

Faith in Dark Places

Lent 2017...

This powerful, no frills five-session Lent study material offers:

- * A deeper understanding of the Gospel in its relation to the urgent issues of poverty, justice and equality in Britain today.
- * Dramatic new insights into the life of Jesus in the social, economic and political context in which he lived and died.
- * A deeper engagement with our neighbour, especially those experiencing poverty and discrimination. The startling realisation that the Gospel is not just good news for 'the poor' but good news for the Church from among the poor.

The material is based on the book *Faith in Dark Places* available [here](#) but it is not necessary to have the book to hand. Bible references are included in each session. The five sessions are:

1. The Trouble with God
2. Why Jesus Hated Pain
3. The Problem with Women
4. A Very Alarming Prayer
5. Jesus and the Power of Failure

It can be used in church groups or individually. It also provides valuable sermon material and a resource for prayer groups. It is intended for study in Lent, but it can be used at any time of year. There is no charge for the download and you are free to share it with others.

(The author of *Faith in Dark Places*, David Rhodes, moved from parish ministry to work alongside homeless people in the inner city of Leeds. The book is in large part the result of insights gained from that work and from the marginalised people who befriended him.)

Faith in Dark Places / Week 1

1. The Trouble with God

A rabbi was once asked what he thought of Christianity. Well, it's strange, he said. You seem to treat God like an elderly relative in an old folk's home. You visit him each Sunday and tell him you love him. But then you drive away to get on with your own lives the rest of the week.

The trouble is that God seems unwilling to fit in with that image. Far from being stuck in a retirement home, God is ahead of us in the world waiting for us to catch up. And often he's not in a very good mood. You've only got to read some of the Old Testament prophets get a hint of that: (Isaiah: 32: verses 5-7 and 58: 5-8 and Amos: 2: 6-7)

And Jesus isn't much help either: 'What is the greatest commandment,' he was asked (Matthew 22: 36-40). 'Love God AND...' he replied. And your neighbour. He links the one commandment with the other, as if they are two parts of a whole. As if loving God *must* express itself in love for neighbour, and love for neighbour is an expression of love for God.

And you have the uneasy feeling that love means more than just try be polite to your neighbour. It means to actively seek the well-being, the welfare and the fulfilment of the other. Even the well-being and fulfilment of your enemy (how they must have squirmed with indignation when he gave the example of the hated Samaritan!)

Jesus meant love to be an action, not just a warm, fuzzy feeling: hence the story of the Samaritan. Do it, Jesus is saying. And to hammer it home, he comes up with the story of the house built on rock (Luke 6: 46-49) Most of us think of that story as being about faith in Jesus: but it's about action. It's about those who DO the will of the Father. As we shall see in the weeks to come, a Father fed up with greed and injustice, pain and suffering. Fed up with the lack of love.

So (now for the bad news): if the hated Samaritan was the least attractive neighbour in the Jesus story, who might be the least attractive neighbour for us in Britain today? Who do we look down on and regard as unworthy of our respect and concern? In the popular media, who is it we're invited to disapprove of? Who are the people the Press portray as worthless and almost sub-human?

In the next two pages we are invited to encounter two such people. Real people. One of them is still alive: the other is quite possibly dead by now.

What questions do they raise? What might they say to us of the word neighbour? What may such folk, who are typical of many in Britain today, reveal to us of Jesus in our own lives? Who are they to God? Who are they to us?

Week 1 (Contd)

The Tightrope Walker: (maybe someone could read this out loud)

In a large British city that prides itself on its dynamism and entrepreneurial spirit, there lives a young woman. She had such a damaged childhood that, like many other vulnerable young people who have been abused, she was taken into local authority care. But enterprising men who ran prostitution rackets in the city regularly cruised the neighbourhood where the care home was located. And one day they spotted her. They gave her the thing she craved – attention. And something she'd never heard of: heroin. Then they sent this child out onto the streets to make them money. Somehow she survived her horrific ordeal. Now, years later, she hardly has two pennies to rub together, but she's got a modest little council house and a lovely nine-year-old son. She also has severe depression caused by post-traumatic stress. She has flashbacks of her abuse as a child and frequent nightmares. She has a body damaged by years of sexual exploitation. Her immune system is shot to bits by the heroin addiction and her teeth are falling out. She walks a tightrope and tries hard not to look down.

