



Through-Life discipleship – Following Christ through the ages and changes of life

Life changes and turning points

The church has had a tradition of marking particular life events in church such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. These are events that mark a transition from one stage of life to another. As we journey through life we experience many changes and turning points; as we leave school and enter the world of work, as we move house or change jobs, or as we take on new roles and responsibilities. These transitions can often be times of excitement which we choose to mark with celebrations but also can be times of heightened stress and anxiety amidst the uncertain future. This session aims to focus and reflect upon the turning points we may experience in our lives and start to explore how we could mark events not traditionally recognised by church.

Starter activity (10 min)



Reflect and discuss: Think back to the time when you left school...

- What feelings does this conjure up?
- Were there things you were sad to be leaving behind?
- Were there things you were excited about and looking forward to?
- What were your expectations?
- Did you have any help or advice given to you in this transition?
- Did you mark the transition in anyway?

Marking the journey (25 min)

When we go through big life changes and turning points, such as leaving school, it can be helpful to mark the event, taking the opportunity to look back and look forward.



Read Genesis 35, in which we pick up the story of Jacob.

Discuss:

1. At the beginning of this passage (verse 1) God instructed Jacob to move to Bethel. Are there times in your life where you have been uprooted and unsettled? How did this impact upon your life? Was it a positive or negative experience?

2. It was a common practice in the Old Testament for God's people to build altars as they journeyed. What do you think is the value and significance of Jacob building an altar/pillar at Bethel (v. 3-7, 9-15)?

3. It might be easy for us to take for granted the significance of a grave-stone when someone dies. What do you think it meant for Jacob to build a pillar over Rachel's tomb (v. 20)?

4. Just as Jacob marked the occasion when God spoke to him at Bethel, what turning points in our lives, which don't already have special church services, might we want to mark?

5. Aside from traditional church worship or indeed building a stone 'pillar' or 'altar', are there other ways in which we might want to mark particular turning points in the life journey?

Worship for life changes and transition points (25 min)

Whether they're religious or not, people have often found it helpful to create rituals to mark, celebrate or mourn turning points in life. (e.g., marking New Year by staying up late, listening to the Big Ben strike midnight, partying and singing Auld Lang Syne. Can you think of another example?)

Worship can offer particularly powerful ways of marking and making sense of the change between one phase of life and the next – for example in baptisms, weddings and funerals, which we sometimes call 'rites of passage'.

But what exactly is a 'rite'? A rite is something which we actively participate in which brings about some sort of change in us. It doesn't just tell us about the change in a passive way but helps us to actively cross a threshold from one stage of life to another. For example in weddings, as expressed in the table below:

| In a rite... | | |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| State | Threshold | State |
| <i>Engaged</i> | <i>Wedding</i> | <i>Married</i> |

For Christians, rites are particularly powerful because they bring our human story (e.g. marry the person you love) together with God's story (God's love for his people through history –the Church as 'the Bride of Christ').

But whilst the Church has a long history of marking some turning points of life with a 'rite', other life transitions have not been paid so much attention. This point is well made by Mark Earey, who writes and teaches widely on worship, and from whose book *Worship that Cares* (SCM, 2012) the following table comes. Mark Earey challenges us to learn from the way Church has traditionally marked events such as baptisms, weddings and funerals, and apply this experience to creating new 'rites' for other life events.

 Have a look at the table on the following page and discuss in your group:

- What other life events/turning points would you want to add to the table?
- Are some life events part of one's spiritual journey and some not?
- Why do you think the church recognises some life events/turning points and not others?
- In what ways could you mark any of these life events/turning points – perhaps thinking beyond traditional rites performed in church?

| Life events routinely marked with worship | Life events acknowledged but not routinely marked in worship | Life events rarely or ever mentioned or recognised in church |
|---|--|--|
| Death Marriage Marriage after divorce Birth of a child Adopting a child Renewing marriage vows Adolescence? (e.g. confirmation) Ordination | Getting engaged Leaving school Divorce Same sex relationships Moving home Wedding anniversaries Retirement Graduation Significant birthdays Redundancy Entering Nursing home | Bankruptcy Abortion Divorce Same sex relationships Miscarriage Release from prison Onset or end of menopause Suicide Suffering abuse |

Where life events fit into the three columns may look different depending on your own church denomination, tradition or community context. To help demonstrate this, the arrows show some of the changes in which life events churches have generally recognised. For example Divorce very much used to be taboo within church, however over time this has softened until the point where now it is increasingly common for churches to remarry individuals who are previously divorced.

