

Journey

*A Personal Exploration
with Peter France*

**GROUP
DISCUSSION GUIDE**
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BIBLE SOCIETY

Journey

A Personal Exploration with Peter France

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Journey

Introduction

At one point in sharing his journey, Peter France confesses his hope that he will help others to find the same destination that he has – “the mind-expanding experience” of a personal Christian faith. Viewers who watch the programmes alone should find fuel for their own exploration of how faith can become real and can be lived out in the modern world. This booklet has been put together, however, in the belief that one of the best ways in which viewers of the series can explore that journey in their own lives – as well as in Peter’s – is through meeting as a small group to watch and discuss the video together.

The discussion guide has been written with three broad categories of people in mind:

- those who are interested in finding answers to the great spiritual questions, and particularly to see how Christianity can help in these.
- those with a Christian faith who want to learn from reviewing how God has been at work in their own lives, listening to what he has been doing in the experience of fellow travellers and looking at relevant passages from the Bible together.
- those who want to appreciate the spiritual questions and search of many around us, and be better placed to help them find a living faith.

This means that the composition of the group can be very varied: committed Christians, open-minded agnostics, or, for maximum discussion, a good mixture of the two! What is important, though, is that the leader has a committed faith and good knowledge of Christianity. Most groups (and leaders!) will also value the input of a second believer to complement what the leader shares.

Lent groups

Journey may also be used by groups of people drawn from various churches in the same area who are looking to follow a course for Lent. It will both (a) help them engage with the Bible and relate their Christian experience to it and (b) be acceptable to people from across the range of church denominations. However, because it runs for *seven* weeks rather than *six*, it is important to note that you will need to fit in one extra session. One way would be to begin a week before Lent begins, while another is to do as some groups already do and have two sessions rather than one during Holy Week.

The sessions

The material supplied is an aid to running a session of around 90 minutes including time spent watching one episode per session. As with all aids, it shouldn't take over! Feel free to fit the length of the session and the questions you discuss to the needs of the group. There is already more material here than you will want to use, so you will need to decide in advance which questions to use and which to leave out. At the same time, you may want to substitute questions of your own if you think they will have more relevance for your group. And while preparation is a key to successful meetings, you will also want to stay flexible enough to respond to questions that arise when you meet.

Each session includes:

Boarding Pass – starter activity to set a relaxed tone to the meeting, start the group interacting, and prepare a base for one of the session's main topics.

The Journey – time to view the video and react to it. I suggest you begin with the group's responses to the programme before using any planned questions.

Highlight Quotes – taken from the programmes, these crystallise points made by Peter and others in the series and may be useful springboards for discussion.

The Guide – the Bible is the basis of belief for all Christians. This Bible-based section shows how the Bible tackles the episode's issue(s). Here it will be helpful for each person to be able to read from a modern Bible translation (for example, Good News, Contemporary English Version, New International Version). For some sessions, *Background* offers help in understanding the setting of the passage or gives a wider biblical understanding of the topic.

Departures – this helps people to put into practice something of what they have learnt. For people who "learn by doing" this is a key activity.

Arrival – a prayer and worship response. Feel free to adapt this if most of the group are not Christians, but still allow some space for prayer. A time for silent reflection followed by a led prayer from you may be appropriate.

The Topics

Some episodes of Peter's journey cover one and others a number of topics. To give a clear focus for discussion, the notes limit each week's discussion to one or two topics. Where certain topics recur in different episodes, they are covered in one episode's notes only.

Leading the Group

Your role is to:

- help people get to know each other.
- help them to react to the programmes and share their experiences openly. Sometimes quite sensitive issues are raised, and here it is important to allow people to take part as much or as little as they want to.
- help the group explore the biblical perspective and clarify it where this is asked for or there is some confusion.
- encourage people to listen to one another's perspectives and avoid pressing their (or your) views on others. The aim is to let them discover the Christian faith at their own pace.
- You will need to do some advance preparation each week. This should include watching the video episode and looking at the questions and Bible passages. For weeks 1, 3, and 6, certain *Boarding Pass* activities require asking people to come with something ready for the meeting. *Boarding Pass* activities for Weeks 3 and 6 will also require some extra preparation by you.

While some viewers may be far into the journey, others may be scanning the brochure, and a third group may be new arrivals who realise that finding faith is the starting point of a whole new journey. Wherever they are and you are, you have the opportunity together to map your route so far and to travel further in your own experience of God.