With disability benefits and an exceptional local doctor, she manages to survive. With her damaged immune system she is often ill. With her depression caused by the abuse she is unemployable. Meanwhile, it seems unlikely that she will be allowed to keep her disability benefits. Every few months she has to reapply. The trauma of her nightmare past is repeatedly raked up: not in the setting of counselling therapy or her doctor's surgery, but in the abrasive interrogation of a government assessment process. It is an ordeal that leaves her on the brink of mental breakdown. Trapped in a situation not of her own making, she has run out of energy and hope.

Technically, of course, there is an answer. She could go back on the streets and hope to make enough money through prostitution to survive. But, to be honest, she isn't as young as she used to be – and the customers do tend to like them young. The upsetting thing is that occasionally in the city she catches sight of the men who ruined her life. They are rich. They drive big cars. They don't suffer from depression – or guilty consciences, come to think of it. For them, life couldn't be better.

Week 1 (Contd)

The Cry in the Night: (ask someone else to read this out)

A woman was taking part in a prayer event called a retreat on the streets. It involved spending several hours in the city with very little money and no task other than to be attentive to God. She said later: 'I did a lot of walking and eventually my legs began to ache. I suddenly realised that the day had been planned to run from mid-morning to early evening: spanning two meal times. I began to feel a bit uneasy.

'Finally I just had to sit down. It had got hotter and my mouth was very dry but I had long since spent my £1. The only place I could find to sit was on some church steps. There was a beggar there as well, but I was past caring.

'We got talking and I was surprised that the man was quite educated. After a time I actually began to enjoy our conversation. A while later someone stopped and gave him a couple of coins. He got up to go and get another drink.

'I called out goodbye and he shouted something I didn't catch and was gone. I felt a bit lonely on my own. I wondered what God thought of my friend and his beer cans. I thought about walking some more to kill time when I suddenly realized my friend was coming back carrying a plastic cup of coffee.

'We shared the cup and talked some more. What was I doing? Where was I from? I felt oddly embarrassed to say I was praying about the city and that I was from a church, but he didn't seem surprised.

'For a few minutes he was silent. Then he turned to me and said: 'Most of us on the streets believe in God, you know.'

'I mumbled some sort of approving words trying not to sound patronizing but they didn't come out right and he wasn't listening anyway. He was looking out across the street. He had a thoughtful, distant expression on his face. He looked very sad.

'Yes, we believe in God,' he said quietly. 'We've got no-one else to cry to in the night.'

'Finally he said he had to go. I got up to shake his hand but on impulse hugged him. I smelled the stale beer on his breath; the stubble on his face scratched like my father's did when he hadn't shaved. 'Take care,' he said, 'and God bless you.'

'I don't even know his name,' the woman said later. 'I wish I'd asked him who he was.'

Faith in Dark Places / Week 2

2. Why Jesus Hated Paint

Last week we encountered a young woman whose life had being ruined by physical and sexual abuse and a man who was homeless. A woman of courage and a man of faith. But that is not how such people are portrayed in the media. To the tabloids the woman is an idle benefits scrounger and the man a drunken waster: neither worthy of our respect or compassion. That is the picture painted for us: the image that appears on the front pages and in poverty porn television programmes.

The reason may be lazy journalism: or something worse. Inequality in Britain is on the increase. We have more billionaires per head of population than any other country but millions of people in the UK struggle to feed their children. How do those at the top of the pile justify that? Make it legitimate? How do they sleep at night?

