the end, simultaneously explaining that “God wants to change the world with and through us”.)

A note on the particular strength of handling the “whole story”, and justice issues, with all-ages together

All-age settings provide a brilliant platform for exploring justice topics with everyone, as part of the “whole story”, while being able to add more detail and depth for the older ones.

Allowing younger children to overhear a number of things that they recognize a little bit but are being exposed to at a higher level of detail, implication or application is healthy. This fosters curiosity and an understanding that there is more detail to come in their faith.

Jesus taught in parables, symbols and metaphors because being beckoned into a story – even if you don’t understand it all – has incredible power. He was also seeking to develop seeking hearts that would look and listen for him. Children too will grow in their desire to know more, as well as their knowledge, when they are exposed to more detailed teaching on a subject they understand the foundation of.

We should be comfortable with accepting that our children are on a life-long journey and part of the wonder of this is the mystery and the massiveness of God and his story – let’s allow them to see how big it is by not reducing it.

Equally, looking at these issues in a way that is appropriate for all-ages helps the whole community move forward. Sometimes breaking the story down more simply helps adults re-connect with the power of the story, and their purpose in it. Similarly, parents can have a framework to build on with their children, and are able to follow-up on issues that might be particularly sensitive for their child.

Appendix 1

Filling in the detail –starting to unpack outward focused issues across the age groups

The following table is not designed as a comprehensive guide to the range of issues you should be covering and/or as the definitive language to use when doing so. But we hope it will begin to unpack some of the issues, and illustrate how different elements of the justice aspects of the whole story can be developed and built on as children grow older.

Once you have got used to the approach, try mapping out how you would tackle other related specific issues such as brokenness and a sense of being trapped; persecution and wrongful imprisonment; hunger; illness and slander.

Topic	Children		Youth	
	Under 5's	5-11's	11-14s	14-18s
The church's mandate to give and receive love	<p>God made you and me to be his friends. But he also made us to be friends with each other. God asks us to look after everyone with him by doing loving things for each other. Sometimes we are the people giving; sometimes we are the people getting. Both are good because God wants us to share. That's what it means to be a family.</p>	<p>God made us to love him and each other. Jesus came to show us how to love God and each other. God wants the church to be like the biggest and best family you can imagine – giving and receiving help to and from each other, and working together to help anyone who is in need but not part of this family yet, too.</p> <p>Giving and receiving can sometimes be hard for us to do because they both mean letting go of being in charge of what we have or do. But God's Holy Spirit can help us do these things because he is a never-ending source of love and power.</p>	<p>The centre of walking out our faith is to love God and love others. Loving others is not limited to helping people in the church, but the church is supposed to be like family – recognizable to people outside it, by how loving its members are to each other, so we should be looking out for each other in every way we can.</p> <p>The early church provides us with some amazing examples of what this looks like – what would be the equivalents of these in our culture?</p> <p>At different times, or in different areas, of your life you will be in a position where you have resources to give, and needs that need to be met. The more we follow God, and the more we let his Holy Spirit change us, the more we will be happy to give, and receive, rather than just provide for ourselves. We are all part of a family where every member is needed, and staying connected to each other is really important.</p>	<p>God wants us to love him, and follow him more closely, but we're not designed to walk out our faith on our own, or in isolation. God designed us for community, and the church is like a family, or a body where we come together because we can achieve more that way than we could on our own.</p> <p>When have you experienced receiving help from Christians? When have you given help to Christians?</p> <p>The early church did some pretty amazing things to look after each other – taking God literally about sharing their resources with each other. They gained a reputation for loving each other like no one else did. Is that the reputation the church has today? How can we be better at giving and receiving love from each other, and then using this secure family as a base for bringing those currently outside of it back in?</p> <p>Each part of the body is vitally needed – we are all different, and all have a role to play in giving to each other, and those outside of the church, and also in receiving from each other</p>