EPISODE 1

Journey First impressions

Boarding Pass

20 minutes

1. This activity is best suited to a group who know one another a little already. Ask group members beforehand to bring along one or two photographs of family members (e.g. parents, brothers and sisters, friends if family life was difficult) or other mementoes which remind them of their childhood. Invite participants briefly to introduce these people to the group. (Where did they come from? What were they like at that time?) Ask members to say briefly if a religious faith was important to any of these people and, if so, how did they show it? If

so or if not, how did this affect your own views about religious belief?

or

2. If you are new to one another, use a “getting to know you” activity to help break the ice. You could give everyone a slip of paper on which they should jot five things about themselves, e.g. favourite hobby, most indispensable gadget, favourite TV programme, which number child they were in order of birth in their family, a favourite place. Next, everyone mingles and, by asking only one question of a person before they move on to someone else, they should find the first person they can who has an answer in common with them. Afterwards, perhaps do a quick survey of the most popular answers before you move on to watch the first episode of the video.

The Journey (view video)

30 minutes

This episode presents a childhood collage: Peter’s working-class family, chapel-going, childhood wonder giving way to a thirst for learning, and the influence of a remarkable Sunday School teacher.

3. Give time for people to pick up on any points that echoed their own experience or to comment on what they found most interesting or surprising about the programme. Then adapt or omit any questions below which have been touched on in this part of the discussion.
4. Peter mentioned the influence in his village of Sunday School teacher Ada Hopper. What were your group’s earliest experiences of Christianity? (Concentrate on childhood, teenage years and early adult years here.) Were these experiences positive or negative, and why?
5. What was it about Ada that most impressed Peter and what has it been about any Christians the group has admired that has impressed them?
6. For Peter, starting secondary school marked a step away from Christianity, as he followed his ambition to “be clever”. Ask the group to draw individual time lines from age 0 to 18 and mark on these any changes that occurred in their own attitudes to faith.

“I had one big problem: saying the creed.”

“Ada was a thorough Christian in the sense that Christ was alive for her and she was influenced by him daily.”

“One thing had become clear: the intellect is what matters.”

The Guide

30 minutes

Luke 2.41–52

This only known event between Jesus' early infancy and his adult years happened on an annual visit to Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

7. Invite the group to tell you what they know of Jesus' family background in terms of "class" and religious commitment. (Joseph was a carpenter-builder and not well off: Luke 2.24. Their home town of Nazareth was unimportant and not highly thought of: John 1.46. But both Joseph and Mary were devout and took God's instructions to heart: Luke 1.38.)
8. Nevertheless, in what ways can group members see that Jesus the boy was thinking through his faith for himself? (Asking questions of the religious leaders; giving answers that seem to have shown a fuller understanding than their own.)
9. Why do people think the temple visitors and teachers were so amazed at Jesus' insight?
10. Mary and Joseph seem also to have been surprised and annoyed by Jesus' *behaviour*. Who has the group's sympathy in this and why?

Departures

(5 minutes to plan)

- Gather some short quotes from young people (with a tape recorder?) on:
 - a) how well schools help them to think through religious belief.
 - b) how much help the church gives in enabling them to work out their belief in God.

Consider what group members can do to help young people going through the questioning period of adolescence and choosing or rejecting a faith for themselves.

- Try to find out:
 - a) what opportunities young people have to learn about Christianity in schools, and if any Christian individuals or groups visit local schools to help in this. If so, what responses do they receive from the young people?
 - b) if a local Bible Society Action Group exists and has been able to contribute Christian resources to a school.

Arrival

5 minutes

Invite people to picture their own “Ada Hoppers” – people known to them whose faith they have learnt from. Ask them to write their first names on slips of paper. Let them fold these up and place them on the floor in front of the group.

In silence, invite individuals to give thanks for their examples. If appropriate, ask God’s help that group members will share God’s love in similar generous and uncritical ways.

Pray that those people you know who work with children and young people in the Church, will be a window into faith for them.

EPISODE 2

Journey

A world of difference

Boarding Pass

10 minutes

1. At university Peter finds one way in which he can really be in his element. Which are the times when group members feel most in theirs? Ask them to share one or two examples from their work; leisure activities; time spent in company with others.
2. Give out slips of paper and ask group members to mark the point on the following two lines when they would be most happy in these two situations:

a) When doing a task

No real challenge

Stretched to the limit

b) With other people

A deer in the herd

A lion in the bush

(mixing with
your own sort)

(basking in being
that bit different)

The Journey (view video)

30 minutes

This episode follows Peter's arrival at Oxford University and looks at questions of social class, feelings of inadequacy and the limits of where intelligence can take you.

