

Matthew's messages of hope

Reflections and activities for no ordinary summer

Recent weeks and months have been unprecedented for our own lives, the life of the nation, the world and the Church. It is into these new and extraordinary times that we send you these resources. As ever, when we turn to the Bible, we can find fresh truths in familiar passages. From the lectionary readings for this period we have focused on four which

offer particular, hopeful themes for us at this specific time. Joel Denno and Becky May guide us through Matthew's messages of hope and how we can respond – both to the Bible passages, but also in faith – to the crisis we have been facing. We hope you find their materials a helpful resource in the coming weeks and months.

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

Hope for families with school-age children

Jesus offers hope instead of anxiety in times of change, teaching us and giving us rest.

Summer's here and the holiday routine has begun, yet as we look back on the past few months, 'routine' is the last description we might use. The rhythms of our lives have been dramatically changed.

Many people suffer from anxiety when their patterns are altered and events become difficult to predict. Yet, here, Jesus also offers hope in times of uncertainty. Jesus says: 'come to me.' If we respond, we will learn from him, finding new ways of being, and we will be able to rest, because he eases the anxiety that comes from change. New ways of living have been revealed to infants, he says, which could mean for us that children and young people will assume leadership roles as the Church moves forward after periods of change and confusion.

Encourage families to reflect on the ways their lives have changed since March, particularly in relation to school. Have these changes made you anxious? How can you come to Jesus so he can teach you and give you rest? How has worshipping at home changed who 'leads' this time?



Group activity for families

Keep a summer journal, perhaps sitting down together to write it, or taking turns. Consider the questions: What things do you do, and where do you go? What are your prayers? When do you feel close to Jesus? What is he saying to you? Stick in mementos and add verses from the Bible that are important to you. This will become a great record of what you learn from God this summer which you can look back on. You can also include details from earlier in the year – this could be an ongoing project.

An activity for individuals

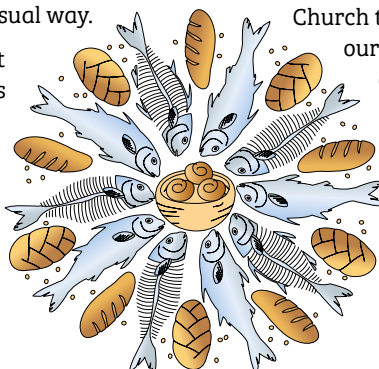
Find a space where you can sit and rest in the quiet with some art materials. What is Jesus saying to you? What does he want you to learn from him? Paint, draw, write, sculpt as you listen. If you find this hard, play some music or listen to the passage on an audio Bible. Breathe deeply and make an effort to pause from activity, and rest with God.

Matthew 14.13-21 Hope for young people

By inspiring a young boy to share his food, Jesus prevents a large crowd from dispersing.

People were shocked when the schools were closed in March and when GCSEs and A Levels were cancelled, depriving large numbers of teenagers from the opportunity to gather together and celebrate their results in the usual way.

Being together is important, which is why Jesus wanted to prevent the crowd from dispersing here. The way in which he achieved this offers hope to the Church that, despite the separation during this year, we can stay together spiritually, even when physical meetings are impossible. What keeps the crowd together is an act of generosity, significantly the response to Jesus of a young person. Our enforced separation has taught us the value of staying together; this passage shows us how we might do this in the times ahead, following the lead of the young, sharing our time and resources with one another.



Encourage young people to reflect on the ways our communities stayed together even when we were forced to keep our physical distance from one another. What resources or ideas is God asking you to share with the Church to keep us united whatever our circumstances? How can you celebrate the transition you have made from one school year to another in a new way?

See 'An activity for individuals' and 'Group activity for young people' opposite.

An activity for individuals

Use a selection of art materials, or online graphics software to make a card to send to someone. This could be to celebrate the recipient, perhaps for something they've achieved that may otherwise go unnoticed, or to encourage them and celebrate what they mean to you.

Group activity for young people

Plan and share a special meal together with your family or friends (in person or remotely, using technology) to mark, or celebrate, the end to a very unusual school year. Choose treats to enjoy, light a candle, dress up for the occasion. Create place settings for everyone with an encouraging message on them. What can you celebrate together at this time? What can you celebrate in each person gathered?

Matthew 14.22-33 Hope for church leaders

Jesus invites Peter to make himself vulnerable as a demonstration of faith.

The life of the Church has changed dramatically this year with rules around social distancing and public gatherings. Change may be necessary sometimes, but it is also frightening, because it can make us vulnerable. None of us wants to perform an action that ends with a cry of 'Lord, save me' issuing from our lips.



However, this Bible passage shows us that when Jesus invites us to 'come', this is often an invitation to vulnerability. Peter demonstrates this when he begins to sink, but he also demonstrates that our hope in these situations lies in keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. We may be called to risky or scary actions, so we must keep looking to Christ so that our faith in him may conquer doubts about our own capabilities.

Encourage church leaders to reflect on how church leadership has altered over the past five months. Has this left you feeling vulnerable, more susceptible to the risk of sinking as Peter did? What are the practical ways in which you keep your focus on Jesus so that you can continue to lead the church in these changing times?

Group activity for church leaders

Take this opportunity to audit the activities of your church. What can you thank God for in the past year and what is it time to call to a close? Where is God at work right now, and what can you continue to do? What new things might God be calling you into and what can you begin to do in the new season?

An activity for individuals

Draw around your foot on a piece of paper or using chalk on a pathway. What step of faith is God calling you to take right now? Say a prayer or write one inside your foot shape, as you ask God to guide you as you take the next step forward.

Matthew 16.13-20 Hope for the whole Church

By recognising who Jesus truly is, Peter becomes foundational in the building of the Church.

Our church communities have had to find new ways of meeting over the past few months; in cyberspaces rather than physical spaces, expressing togetherness in new and sometimes alien ways. This has led to us asking questions about what it means to be Church.

This Bible passage finds Jesus investing his hope in Peter as the rock on which the Church will be built. It's interesting that Jesus' rock was not a rock at all, but a person. Our church buildings, impressive as many may be, are, by way of contrast, not people but merely rocks. Simon Peter was a person, but he was a person who recognised Jesus' true nature; this is what made him a suitable foundation stone for the future Church.



Encourage your church family to reflect

about the people within your church community who recognise Jesus for who he really is. Do we place our trust in them to be foundational in the life of the Church? Do we go to them for help in our own faith journeys? In what ways might this crisis inspire us to put our trust anew in Jesus, rather than in physical buildings or earthly expressions of faith?

Group activity for whole church communities

Share and use the 'Peter the rock' artwork provided (see this page and link on [WEB](#)). Talk about the Church God has continued to build throughout history, but particularly right now, on the rock. Together, show the things you discuss, by drawing simple images, or writing key words on the artwork provided. As you do so, talk about what it means for you to be a part of the Church.

An activity for individuals

Find a small rock or pebble. You could decorate the rock with the name of Jesus as you reflect upon what it means to build your life on Jesus the rock. Keep the rock somewhere you will see it often as a reminder of the firm foundation you are building your life upon.



Joel Denno is a licensed lay minister in the Anglican church. He serves in Old Marston in the Diocese of Oxford. Becky May is a freelance writer and trainer who helps to lead Wixams Church in Bedfordshire.