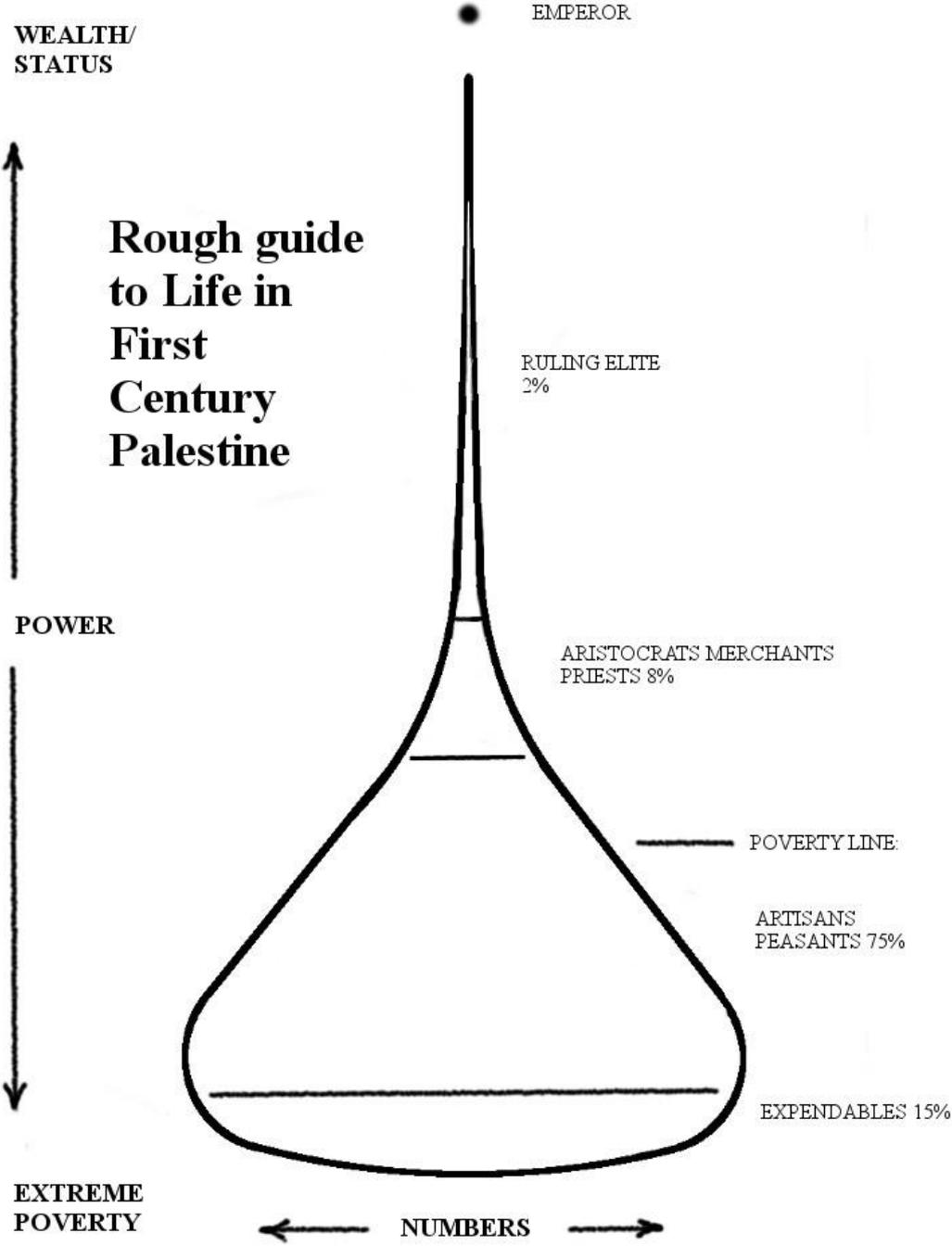
One age-old way is to say that those at the bottom are worthless: not worthy of our respect. We call it spin: but it's really a paint job. The rich paint themselves as noble, enterprising and beautiful – and paint the poor as scroungers, dirty and useless.