3. Give time for people to pick up on any points that echoed their own experience or to comment on what they found most interesting or surprising about the programme. Then adapt or omit any questions below which have been touched on in this part of the discussion.
4. Which words or phrases that Peter used, speak most clearly of his sense of culture shock at Oxford? (For example, "out of place", "a different species", wanting to "camouflage".) Is Peter on his own in this or can group members identify with these feelings in any way? When have they felt overawed by people or situations, and how did they cope?
5. For Peter, acting and mixing with well-known actors built up his confidence. What has this effect for the group members? Does faith and/or Scripture help and, if so, can they say in what ways?
6. At the end of episode 1, Peter mentioned his belief that "given enough time and enough books [he] could come to understand everything that really matters in life". Do you think his experiences at Oxford changed that in any way? Why, or why not?

"I felt about three feet tall, crushed, humiliated and rather out of place."

"Even the most hardened atheist couldn't spend time alone in this place without feeling the odd twinge of insecurity in his unbelief."

"To be clever meant you rejected things, you didn't accept them."

The Guide

30 minutes

Matthew 19.16-22; Luke 5.27-31, 7.2-10; John 3.1-3

7. What do you notice from the way that Jesus treated all classes and races of people? How does this seem to have been different from the prevailing attitudes of his time?
1 Corinthians 1.10-13; 11.17-22
8. In contrast to the indiscriminating respect Jesus gave to people, in the church at Corinth all manner of divisions – social class included

– were separating people. As a group, tease out the various currents that were dividing Christian from Christian. (See *Background*, below.)

9. With his mining village roots, it was inevitable that Peter would feel Oxford's class differences keenly. Unfortunately, class and education can be a barrier in churches today as they were in Corinth. On a scale of 1–10, how high does your church score at tailoring its activities to people in your area of all backgrounds and abilities? How could it score more highly?

1 Corinthians 2.1-12

10. Read or display the following ideas about the intelligence and ask which one(s) Paul would have agreed with:
 - Use the grey matter God gave you, but see its limits.
 - Close down your brain and open up to God.
 - God's wisdom is better than a library of learning.
 - You need God's wisdom to grasp spiritual things.
 - Peter France's family were right: too much learning does rot the brain.

Discuss the answers people have given and ask if the group can give examples of any ways in which they have been able to make sense of things or see them in a different light because of God's help, as opposed to through using their intelligence alone.

D*epartures*

10 minutes

- Plan a social event for the whole church, such as a sports day, fun day for all ages, "Desert Island Discs", or a meal or walk together. Alternatively, arrange something primarily for newcomers or occasional visitors to church.
- Ask the group to pause to consider whether there is anyone they have been rejecting or ignoring because of prejudice of some kind. Encourage them to decide what action they can take to put this right.
- Consider whether there are groups within your community (perhaps with disabilities, from deprived parts of town or from ethnic minorities) who are being overlooked by the church and community. Could you do anything about these situations?

Arrival

5 minutes

- Read Romans 5.8 aloud. Give thanks that God accepts us, not on the basis of IQ levels or our background, but because of Jesus' life surrendered for us.
- If group members have been thinking of people they need to show acceptance toward, ask God's help to dismantle the barriers.

Background

Trouble at Corinth: Divisions were a big problem at Corinth. "Fan clubs" had formed around favourite teachers who were judged to be the best educated and most impressive. Communion and the meal that usually came before it had become causes of division rather than unity, as well-off people feasted before the poorer ones even arrived.

EPISODE 3

Far horizons

Boarding Pass

10 minutes

To create an appropriate atmosphere, play some exotic-sounding music while people are arriving and chatting. Record stores and many public libraries have examples of world music that would be suitable.

1. Ask if there is anywhere, at home or abroad, that group members longed to visit from a young age. Why that place? Given unlimited "Air Miles", where would they most like to travel to today, and why?
2. As an alternative to (1), ask people in advance to bring along one or two items that make them think of faraway places. (Mementoes, fruit, even packaging are acceptable and need not actually originate in the country so long as they create an idea of it in the imagination.) Let participants introduce their item(s) and say a few words about the magic of their location.

The Journey (view video)

30 minutes

After university, Peter had the chance to travel and follow a fascination with a part of the world he had first become aware of through a

friend's unusual record collection. We see where a pile of odd records can take you . . .