<p>Justice (and mercy)</p>	<p>God is the perfect decider, and always knows the perfect right and what is wrong. He loves rightness and wants every person on earth to have good and right done for them, but sometimes people choose to not do right for each other. Sometimes some things that are very unfair happen to people. God’s heart is sad and angry when this happens. He is upset for the people who are treated unfairly, and upset for those treating them badly because acting this way is bad for them too – he wants to forgive them and change them because he loves them too. We get to help God bring rightness when unfair things happen. We can say “Hey - unfair!” so people notice, and we can look for unfairness to help make right in our families, friends, and world. We can pray for people who do bad things and try to still love and forgive them so that we show them there is a better way.</p>	<p>Everyday God’s heart aches at the unfairness that happens in our world, as it hurts and squishes people’s bodies and hearts. He is particularly sad and angry when he sees people suffering because other people have treated them badly and unfairly. His love is so huge that he is concerned about the effect on the person who has been unfair, as well as the person who has been unfair. He wants to see the situation transformed so that the unhappy person can be helped, and the unfair person can change. One big thing God asks of us is to watch out for those that are having unfairness done to them and to stand up for them and help bring rightness back to their situation. This is easy to do sometimes, when we really care about someone, but can be harder when we don’t know the person affected so well, or when standing up for them might make us look bad, or weird to others. What’s almost always hard is to love the person who has been unkind, and to want God to help and forgive them too. But this is what God does, and asks us to do. Who in your family, friends, school or church is having unfairness happen to them? Who elsewhere in the world is having unfairness happen to them? What is God doing about all these things? What does he want you, and others, to do with him about it?</p>	<p>God is completely good. The Bible talks about him as being just and righteous. How would you explain justice to someone? Where do you see justice in the world? Where do you see injustice? What situations of injustice do you feel most strongly about? How do you think our understanding of justice differs from God’s definition of it? Jesus told us to love others and that sounds great until you realise that he also said love our enemies. Throughout the Bible, we are told to share God’s heart and act on behalf of all who are exploited or treated unfairly – and yet we are to forgive these people too. This is hard to do. Sometimes standing up for someone is hard too – especially if it’s against someone popular or powerful. It might even get us into trouble. Sometimes we need others to stand up for us too. What situations do you know where injustice is happening, and where God might be asking you to partner with him in standing up for someone or something? What might the cost be? Are you ready for that?</p>	<p>too. For us, justice can be a difficult word, because it is tied up with our human understanding of right and wrong, which is often subjective. But God’s justice is perfect because he is completely good, and knows what is right perfectly. He is rightly angered when he sees people treated unfairly. His heart grieves for the people suffering, and also, for those who are acting wrongly too. He calls us to be people who care about justice and mercy – we are to champion what is right and oppose what is wrong; to act for a fairer world at every level; and to have mercy on those who are in need, or are being exploited. But, crucially, we, like God, must be characterised by love, forgiveness and grace. Our justice must never put rules above people, or seek revenge in recompense. This is hard – but it is only a fraction of the grace that God has already extended to us in Christ. Are there issues we need others to stand up for on our behalf? Who might God be asking us to stand up for? What might the cost of doing this be? Are we ready for that? What “enemies” do we struggle to love because what they have done to us or others? How can we partner with God in building a more just world, full of mercy and grace.</p>
<p>Spiritually</p>	<p>God wants to live everyday</p>	<p>God loved this world and its people so</p>	<p>God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, Jesus Christ, to lay down his life</p>	

