



On your marks

Ash Wednesday begins the 40 days of getting ready for the events of Holy Week and Easter. This is a time for thinking through what it means to make a lifelong commitment to following the way of Jesus. For adults, it means refocusing our priorities and renewing our commitment to a life of prayer and service, but there's no reason why children can't join with us on a Lenten pilgrimage. They can aim to go deeper with their faith in Jesus through some simple daily challenges involving prayer, giving, going the extra mile and perhaps going without some things as a reminder that God comes first.

This outline could form part of an all-age service on the theme of Lent and/or as a basis for a group session, either with children on their own or with children and adults, exploring discipleship as a family.

Get set

You will need

- Bibles
- Building blocks
- Boxes or old books
- Pre-printed cards showing an outline for a Lenten calendar (see 'Playing with the story' below)
- Coloured pencils and felt-tip pens

The Bible passage for this outline is Luke 14:25-33, in which Jesus challenges the crowds to count the cost of becoming true disciples.

Go!

Background to the story

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, just as we in Lent are on our way towards the events of Easter. On the journey, he begins to tell stories that prepare his followers for what lies ahead. Some of his sayings take on a more sombre tone as he warns them that it won't be easy to stay faithful to him, especially when the pressures of life and temptations come their way. Jesus may have attracted crowds in Galilee, but now opinions about him will be divided: even family members may be set against each other.

Jesus now tells surprising parables, such as the story of the great banquet, in which those whom God has invited to the feast don't bother to come, so the guest list is made up instead of unexpected outsiders from the highways and byways.

During Lent we are encouraged to respond wholeheartedly to the invitation to follow Jesus, but in



this passage we are warned to think before we say our 'yes' to him. Do we know what we're taking on? Loving God first and foremost comes before loving our neighbours - including the members of our own family. Jesus urges us to think very carefully about our decision and to count the cost of following the way of the cross.

This is a call to a radical Christianity, which will turn our lives and then the world upside down and inside out.

Opening up the story

To help everyone into the Bible story, pick up on the two word-pictures that Jesus offers his listeners in the reading - namely building a tower and preparing for war.

Ask for two volunteer groups of about five adults and children together (for example, they could be family groups) and challenge them each to build a tower with Jenga blocks, shoeboxes or a set of old hymn books. Each team should have the same number of building pieces and must complete their tower within a set time limit.

- Whose tower is finished first?
- Whose tower is the most stable?
- Which team took the most time to plan before they started building?

Additionally, or as an alternative to the above activity, read out the following scenario and invite comment as to what would be the best response:

'Your teacher at school or boss at work asks you late in the day to take on a challenging piece of work. It needs to be in by the next morning but it's a much bigger job than you can complete properly on your own before the end of the day, even if you work all evening. How might you respond, while remaining as willing and helpful a student or employee as you can be?'

Relate the activity and/or the scenario to what Jesus says about becoming a sincere and committed follower.

- Are we sometimes too quick to say 'yes' to God without realising just what being a Christian might mean?
- How often do we make a good start at things like prayer, Bible reading or regular meeting with other Christians, but then give up and leave the 'tower' of our faith unfinished?
- If we are taking on a special challenge for Lent, are we prepared to see it through right to the end?
- Are we tempted to exaggerate what we think we can achieve or set ourselves impossible goals, when it would be better to keep things simple and doable?

Telling the story

Retell the story from Luke's Gospel using four visual aids: a large heart (a picture printed from the



internet or perhaps a heart-shaped cushion), a wooden cross, a tower built from wooden blocks, and a crown.

Here is a rhythmical and participative version of the story that you could use. It could be performed as a simple rap. Link each visual aid in turn to the four verses.

Chorus:

Who'll come first and what will it mean
If I stick with Jesus as part of his team?

Verse 1:

Now Jesus said - 'If you follow me,
It's a choice not to take - too lightly.
Love God first - and then the rest,
That's the way - to be your best.

Chorus...

Verse 2:

This cross means death - to selfishness,
Think of others - and yourself less.
Cross out the bad - and do what's good,
That's the meaning - of this piece of wood.

Chorus...

Verse 3:

Plan to finish - what you begin,
Don't stop half way - or just give in.
Be a tower of faith - that's true and strong,
If to God - you would belong.

Chorus...

Verse 4:

Be wise when it comes - to what you choose,
Don't start a fight - you will lose.
Trust in God - who loves you tender,
To God as king - your all surrender.

Talking about the story

Explore with your group or all-age congregation what Lent means to them. For some, the idea of giving up something for Lent may be a new one. Perhaps they have heard about it but are unsure what it is supposed to mean. Others may prefer the idea of taking on something special for Lent - an



additional discipline of prayer, spending longer in Bible study, raising money for a particular mission or aid agency, or perhaps reading a Christian book over the 40 days.

This may also be an opportunity to talk about the origins of Lent and the reason why it lasts 40 days (the number of days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Day, excluding the six Sundays). You could encourage everyone to use this time of preparation well.

In some church traditions, all the crosses in church are covered during this period. The word 'Hallelujah' is not sung or said, so that it has greater depth and meaning when it is eventually used on Easter morning.

Within an all-age congregation or setting, arrange for mixed-generational groups of people to talk together about what Lent means to each of them and how it could be special this year.

Playing with the story

We are used to the idea of counting down the days to Christmas (only so many 'sleeps' or so many shopping days left). Why not extend this idea through the 40 days of Lent and invite groups to create their own Lenten calendar?

Each family group or individual will need a large piece of card with the six days of the week from Monday to Saturday shown in separate columns (although the first column will only have Wednesday through to Saturday). Leave a space after each day, which can be marked as 'completed' as people proceed through Lent.

At the bottom of the card, write a generic challenge for each of the six days of the week, as follows:

- Mondays in Lent - a day for giving something away. What act of generosity will you perform today?
- Tuesdays in Lent - a day for giving something up. What sacrifice will you make for others today?
- Wednesdays in Lent - a day for giving to a good cause. What money will you give away today?
- Thursdays in Lent - a day for giving time to someone. Who will you help today?
- Fridays in Lent - a day for giving space to God. How will you spend more time with God today?
- Saturdays in Lent - a day for giving encouragement to someone far away. Who can you encourage with a call, a text or an email today?

Encourage everyone, particularly family groups, to take up the daily challenges, deciding each day how they will respond to the questions. Throughout the weeks of Lent, this can be a way of getting ready for the events of Easter, when Jesus gave himself up for us.

As you decorate the calendars, talk about what sort of 'giving' you might do each day.

Reflecting on the story



It is clear from the story in Luke's gospel that Jesus is not asking us to do anything that he has not already done himself. He put God first, even though it meant that his family had to come second. Jesus took up his cross, not just at Calvary but daily on his way to Jerusalem. He completed the job of salvation when, on the cross, he said, 'It is finished.' He worked out that the only way to overcome the overwhelming forces of evil against him was to choose not to fight; he won the battle by refusing to give in to revenge and retaliation, and finally he gave everything away out of love for us.

There is a famous prayer for Lent, the [Collect for Lent](#), in the Anglican prayer book. (It's the first prayer on the page that appears when you click the link.) You could make this your family prayer for Lent. For each line of the prayer, use the following simple actions.

1. Lift hands high.
2. Make a circle in the air with both hands, to represent the world.
3. Bow your head.
4. Touch your heart.
- 5 and 6. Shake your head slowly.
- 7 and 8. Hold out your hands to receive.
9. Draw a cross shape on the palm of one hand.
- 10 and 11. Lift hands high.
12. Roll arm over arm to indicate eternity and say 'Amen' with a clap of the hands.