3. Give time for people to pick up on any points that echoed their own experience or to comment on what they found most interesting or surprising about the programme. Then adapt or omit any questions below which have been touched on in this part of the discussion.
4. Often Peter stresses the mind in his talking. Was it this or his heart that took him to Fiji? Why do group members think this?
5. Have any interests or experiences motivated the group, as Wilfred's record collection did Peter, so much that they had to act on them?
6. On the one hand, Peter comments that he thought he "had life worked out" and could solve most problems by thinking about them. Why then do you think he was excited by the search for the "supernatural" in Fiji?
7. Although numbers in the Church in the West are declining overall, most culture watchers think that the last ten years have shown something of a revival of interest in the spiritual dimension of life. What evidence, positive or negative, do the group know of this?
8. What can these interests (for example, in Eastern religions, primitive society beliefs, meditation and self-healing techniques) tell us about the concerns and longings of modern people? Should they influence how we present the Christian faith, for example, where we start or how we tell of our Christian experience? If so, how, and if not, why not?

"If they came to me with their problems, all I had to do was to think about them calmly, rationally, intelligently, and I'd be able to work them all out."

"One of the most exciting areas of exploration . . . is the search for what we've lost by being civilised."

"Perhaps it is possible to be intelligent and well-read and to accept the Christian faith."

"There is a complete mystery for the humanist in unmotivated goodness."

The Guide

30 minutes

Acts 8.5-25

Shortly after the day of Pentecost, Philip, one of seven assistant leaders in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6.5), took the news of Jesus' resurrection

to Samaria, an area isolated from the rest of the country by historic differences. His arrival caused a dramatic drop in support and income for a sorcerer named Simon.

9. What did Philip and Simon have in common? How were they different?
10. What do you think Simon's followers might have had in common with people today who are interested in all kinds of spiritualities?

1 Corinthians 2.14-16; Matthew 22.37; Romans 12.2

Peter France recalled two more blows to his confidence in the powers of human reasoning. We turn up some Bible passages which address the same topic.

11. What hope do we have of proving God's existence and understanding him through human reasoning? According to Saint Paul, what more do we need?
12. How important is hard thinking for followers of Jesus? How can they ensure that their minds are used to draw closer to rather than distance them from God?
13. What were the two realisations that shook Peter's confidence in the intelligence? Are there any arguments for God or our need of him which group members have found make good sense?

Departures

(5 minutes to plan)

5 minutes

- During the next week, ask the group to cut out news stories from papers that
 - a) show current interest in spiritual things that lie outside Christianity;
 - b) point to the reality of God in ordinary people's lives.
- Invite group members to consider finding out how to respond to the tide of "new age" spiritualities in our culture, e.g. by reading *What is the New Age Still Saying to the Church*, John Drane (Marshall Pickering, 1999).
- If you have friends with different religious beliefs, be ready sensitively to bring your Christian faith up in conversation, mentioning special things that happen to you or are going on in your church.

Arrival

5 minutes

- Spread a map on the floor. If your group are well-travelled, choose a world map, but if not use a UK map. In quiet, spend some time thinking of somewhere or something which provoked a sense of wonder and delight (similar to Peter's fascination with the East) in you. Use your imagination to re-experience it. Finish by inviting people to each write a single word prayer on a slip of paper and place this on the map roughly where it happened.
- Have someone read out Romans 12.2 and lead into prayer asking God to give you minds that are both open to the wonder of his world, and open to the control of his Spirit so that you will know his will and concentrate on what pleases him.

EPISODE 4

Quizzing the experts

Boarding Pass

10 minutes

1. What are the group's recipes for happiness? List all their ideas on a large sheet. Then take votes for each answer and see if you can agree your top five.

The Journey (view video)

30 minutes

Peter begins his career at the BBC. It eventually gives him full scope to undam the reservoir of religious questions he has, but leaves him dissatisfied with the answers.

2. Give time for people to pick up on any points that echoed their own experience or to comment on what they found most interesting or surprising about the programme. Then adapt or omit any questions below which have been touched on in this part of the discussion.
3. What insights did the episode give you into the making of factual TV programmes?
4. The "objective" religious broadcasting developed by *Everyman* is now the status quo. Where do you think such programmes fit on the following scale, and why?

Stimulating

Infuriating



"I'd been with . . . some of the cleverest people in the world, and . . . they weren't clever enough to be happy."

"I had a unique talent . . . a complete inability to remember anything anybody told me."

"We wanted you to be our intelligent common man who would . . . ask the kind of questions we felt our audience wanted to ask."