Back in the apartheid years of South Africa, a man called Steve Biko started the Black Consciousness movement. Its main tenet was that the whites had so demonised the Blacks that they had lost hope and all sense of their own worth: and were thus much more easily manipulated and exploited. The most powerful weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed, said Biko. Change that and you change the balance of power.

What some of us forget is that Jesus also lived in a sharply divided society, as we can see from the diagram on the next page. A tiny Roman/ Jewish elite controlled huge wealth and power while the mass of the people lived in destitution and dishonour in poverty. One reason for this exploitation was the insatiable desire of the occupying Roman Empire for wealth, power and status. And the rich got richer by demonising and exploiting the poor. You get an idea of what Jesus thought about this paint job by his condemnation of the rich and powerful as 'whitewashed' tombs (Matt 23:27-28).

But when you challenge power, bad things happen. People get crucified. Crucifixion was a specifically Roman punishment for people who rebelled against the Empire. The Jews did not execute people by crucifixion.

So when we read that 'the Jews' had Jesus put to death, it refers to the Jewish political elite. It was they, along with their Roman masters, who were intent on retaining their power and status - not the Jewish nation as a whole. The people who killed him were those whose vested interests he threatened.



Week 2 (Contd)

Some points for discussion:

(1) Why does the paint job on the poor matter? Apart from making the rich feel better?

How does what Steve Biko was doing in South Africa compare with what Jesus seems to have been doing when he befriended the oppressed poor in first century Palestine?

Jesus was born into a situation of oppression and exploitation. So when he said he had come to bring good news to the poor, what did that mean? When he befriends the poor, what does that mean? What does it say about the paint job done on the poor? What does it say about God?

(2) How do some of the acts of healing appear in this context? Think about the impact of the healing of the leper (Mark 1, verses 40-42). The man was the lowest of the low: ostracised by his neighbours, unable to work and therefore reduced to begging. He was physically and ritually unclean: a sin against the purity laws.

And what does Jesus do? Heal him? Not at first. The first thing he does is to embrace him. A leper. What does that say to the hierarchy of value and status on which the Empire is built? Why does Jesus deliberately break the divisive purity code?

(3) How do some of the parables sound in this context? What happens when Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10: 46-52)? Jesus tries to send the man home: back to his own community. But why? Perhaps because Jesus wanted word to spread among the villages of northern Palestine.

Think about the Parable of the Sower . What was that about? Spreading the good news of a distant heaven or spreading the word of a new and politically subversive way of living here on earth? A new value system that would undermine oppression and greed? And a warning of the struggles that lay ahead. Giving courage to impoverished people. A gentle religious story or political dynamite?

(An interesting account of the surprising nature of many parables, plus a more technical version of the poverty diagram, can be found in *Parables as Subversive Speech* by William Hertzog. For more on oppression and poverty in the first century, see *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* by K. C. Hanson and Douglas Oakman. Both books are in paperback.)

Faith in Dark Places / Week 3

3. The Problem with Women

The one thing they never tell you at church is that to be a Christian you need to be a detective. An investigative journalist. Last week we discovered that Jesus lived in a conflict situation: a world in which the poor were exploited and crushed by the rich and powerful. There was a simple diagram that shows how things may have stacked up in first century Palestine.

But there was something missing: the women. And that's a big problem.

Jesus lived in a male dominated society. With very few exceptions, men ruled and women did what they were told. Most men began the day with a ritual prayer of thanksgiving that they had not been born a woman. Women had less power, less wealth and received infinitely less respect than men.

Our diagram showed roughly how power, status and wealth were carved up. What it didn't show was that, among the people in each sector of the diagram, women were the poorest and most oppressed.

How was Jesus with that? After all, it seems he referred to God as 'father' and the famous Twelve were all men. Were the women absent? Or have they been air-brushed out by male gospel writers? How can we ever discover the truth?