Worship that cares: Putting it into practice (20 min)

Have a go at creating a new rite that could address a life event/turning point not already being addressed at your church.

- Think of a life event that your church could easily serve in this way – use the previous table for ideas if you're not sure.
- What would it practically look like to mark or celebrate that experience of life? See below for some suggestions that might help you on your way.

Earey draws out four key elements that build an effective rite:

1. Gathering (Why are we here?) – God gathers us, we tell our story.
2. Word (What does God have to say?) – God speaks to us, especially through scripture.
3. Response (What should we do about it?) – God changes us as we act in response to God's story.
4. Dismissal (How then shall we live?) – God sends us out to put into practice the change we have experienced.

You may want to include some of the following tools in your rite:

- Performative language i.e. when the words you say move beyond words to actually doing something e.g. when you say 'I forgive you' the words effectively express forgiveness
- Symbolic gestures/ actions E.g. at a wedding the bride entering with her father and leaving the church with her new husband or in full immersion baptism signifying dying and rising to new life
- The use of objects as symbols, e.g. giving & receiving rings at a wedding, or the use of oil for anointing, perhaps used at a confirmation or ordination service
- Bringing in both the human story and God's story
- Using music, words and prayers as you would in regular worship services



If you have time, consider what it would be like to imagine the life events already served by your church were not. How would you want to mark and celebrate the events of baptism and weddings, for example, with no knowledge of what is traditionally done?

Worship/Prayer (10 min)

Read together **Psalm 90**. One person in your group could read most of the Psalm and the group could join in the verses and refrain in bold type. You may wish to spend a few minutes afterwards reflecting on how God never changes in the midst of our constantly changing lives.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

² Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³ You turn people back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

⁴ A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

⁵ Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death— they are like the new grass of the morning:

⁶ In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered.

From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

⁷ We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.

⁸ You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.

⁹ All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.

¹⁰ Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,

for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

¹¹ If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.

¹² Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

¹³ Relent, LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.

¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

¹⁵ Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble.

¹⁶ May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendour to their children.

From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

¹⁷ May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us— yes, establish the work of our hands.

From everlasting to everlasting you are God.

To finish you may wish to pray the grace prayer together.

*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all,
now and evermore.
Amen.*

In the week ahead you may want to do some further reading on rites of passage:

Jason Gardner in his book: 'Mend the Gap – Can the Church reconnect the generations?' (IVP, 2008), suggests that there is room for the church to demonstrate the value of ritual and celebrating the journey from childhood to adulthood could be a good place to start.

There is confusion amongst teenagers, and amongst society at large it seems to what healthy growing up looks like. This has come from inconsistent messages in the media and society regarding adulthood and adolescence. In recent times the phenomenon of young adulthood is a well-recognised stage of life. Adolescence has been idealised so that those pre and post the teenage years want to be adolescents, "a period of time in your life in which people get to stay out late but don't have to pay taxes." There is a problem that young adults are now modelling extended adolescence.

The historic boundaries of adulthood: independence, moving out of home, getting married and getting a job are increasingly blurred due to changes in family and economic circumstances in society. Gardner notes "It doesn't help that we have no defined celebrations of childhood's end, only confusing distances between legal acknowledgements of 'adulthood'." At age 10 you can be criminally responsible; at 16 you can get married and have sex; you can join the army at 17; and at 18 you can vote, buy cigarettes, drink and watch what you like at the cinema. Perhaps the thing closest to a rite of passage might be going out to a bar or club for your 18th birthday, although for many this is unlikely their first night of drinking and partying.

Gardner poses the question: "If young people are to acknowledge a shift of roles and expectations on becoming adults, do we need to mark clearly the exit from childhood and the entrance into adulthood?" A helpful example might be the Jewish celebrations of Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah. There is also in Amish communities in North America a coming-of-age experience in which young Amish men and women are allowed to explore the outside world and there make a decision whether to remain in or leave the church and community. Closer to home, there is an example of a church in the North East gathering the family and friends with the coming-of-age boys for an evening of take away curry and prayer to mark the occasion.

Can you think of how you could in church (or even outside of church) mark the transition from childhood to adulthood? It of course begs the question when would be the best time to recognise 'coming-of-age', 12, 15, 18? Furthermore, what do you think distinguishes adulthood from childhood, and is this the same for today's society and culture?