"I was totally open to that change, and nothing happened."

"The supernatural dimension of religion had become so embarrassing to the culture . . . that it had been squeezed out of all the major religious denominations."



The Guide

30 minutes

Acts 17.1-4, 16-34

Like Peter, Saint Paul constantly engaged in dialogue about faith, but from the other side of the table.

5. Paul was one of the early Church's most effective communicators. But how did he go about it? List the verbs and phrases used to describe the methods he used to speak to people in 17.1-3 and 17.17-18 ("held discussions . . . quoting . . . explaining . . . proving", etc.). What seem to have been the keys to getting his message across?
6. Paul's style with both Jews and non-Jews was one of dialogue. The difference, though, was in where he started. Look at 17.3, 23, 28 together to spot his different starting points (see *Background*, below).
7. Peter France was frustrated when those who spoke on the Church's behalf were either evasive or seemed to have jettisoned the miraculous. Do you share his feelings in this? Had Peter been able to interview Saint Paul, how do you think his experience might have been different? (See, for example, 17.3-4, 30-32).

Philippians 2.5-11

A statement of faith used in the early Church.

8. Tease out from this passage the beliefs that the early Christians held about Jesus (he shared God's nature, became a human being, died on the cross, was raised from death, is universal Lord, will be worshipped by all).
9. Some churches recite one of the creeds that were agreed in the fourth and fifth centuries AD week by week. If your church does this, how helpful do you find it? If your church does not, does it

declare its faith in other ways (for example, in the words of songs, liturgy or prayers)?

Departures

10 minutes

- In small groups, compile your own list of the “essentials” of what you think is necessary to believe as a Christian.
- Ask individuals to imagine they had the freedom to meet any religious leader and ask them one question. What would it be? Who would they ask?
- Review what opportunities your church gives for people to ask questions and investigate Christian belief. How could you take steps to improve this?
- Invite a “seeking” friend to the next video, or plan to show the series again later in the year and invite more people from outside the church fellowship.

Arrival

10 minutes

Share some of the opportunities and difficulties you have in answering questions about Christianity that others put to you. Pray for one another, asking for help to listen and understand, as well as to see where others are on their spiritual journeys.

Background

Beginning where they were: In synagogues, Paul began his talks with Jews and Jewish converts by interpreting the Old Testament Scriptures, which they knew well. When he spoke to the educated pagans of Athens, he mentioned their objects of worship (v.23) and cited their writers (v.28). He also drew a contrast with ideas of an impersonal god held by one group, known as the Stoics (v.24), but suggested they were right in believing that God is close at hand (v.28). In both settings he started with people’s knowledge of God so far and tried to take them further.

Journey

Inside the door – and outside

Boarding Pass

10 minutes

1. Break the group into mini-groups of three or four. In advance, write the following definitions on separate cards and give each group one definition:

Health: “A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity.” (World Health Organisation)

Miracle: “Marvellous event due to some supposed supernatural agency; remarkable occurrence.” (Concise Oxford Dictionary)

Ask your threes and fours to discuss how good they feel the definitions are and come up with an improved version of their own. After four or five minutes, they read out the original definitions and present and explain their improved ones.

The Journey (view video)

30 minutes

This episode relates how symptoms of multiple sclerosis led to the discovery of a personal faith for Peter’s wife, Felicia, while Peter’s attempts to follow her floundered and their marriage was under strain.

2. Give time for people to pick up on any points that echoed their own experience or to comment on what they found most interesting or surprising about the programme. Then adapt or omit any questions below which have been touched on in this part of the discussion.
3. Peter reflected, “If the time Felicia had left was to be shorter, perhaps it should be fuller, perhaps it should include a religious dimension.” Were there special circumstances (good or bad) that led group members to look for a spiritual dimension in life, or that led to a deeper faith? Why was it at that time that they took a stronger interest in God?
4. Father Michael described his role in helping Felicia come to follow Christ as a kind of spiritual matchmaker (see Highlight quotes, below). How helpful do you find this as a description of communicating the Christian faith to others (evangelism)?
5. Do you agree that it was more important that Felicia found God than that she received healing? Why or why not?

6. How do you explain Peter's insensitivity towards his wife's feelings about his planned suicide? What was it, do you think, that stopped Peter from taking his life? (Chance? A meeting engineered by God? Realising that it was worthwhile carrying on?)

“She was in and I was out.”

“A sort of an agent . . . a witness or a friend, who would bring together . . . God the Maker and this lovely person who wanted to come to God . . . and be part of his family.”