You're a detective: go back to the evidence. Read the gospels again. What have we missed? If the mass of the population lived in abject poverty and many were on the verge of starvation: and if women were the poorest of the poor, what did Jesus mean when he said: 'The last shall be first and the first shall be last'? Who, in real life, *were* the last? Did he know? Did he care? How might the women who heard him have felt about the last being first? And what might have been the reaction of the men?

Think about that heart-warming story (Mark 5: 21-42) of the healing of the woman with a haemorrhage. Nice story: great ending. But dig deeper: what is really going on?

Jesus reverses the hierarchy on which oppression is based. The powerful, high status *man*, Jairus, is made to wait, and the low status, utterly impoverished, ritually unclean woman is given priority – and respect. Only when she has found healing and life, and been called 'daughter' does Jesus then move on to heal the daughter of Jairus.

Think of the images Jesus that gives us for God. God seeks out the lost like a *woman* sweeps the house to find a coin. Which father among you will give a child a stone when he asks for bread? Which father? When a child was hungry, who did it ask for bread? Its *mother*. You are to be the leaven in the lump, he tells them. Who kneaded yeast into the bread? The *women*. Is Jesus giving us 'womanly' images of God?

There may even be a hidden message in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24)

Week 3 (contd)

The Prodigal Son:

We all know the story of the prodigal son and what happens when the son decides to swallow his pride and go home. While he's still a long way off, the father sees him and runs to meet him. Before the son can say a word, the father flings his arms round him and hugs him.

Hold that familiar sequence of events in your mind and consider something different, but strikingly similar. A film on daytime television.

A young soldier has been abroad on active military service. At last his tour of duty comes to an end. His parents have been counting the days, waiting for his safe return. When the great day arrives, the mother and father stand at the window waiting for a glimpse of the taxi. As the car drives up, they hurry to the front door and step outside.

Now, slow the film. Watch what happens, one frame at a time. The car door opens and the young man starts to get out. The father is standing on the front doorstep leaning on his stick. His hand is raised in a gesture of dignified salutation. But the mother isn't there. The mother is running.

She runs down the garden path and throws her arms round her son and holds him tight. For a long time. Then, together, they walk back up to the house. Father and son meet and shake hands in manly greeting. 'Welcome home, son. You must tell me all about your adventures,' the father says gruffly.

Now go back to the prodigal son. Fathers in first century Palestine behaved with a lot more dignity than they do today. There was absolutely no way a father would run to welcome home a disgraced son. No way he would embrace him when he was covered in filth. No way he would easily forgive him for disgracing the family.

But read what it says. The father runs and flings his arms round the boy. The son is filthy but the father doesn't care. All he cares about is that his beloved child is alive. Safe in his arms. Nothing else matters. The father is truly exceptional. In fact the father in the story is God. That's how God is, Jesus is saying.

But the father in the parable is behaving just like the *mother* in the film. Jesus is giving us a mother image of God. A mother running, with tears of joy in her eyes, to embrace her lost child. God behaving like a loving woman, not a patriarchal man.

And then there's the not so small matter of the Resurrection, the one event on which, we believe, our whole faith is based. Of all the people in the world, who was it that God choose to be the first witnesses and messengers to the follows of Jesus of that crucially important discovery? Who are the people, so significant that they are named in *all four* gospels? Women.

Had the last become the first? Have the last become the first today? Among the poorest in today's world, who are the poorest? Why might that be so?

Faith in Dark Places / Week 4

4. A Very Alarming Prayer

There's something soothingly familiar about the Lord's Prayer. Most of us can say it almost without thinking. It's like a comfortable old sofa into which we can relax. As long as we don't think about the words, that is. But when Jesus taught those words to his followers it must have been like a bomb going off.

It was the first word that did it. *Abba*. Dear Father. A term of familiarity and trust. Of informality, directness and accessibility. But Jesus said it in a world of hierarchy where the people at the bottom could never speak to the people at the top. A world where distance was key to control and the only way you could get things changed was to get a mediator or patron to intercede for you. A world where the poor were called unclean and sinful and told they were cut off from God. But if you can speak directly to God, that hierarchy of power and control is threatened. And *Abba* threatened it.