<p>lost</p>	<p>super close to his children, but some people don't even know who he is or all the wonderful things about life with him. Can you help people see and know how close God is and how much fun life with him is?</p>	<p>much that he gave up something super precious to him (Jesus) in order to provide a way to do life forever with Him. There is so much in life that only God can fix, that we can only get through with God whispering in our ear and giving us his gifts. There is so much joy, fun, peace, and power with God in our lives, but so many people don't even know it exists or don't know how to get it. You are called to help people connect to who God is and what life can be like with him.</p>	<p>(and rise again) for the sake of us, and restoring a relationship with us. This relationship between man and God is literally the most important thing in life – it is what we were created for, and without it nothing makes sense. When we don't have it, we chart our own course in life, making selfish decisions which affect ourselves and others badly – and we miss out on the most precious thing in life – knowing God. Personally this leads to problems, and corporately it leads to even bigger problems. We all need to return to God, and have a right relationship with him – so we can experience life as it should be now, and for eternity, and so we can partner with him to transform his world. God asks us to partner with him in making him known to people who are still far away from him. There are many things we can try to do well in our own strength – but it's only through living in relationship with God, and following his way, that people, and the world, can be fixed. Who might God be asking you to share your faith with? What might be the cost of doing this? Are you ready for that?</p>	
<p>Poverty</p>	<p>Some people don't have enough, and don't get to have food, toys, or other things they need. God made enough for everyone and wants to help these people. He gave us the important job of taking care of those around us who don't have enough. We can pray for things to change, and help this change come by being generous with what we have so they can have what they need.</p>	<p>We may come in contact with people every day who are in poverty and whose needs aren't being met. (We may experience this too.) God provided, and continues to provide, enough for everyone, but people don't always live by his rules and so there are people and places that don't have enough. This means that there are people very close to home, and people much further away who have a lot less than others, and many who don't really have enough to survive. God is already loving, blessing and working to change people's lives, and we are called to partner with him to meet those needs. We can pray for change, and be part of bringing change by giving out of our generosity, and encouraging others to do so. Often, particularly in other parts of the world, people are poor because rich</p>	<p>What do you think poverty means? Who is poor? Whether it's some people who are struggling in the UK, or whole communities in poor countries round the world who don't have enough to eat or drink, poverty is one of the biggest things wrong in our world today – and most in contradiction with God's plans for us. He made plenty for us to live on, and designed us to share what he made with each other. Is this what it looks like today in our community? Many of the very poorest people in the world are in this situation because of others' greed, and because of unjust laws and practices that rich countries and companies have put in place to make them still more rich and powerful. Wherever we see poverty, we don't have to accept it. Instead we should ask God what he is doing, and how we can partner with him in changing it. If we are experiencing it</p>	<p>Poverty is a complicated issue – but one thing we can be sure about is that it is definitely not part of God's plan. God made a world with enough resources for everyone; and throughout the law, prophets, and New Testament teaching by Jesus and the apostles he has charged us to protect those who don't have enough, and ensure that they do. Poverty is a relative concept, which many of us will experience at some point in our lives. Who in our schools, communities, or country are poor? How might God be asking us to reach out and help them. In a global society we need to also remember the people we don't see, but who are affected by our choices every day. About a fifth of the world's population live in extreme poverty – the problem is big and the reasons complex, but nothing should stop us from praying, and acting for change. Just as he always has, God is building his kingdom of love and justice – where the poor are provided for – in our world today. He is</p>

		<p>and powerful governments and countries make all the rules to make them more money. We can pray for this to change, and speak out against it.</p> <p>Who or where is God asking us to invest and sacrificially give to meet other's needs and help them build better futures?</p>	<p>ourselves we can pray for God to change that and ask for help from others in the church. If we see it in our communities, we can pray, and work until that changes. And even globally, we can pray, speak out, and give to work for God's kingdom of love, mercy and provision.</p>	<p>doing this through miracles of transformation, and generosity. And asks us to partner with him.</p> <p>We need to pray passionately, give sacrificially, and campaign for change wherever people's lives are being seen as less valuable than profit, or power by companies, countries, or individuals.</p>
<p>Defending the weak</p>	<p>God loves every person, and has a special hug for those who feel small and weak. Sometimes people need to be protected and rescued when they feel small or weak. Do you know what that feels like? How can you say "stop" and protect people who feel small and weak to help them feel God's special hug?</p>	<p>God has a deep heart for the weak. He draws close to them, protects them, encourages them, and lifts them up. He looks for us to do the same, to match his heart for guarding and defending those who are at their weakest. When do people need defending? Who do you see in your family, friends, schoolmates, community, world who need child of the king defenders to protect them?</p>	<p>God is amazingly big and powerful but he cares about each one of us. In his Word, again and again, we hear about how he sees each tear fall, and how his heart breaks for the poor and the weak.</p> <p>Weak means lacking in strength, and therefore vulnerable – both in terms of how difficult their current situation is, and in terms of how much they might be at risk of this being exploited by the strong and powerful .</p> <p>In the culture of Biblical times this was often used to refer to people who could not support themselves, or were missing key family support structures to step in and defend them – e.g. orphans; widows; foreigners or sick people. These ideas were closely related to other categories such as the voiceless or the poor.</p> <p>Who might it mean today? (All the above plus perhaps the elderly; the unborn; the disabled etc.)</p> <p>When in our lives might we be weak?</p> <p>God is defending us and these people already, and asking us to partner with him by praying for them, and speaking up, or acting, in their defence.</p> <p>Who might he be asking you to defend?</p>	<p>Many issues are used to describe God which talk not only about his power, but about his desire to use this power to protect, rather than dominate, people. He is Father; a righteous judge; Saviour; Comforter and Defender.</p> <p>As Christians, through the power of Holy Spirit, we are called to become like Christ – so we are called to partner with God as he saves, comforts and defends.</p> <p>What does it mean to defend? What is the role of a defender in sport – who or what are they defending, and what do they do in order to achieve this?</p> <p>Who in the world today particularly needs defending?</p> <p>Who in our society today needs defending?</p> <p>How do you understand "weak" in this context?</p> <p>In many ways all of us are weak – and at different times in our lives we need defending – either in words or actions. But some people are particularly vulnerable because of their circumstances. In the Bible, God is particularly concerned about sick people, widows, orphans, and foreigners . Why would these people have been weak in that culture? Why might they be weak in our culture? What modern versions of these groups of people do you think exist?</p> <p>Who might God be asking you to help</p>