“The excitement grows all the time. It's like a door opening into an enormous countryside.”

The Guide

30 minutes

Luke 5.17-26; 8.43-48

These passages look at the healings of a paralysed man and a woman whose medical condition made her a social and religious outcast. The miracles show that the biblical idea of healing involves the well-being of the whole person, physical, social and spiritual.

7. What similarities do you see between the story of the healing of the paralysed man and Felicia's healing and becoming a Christian? (The place of friends who brought him to Jesus, the connection between physical and spiritual healing suggested by Jesus' forgiveness of the man's sins.)
8. For Jesus, the idea of “getting well” implied complete well-being, with God, self, and other people, so it is not surprising that the Gospels use the word *sozo* (to save) to mean healing of body or saving the soul. Which form of healing did Jesus give first to the man and why do you think this was?
9. Why do you think the woman in the second story approached Jesus, hoping that she wouldn't be discovered? Certainly any other rabbi would not have wanted to be touched by a woman with a menstrual disorder, because this would have made him ceremonially unclean (see *Background*, below). How does this help you to explain her attempt to approach Jesus unnoticed and her fear when found out?
10. Is God any more involved in “special” healings (miracles) than in “natural” or medical ones? What makes something a miracle? Is it because it goes beyond what we know of the world or because of its timing, for example, in response to prayer? (To show that God uses both usual and remarkable methods to care for us, perhaps

refer to Psalm 147 where God is pictured as the “healer of the broken-hearted”, presumably by spiritual means, as well as the provider of food and rain, by natural means.)

11. What place should prayer for healing have in your life and that of the churches?

1 Corinthians 7.12-16

A passage which highlights the difficulties of marriages in which one person is a Christian and the other is not.

12. 1 Corinthians 7 recognises the tensions that can exist when one partner becomes a Christian and the other continues outside the Church. Paul was writing about a situation in which some of the unbelieving partners were wanting to end their marriages (see *Background*, below). As far as the Christian partners are concerned, what does he say they should do?
13. Peter began going to church to understand what had become so important to Felicia. Did any member of the group begin looking at Christianity because of a partner’s faith? What was the experience like for them?
14. How can the Church do more to help people whose partners are not Christians? Is there more it could do to assist the partner in finding Christ?

Departures

5 minutes

Plan to build your friendships with similar couples/families in which one spouse is not a Christian. Invite the couple (family) for a meal, have a night out together, or consider arranging a girls-only or men-only activity to which you could invite non-Christian partners.

Arrival

5 minutes

Remembering that God is “full of love”, stop to think about all that he desires to do for each of us. Silently bring to God in prayer any people who are sick, who are seeking God or who are going through difficult times in their relationships. Close by thanking God for the fullness of life that Jesus brings.

Background

Under the influence: It’s not clear what Paul meant when he said that unbelieving partners were made “acceptable to God” by their husbands or wives (1 Corinthians 7.14). It may be that he had in mind the Christian partner’s influence or that both partners will benefit from the changes that faith brings to the one who has become a believer.

Ceremonially unclean: The woman’s condition was a menstrual

disorder. According to Leviticus 15.25, this would make her “unclean” and unable to attend synagogue or temple. Anyone who touched her would become “unclean” until evening.

EPISODE 6

Journey

Planted on Patmos

Boarding Pass

20 minutes

1. Either:
 - a) Before you meet, ask everyone to prepare to share a Bible verse or statement or a very short passage (maximum 5 verses) that they find especially memorable (perhaps because of its message or language or because of an experience during which it spoke directly to them). Give each person a brief spot to quote and explain their choices. (This will form a link with Peter’s comments on the power of the words in John 1.)
- or:
- b) Give the evening a relaxed Greek atmosphere. Arrange for the group to bring any photographic books, travel guides, or artefacts from Greece. Display a map of Greece and mark Patmos on it (with a string, removable adhesive dot and label). Try to obtain books showing Orthodox art. Provide or organise some of the group to bring Greek snacks (for example, olives and tahini sandwiches, stuffed vine leaves, Greek yoghurt). Spend the first part of the evening browsing, chatting and munching.

The Journey (view video)

30 minutes

On Patmos, Peter isn’t short of people with whom to discuss Christianity. But it is through examples of “lived Christianity” rather than debate and through the New Testament’s attention to detail rather than its grand messages that he gets nearer to his destination.

2. Give time for people to pick up on any points that echoed their own experience or to comment on what they found most interesting or surprising about the programme. Then adapt or omit any questions below which have been touched on in this part of the discussion.

