Session Three

We cannot make the world we want

1. Some people hope governments or other organisations will make the world a better place. Others are pessimistic: nothing really changes. Which sort of person are you?

The Christian gospel identifies Jesus as God’s promised son, the one who will make the world new. Where Jesus is, there is the world of health and peace that we long for.

But do we need him? Can’t we make a better world for ourselves? The Bible tells two stories of times when it looked like a new and better society might arrive. Both stories relate to the people of Israel.

The first one was when God created Israel as a new nation, and gave them a beautiful land to live in...

BIBLE READING: from Psalm 106

2 Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wonderful works; they did not remember your strong, faithful love, and they rebelled against the Most High at the Red Sea.

8 Yet God saved them for his name’s sake, to make his mighty power known.

9 He rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up; he led them through the deep as though it were desert.

10 So he saved them from the hand of the foe, from the hand of the enemy he delivered them.

11 The waters covered their enemies; not one of them was left.

12 Then they believed God’s promises; and sang his praise.

[After Israel entered the beautiful land, God asked his people to stay faithful to Him.]

15 ...but they mingled with the nations and learned to do as they did.

16 They worshipped their idols, which became a snare to them.

17 They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons;

18 they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their own sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the good land was polluted with blood.

19 They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves.

20 Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people...

21 He gave them into the hands of the other nations, so that those who hated them ruled over them.

22 Their enemies trod them down, and Israel was oppressed under their power.

23 Many times God rescued them – but they were bent on rebellion, and were brought low through their sins.

24 Yet still God took note of their distress when he heard their cry.

25 For their sake he remembered his covenant, in his strong, faithful love he had mercy on them...

27 Save us, O LORD our God, and regather us from among the nations.

God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, and gave them a beautiful land of their own to live in. But Israel ended up losing that land and being carried away into exile by their enemies.
3. The land of Israel was supposed to be a new and better society in the midst of a very violent world. What went wrong? (verses 35-43)

The Israelite people had a taste of how good the world can be with God at the centre of the picture. But they turned away from God and from the world he wanted.

Much later, Jesus of Nazareth said God had sent him to re-form and renew Israel. He was giving the nation a fresh start. Jesus gathered a group of people to be the core of the new people of God.

BIBLE READING: John’s Gospel chapter 1, verses 35-44

The next day John the Baptist was standing with two of his disciples. Seeing Jesus pass by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus noticed them following him. He asked, “What are you looking for?”

They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”

“Come and see,” he replied.

So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day.

Andrew was one of the two who heard what John the Baptist said and followed Jesus. The first person Andrew told was his brother Simon. He told him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the King). And he brought Simon to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John.

From now on you will be called Peter” (which means ‘Rock’).

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”

Philip came from the same town as Andrew and Simon Peter: the town of Bethsaida. Philip went and found his friend Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, the one the prophets also wrote about — he’s called Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

And so Jesus gathered this new community around him and taught them how to live as God’s faithful people. At the core of that community were twelve leaders, called ‘The Twelve’. Let’s see how Jesus’ project went.

BIBLE READING: from Mark’s Gospel chapter 14

Now the Jewish Passover festival was only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some secret way to arrest Jesus and kill him. “But not during the festival,” they said, “or the people may riot.”

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised him money. So Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over...

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me— one who is eating with me.”

They were sad, and one by one they said to him, “Surely it’s not me?”

“It is one of the Twelve,” he replied, “one who dips bread into the bowl with me. I will go just as it is written about me. But it will be bad for the man who betrays me! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples. He said, “Take it; this is my body.”
Then he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it…
When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.
“You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written:
I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.
Peter declared, “Even if all the others fall away, I will not.”
“Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—this very night—before the rooster crows you yourself will disown me three times.”
But Peter insisted, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same…
Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of Israel.
“Am I leading a rebellion,” demanded Jesus, “that you come out with swords and clubs to capture me?” Then everyone deserted him and fled…
They took Jesus to the high priest. All the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the law came together. Peter followed at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. He sat there with the guards and warmed himself at the fire…
One of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him.
“You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” she said.
But Peter denied it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, and went out into the entryway.
When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” Again he denied it.
After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them: you’re a Galilean!”
He began to curse, and swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about!”
Immediately the rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him: “Before the rooster crows you will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

4. How did people respond to Jesus and his program for a renewed world?

5. Why do you think the Twelve behaved the way they did?

Hatred, suspicion, corruption, greed, pride, violence, fear, selfishness, cowardice, even betrayal – the Bible’s word for this dark side of human nature is ‘sin’. The sobering message of the Christian gospel is that we cannot make a new and better world for ourselves – because we are part of the problem. People are so affected by sin, that we often waste our best opportunities and ruin what we value the most. Sin pushes us away from God and his plan for a good world.

We might not like the thought that we are part of the problem! We may feel that other people are the problem, but we are different. But
remember that Peter also felt that way: “Even if all the others fall away, I will not.”

This painful truth about ourselves is not the last thing the gospel has to say to us! Next week we will see what Jesus has done to fix things.

**Further reading:**

To find out more about what went wrong with the human race, see Genesis, chapter 3-4.