<p>Loneliness and the foreigner or stranger</p>	<p>God wants everyone of his precious children to feel loved by people and to have friends. But some people don't make friends well or feel lonely or new. God has given people a special power to help lonely or new people feel like they belong. What person needs a friend like you?</p>	<p>God made people to be with each other, but some people for many reasons feel alone, lost, and uncomfortable.</p> <p>For some people this is because other people see them as different or less special and decide to leave them out of things.</p> <p>God loves everyone and made everyone as a special, and different reflection of a different part of him. In fact, he has a special place in his heart for anyone who has been left out, or made to feel too different.</p> <p>If you are every feeling lost, new or left out, ask for God to comfort you, and to send friends.</p> <p>And be ready to be a friend to different people too.</p> <p>One of the most powerful life-changing things we can do is welcome a lonely or lost person and be their true and faithful friend. It can be a big risk, and can cost you something, but changing someone's life is worth it.</p> <p>Who might God be asking you to befriend?</p>	<p>How important is being accepted to you? Have you ever felt left out, different or simply the new kid? Have you or your friends ever experienced bullying?</p> <p>In the Bible God talks a lot about looking after, and including the stranger, or foreigner – often it's translated as alien, but it doesn't mean someone from space!</p> <p>In Bible times, families and communities were even more central to how society was structured, so a foreigner would be isolated and different – with no support structure to help them or gather round them.</p> <p>God knew that these people needed special care.</p> <p>Sometimes, in our image obsessed culture, people who are different, or new, are looked at as if they were from Mars... and sometimes this is because of something more sinister at work, such as racism.</p> <p>Sometimes, we go along with other people's assessments because we want to fit in, or look cool. It can be really hard, and costly, coming alongside the outsider – it might mean we have to become one too.</p> <p>But God, and those who seek to love like him, is always looking out for the outsider – who in your school, community, or in the wider context of this country, or the world do you think is the outsider? How can you partner with God, in prayer and action, to see them included? What might the cost be? Are you ready for that?</p>	<p>defend?</p> <p>When were you most lonely? What does loneliness feel like?</p> <p>One of the phrases often used about Jesus is "friend of sinners" – it sounds quite religious to us, but it's anything but. In Jesus' ministry on earth, his habit for hanging out on the margins of society, and befriending tax collectors, prostitutes and Samaritans was constantly getting him into trouble with the elite religious leaders.</p> <p>But he couldn't have done anything else because God's heart has a particular compassion for anyone who is lonely or excluded – whether that's because of where they come from, what they look like, or what they've done.</p> <p>When you look at the instructions he set out for the Israelites, and his anger as conveyed by the prophets, much of the Old Testament is focused on looking out for the outsider, and specifically, the foreigner – who would not have had the same family support structure as the rest of the community.</p> <p>Jesus takes it even further – he says if you throw a party, don't invite all your friends, because that's what anyone would do.</p> <p>Instead invite the down and outs, rejects and people from out of town...</p> <p>It's a bit like suggesting only inviting people other people hate to your party, or to be your friends on Facebook. Do you think he's serious?</p> <p>God is at work including outsiders right now – directly, and through others he is prompting to partner with him in his work. What might he be asking you to do? What might that cost you, and your friends? Is the potential change you could bring about worth this?</p> <p>Where do you see rejection of the foreigner</p>
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