3. Peter says Patmos is “steeped in Christianity”. Are there any places the group have been to where the influence of Christianity seems unusually strong? Would it be easier to be a believer there than in their home area or country? Why, or why not? Alternatively, are there places where group members feel strongly aware of God? How can they take this awareness out into the everyday world?
4. Felicia “planted” Peter on Patmos so that he could encounter the Christianity of the islanders, its churches and priests in an unpressurised way. Are there any insights from this approach you could use locally to make coming to faith easier for non-Christians?
5. Peter and Felicia mention two groups of believers and one individual who spent time with Peter: the nuns at Evangelismos convent, visiting Serbian theologians and a former missionary, Father Amphilochios. Which of these would you most like to meet and why?
6. Peter explains that his reaction to Father Amphilochios’ words was different from what it might previously have been because now he “was ready for them”. Does this experience ring any bells for the group? How important is it to sense when someone is “ready” to hear the Good News of Jesus?

“My scientific and philosophical rationalism had been dissolved away by the warmth of love and human goodness.”

“You look back at the people who have really impressed you and you find, to your amazement, that the ones who really made a deep impression have a religious dimension.”

“His answer was, ‘I wouldn’t say anything to you. I would be with you and I would love you.’”

The Guide

30 minutes

John 4.1-30

Jesus’ meeting with a Samaritan woman is an eye-opener for both her and Jesus’ disciples.

7. From what you learn in this passage about the customs and prejudices of the time (4.9 and 27) and about the woman’s lifestyle (4.16-18), how did Jesus’ behaviour seem to differ from what might be expected of a first-century rabbi? (See *Background*, below.) What other example of Jesus showing “uncritical affection” can the group think of?

8. Why do you think Jesus mentioned the woman's partner? Why didn't he tell her what to do about the relationship? How important is it to depend on God's Spirit to guide us in situations like this?
9. How did Jesus' uncritical attitude open the woman's eyes to spiritual things?

1 *John 3.11-18; 4.7-12*

John stresses the litmus test of Christian living.

10. What is the clearest sign of Jesus that people can look for in his followers?

Departures

5 minutes

- Suggest that group members quietly consider anyone from whom they have been withholding Christ's love. Allow them a couple of minutes to reflect individually on how they could put this right (a visit, telephone call, changed attitude, practical act?)
- Discuss: what extra things might the group or the church as a whole do to express love and care for one another? For example, to show that people are missed if they are ill or kept away by other pressures.
- Contact Bible Society to learn how your church could become involved in the *Open Book* project, as it seeks to bridge the gap between the Church and the secular world.

Arrival

5 minutes

Bring to God any resolutions and plans you have made individually or as a group. You could say the following prayer together:

May the love of God, who has welcomed us as his children, purify us.

May the Son who makes the Father known, move us to care rather than judge and listen before we speak.

May the Spirit who inhabits and changes us, perfect God's love in us and let it loose.

Background

Breaking down barriers: Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman was surprising for several reasons: the longstanding prejudice between Jews and Samaritans for historic and religious reasons (Samaritans held their own version of Judaism); the fact that other rabbis only taught men; and that although Jesus knew the woman's past and present relationships, he showed her respect.

Journey

Across the threshold

Boarding Pass

10 minutes

Give the group two or three minutes to think of some important changes they have chosen to make during their lives (for example, moving home, getting married). Ask them to pick one change and tell the group what it was, why they made it at that time, and the difference it has made to them.

The Journey (view video)

30 minutes

Peter realises the only way he will ever understand Christianity is to take the step of becoming a Christian. He decides to join the Orthodox Church, but there are two barriers to overcome first . . .

1. Bishop Kallistos sensed that Peter already had the stirrings of a faith and that it was his compulsion to “understand” before he could recite the creed that was holding him back from a Christian commitment. Nevertheless, how do the group react to the offer to say the creed on Peter’s behalf? Why do they feel this way?
2. Are there any elements of Peter’s baptism which the group members envy (as an adult, surrounded by friends, symbolism of rebirth out of the barrel)?
3. Someone has said we should leave our doubts on the shelf and put our beliefs in the centre. What does the group think is the right attitude to doubt? Do they have any suggestions that they have found helpful in overcoming or living with their doubts?
4. Do group members agree that Christian faith only makes sense seen from within? How has their experience confirmed or contradicted this?
5. How have the sacraments of baptism and communion helped people in the group to appreciate their relationship with God? How have they helped them appreciate their membership of the Church and relationship to other Christians? (You may find it helpful to read out the explanation of the sacraments given in *Background*, below.)