Then there was your *kingdom* come. But the rich and powerful already had a kingdom and it worked very well for them. The last thing on earth they wanted was a different kingdom, especially a kingdom of justice and equality. God's kingdom sounded like a threat to the status quo. A threat to the vested interests of the powerful. Bad news.

The third word was *bread*. Give us today our bread for tomorrow. Who would pray those words most desperately? The rich? But they always had more than enough to eat. Maybe it was the poor and destitute: those who faced starvation and humiliation at not being able to feed their kids. Give us bread for tomorrow: God give us life. Is the Lord's Prayer a prayer for the rich? Maybe it is. But how much more is it a prayer for the desperately hungry poor?

A young woman recently said she thought Jesus was wicked: pronounced wick-id. Translation: cool, smart, having a wicked sense of humour. Can there be laughter in the Lord's Prayer? Almost, judging by the fourth word. Jesus was really pushing his luck when it came to *debt*.

The Church prefers forgive us our 'trespasses' which sounds reassuringly religious. But Jesus, it seems, said *debts*. And debt was what made the wealth extraction process of the Empire work. Land provided wealth and status, and the rich and powerful wanted lots of it. So they forced smallholders into debt, turning them off their land and into a low-wage pool of casual labour. Debt was not only financially crippling, it also brought a huge sense of shame. It was the single greatest burden that the poor carried. It destroyed their livelihoods and their hope. It was the killer.

But Jesus says pray for a world where your debts will be cancelled. Where you will find hope. The dream of a new world: new life. Release from the captivity of debt. That sort of vision didn't go down well with the rich, but it must have been a jolt of adrenalin for the poor. A prayer that gave life, courage and dignity. Words that, if they were allowed to spread, could undermine an empire. A vision of joy – perhaps even of laughter.

The Lord's Prayer / Week 4 (Contd)

Question 1: Do you believe in coincidences?

As you read the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11: 1-4) something else may catch your eye. Just a few lines above it, at the end of chapter 10, is a story about Martha and Mary.

Martha is exasperated with Mary because she is not helping with the cooking. But what was it that Mary was doing? According to Luke she was listening. In one sense that was typical. Men did the talking and the (much less important) women did the listening. But what did Jesus tell Martha and the others who were there? That only one thing was *necessary*: and Mary was doing it. Listening. Intently.

How do we hear the words of Jesus today, other than from the people who listened intently and remembered? The people who remembered the Lord's Prayer were most likely the people who desperately needed to hear it - because it spoke powerfully to their situation of poverty and oppression.

The rich and powerful would have preferred everyone to forget it. But some people were determined that no-one should forget. The poor. And, among them, the poorest of the poor? The women?

Are they why we know so much about Jesus? Is that good news from the poor? Was that why Jesus said that Mary's listening was *necessary*?

Question 2: If the Lord's Prayer was (and is) so controversial, how is it that so few of us have noticed? Has there been an unconscious (or conscious) tendency to ignore the Gospel as good news for the poor and a challenge to the rich?

Individual sin is important but Jesus doesn't seem to have been fixated by it. It was the systemic sinfulness of the rich that seems to have been the big issue for him. So why hasn't the Church taken that view?

Over the centuries there has been a lot of poverty and injustice in the world. Often the Church seems to have turned a blind eye to it. There have also been times when it has gathered to itself huge wealth and sided with the powerful against the poor. Has that been the reason it has chosen to focus on issues less controversial than the Gospel?

Faith in Dark Places / Week 5

5. Jesus and the Power of Failure

In the past weeks we've been moving relentlessly towards the Cross. Most of the crosses we see in church are aesthetically pleasing. The figure of Jesus is usually a young man in a passive and calm attitude. There is little to shock us. But the reality was different. After dying in agony, the naked bodies of victims were left to rot. Food for the dogs and carrion crows. Dead meat. A terrible warning to others.