“Christianity . . . is a way of life, and you can only see what the way of life is when you come in.”

“The difference between a believer and an unbeliever . . . is that the unbeliever isn’t open to the sorts of irrational elements which constitute reality; it’s . . . between . . . a position which is narrow and a position which is expanded.”

“This is a channel of grace which does something to your capacity to understand.”

The Guide

30 minutes

Romans 6.3-11

Saint Paul explains the changes that baptism represents.

6. What does baptism say about the connection between a person and Jesus? In what ways does it represent the end of one chapter and the start of another?
7. Can any of the group say what led them to the step of being baptised or confirmed when they were old enough to take this decision themselves? What did it mean for them? Does it have any meaning for them today?

Acts 2.22-33 and 2.32-42

On the day of Pentecost when the Church began, Saint Peter told crowds in Jerusalem about Jesus’ resurrection and urged them to commit their lives to him. This commitment was shown in being baptised and joining the Church.

8. According to Saint Peter’s preaching, what was the one thing people needed to do to be baptised (verse 38)? What encouragement is there here that even those with doubts might be helped to believe? (God will give them the Holy Spirit, compare Romans 12.3 and 2 Peter 1.1 which stress that faith is a gift from God.)
9. What do you think the first believers gained from their involvement in the life of the Church (Acts 2.42)? What are the best things that group members who belong to a church have gained from this?

Departures

10 minutes

- Consider individually: is it the “moment of opportunity” for any of the group to become a Christian, to be baptised or confirmed, or to join the Church more fully?
- Discuss: what has the group learnt from sharing in Peter France’s journey and their times together over the last seven weeks?
- Consider: who might members invite to another group showing of *Journey*? Which of them would be happy to come along and help keep the discussions going? Are there any individuals to whom they could loan a copy, and then ask what they thought of it?

Arrival

5 minutes

Spend some time in quiet in which members can consider where they are in their own spiritual journeys. What next step might God want them to take? Suggest that they give themselves to God, recognising that he will accompany and sustain them on the way. Say the grace together as a way of supporting each other on this journey.

Background

Sacraments: The word itself comes from the term used in the Latin New Testament for “mystery”. There it means God’s plan of salvation made clear and possible through Jesus’ coming and through his dying and rising again (see Ephesians 3.3-6; 1 Timothy 3.16). Christians use it today for several services which specially mark the ways God gives his “grace” (his love and resources) to his followers.

In the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches more emphasis is laid upon the services as channels of God’s love, while Protestant Churches place more stress on seeing them as signs of what God has already done. A sacrament is described in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”.

Over time, the Church called a number of other services “sacraments”, though from the eleventh century onwards these were limited to seven. Protestant Churches normally only recognise baptism and communion because Jesus himself commanded these two.

Although all churches teach the need for faith and repentance to benefit from baptism (and the other sacraments), the founders of the Protestant Churches stressed that it is the decisive turning to Christ and committing one’s life to him, even apart from the act of baptism, that brings people into God’s family.

Travelling on

For groups who would like to continue meeting:

Stephen Cottrell, Steve Croft, John Finney, Felicity Lawson, Robert Warren, *Emmaus: The Way of Faith*, Bible Society and National Society/Church House Publishing, 1996, 1998. Five group-based courses (and leaders' support materials) that can be worked through in any order to help both newcomers and old hands explore Christian faith and growth as part of an accompanied journey.

Reading room

John Benton, *Is Christianity True?* Evangelical Press, 1988. A short, intelligent examination of the evidence.

John Finney, *Finding Faith Today*, Bible Society, 1992. Revealing research and moving stories of how adults come to faith.

John Finney, *Stories of Faith*, Bible Society, 1995. Forty stories of ordinary people's journeys to faith, along with commentary and questions for discussion.

Peter France, *Journey: A Spiritual Odyssey*, Chatto & Windus, 1998. The full story of Peter's spiritual search and conversion.

Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life*, Kingsway, 1993. A popular explanation of the relevance of the Christian faith, and the basis of the well-known Alpha course.

John Young, *Journeys into Faith*, Bible Society, 1993. A group study resource for those involved in evangelism, which looks at how the most effective outreach takes place.

Special thanks for comments and helpful suggestions to the groups who trialled this material: Michael Penelhum's house group in St Austell and Geoff Bird's group in Nottingham, and to David Spriggs for reading it.

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