The Church has always believed the Cross was in some way powerful and triumphant. How could that be? It may sound unlikely, but perhaps the Romans did not want Jesus dead. How could they get rid of the Jesus problem? Not by creating a martyr. But what if Jesus recanted and betrayed his own cause? Begged for life. That would be perfect. The Romans were not stupid: is it possible that the Cross was their attempt, not to kill him, but to break him? Whatever their plan, Jesus did not give in. Quite the opposite. 'Father forgive them,' he said. Words of love from a dying man.

Meanwhile something else may have been happening. It is said that one of the others being crucified cried out (Luke 23: 42): 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Did he really say *when* you come to your kingdom? In all the horror and pain was that single affirming word of resurrection hope spoken to the Son of God by a dying criminal?

And, in any case, who was allowed close enough to hear? Not the men: they may have made some sort of rescue attempt. But the women? And maybe some kids? Kids get everywhere: don't go near the water, don't go near the railway line. But kids do. Perhaps some kids slipped through the military cordon to see the spectacle of people being executed. Maybe women, who didn't count for anything, were also allowed to get closer and weep. And to do what they had always done: to listen. Women were the ones brave enough to risk death by going to the tomb: perhaps they were also brave enough to stand by Jesus as he died. Women – the poorest of the poor.

In the world's terms, the Cross symbolises total powerlessness and failure. But in a strange way it turned out to be the opposite. And the same thing happens today: Malala, a girl with a bullet in her head did not die, but became possibly the most influential woman in the world. The Pope receives world-wide acclaim. Why? For standing alongside the marginalised and poor. The most famous saint, also called Francis, is loved for laying aside inherited wealth and power and caring for the poor.

On the streets of our own towns and cities, people find the same dynamic operating: that when we open ourselves to them in love, we receive life and meaning from those who have nothing. Their failure to measure up to worldly standards of wealth and success becomes a channel for God's love. As was the Cross.

Almost hidden on the back cover of *Faith in Dark Places* is a quote from Jean Vanier who founded L'Arche Community for people with disabilities. It says: 'We are healed by the broken as *they reveal to us* the presence of Jesus.' What more do Christians ask than to be healed and to know the presence of Jesus? And to do the will of the Father.

Jesus and the Power of Failure / Week 5 (Contd)

Finally, to make you smile...

Mention of L'Arche Community brings to mind the story of a vicar and a girl called Corinne who has Downs syndrome. Christian Aid Week was drawing near, and it was decided there should be an ecumenical money-raising event.

Several suggestions were made, and then some bright spark came up with the idea of a clergy sponsored swim. After all, people would pay good money to see the local clergy with virtually no clothes on.

To make up the numbers, it was decided that members of the different congregations should also be invited to take part. And Corinne was one of those who volunteered.

The vicar knew that the girl often went with her mother to the swimming baths where she loved to splash around at the shallow end. 'Will you sponsor me?' Corinne asked him. 'Of course,' he replied. 'Two pounds a length – or part of a length if you can't manage a whole one,' he added patronisingly.

The evening of the sponsored swim was a huge success. In the end, they had to tell the last swimmer to come out of the water because they needed to close the sports centre for the night.

The last swimmer was Corinne: she had swum 42 lengths.

Since then the vicar has realised that Corinne has a lot more determination, humour, integrity, wisdom, love and strength of character than he ever dreamed. It is as if the love of Jesus shines through her.

And what is true of a small and amusing incident involving a young girl is also true of a young peasant called Jesus who lived in first century Palestine. At first he too was regarded as weak, worthless and insignificant.

Maybe it is time we began to learn the same truth today, when the papers pour scorn and ridicule on the vulnerable and poverty porn has become a cheap way to make television programmes.

Perhaps the Church needs to take to heart the story in which Jesus says: When you did it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it also to me. And to discover that the Gospel can be good news from those we call the poor. For among them stands Jesus.
