**A Month Considering Action**

# **Background**

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6 v8)

Neither Judaism nor Christianity is a matter of simply contemplating God.

“Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ...For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead” (James 2 v20,26)

We are to express our faith in action. That sounds easy. There are lots of ‘good causes’ in the modern world to attract our activities – and to distract our attention from God! How are we to decide on our personal priorities for what we might call ‘Godly’ action?

‘Think before you act’ is good advice, but do we in our Christian lives? Fortunately, we have the wisdom of Millennia of the Judeo-Christian faith to help us; and we have the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit, God’s expression of his dynamism and power in this Universe, since the beginning of time.

In the next four weeks we shall explore these precedents, not to rest on our laurels, but to become more active and effective in God’s world.

# **Week 1 Kavannah and Mitzvot**

We begin with a consideration of Jewish theology of Godly action, and its use of two particular terms, **Kavannah** and **Mitzvot**.

Superficially, **Kavannah** means purpose, motive or intention; and **Mitzvot** / **Mitzvah** means commandment(s). But both go much deeper than that.

*“*Kavannah… is more than paying attention to the text of the liturgy or to the performance of the mitzvah. Kavanah is attentiveness to God… It is an attitude of the whole person. It is one’s being drawn into the preciousness of an object or a situation*.”* (Heschel)

**Mitzvot** are Godly actions; God’s actions in the world.

“In performing Mitzvot, we are invited to join God in his actions in the world. To sense the preciousness of being able to listen to an imperative of God; to be perceptive of the unique worth of doing a Mitzvah, is the beginning of higher Kavannah… It is in such appreciation that we realise that to perform is to lend form to a divine theme; that our task is to set forth the divine in acts, to express the spirit in tangible form…”(Heschel).

In a quiet session, consider these terms carefully. How do you now see your doing God’s will in the world?

In a separate session, ponder whether you see your performance of a commandment as a privilege, as “setting forth the Divine in acts”?

God revealed 613 commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, 365 negative prohibitions and 248 positive duties. A list is here [The 613 Commandments (Mitzvot) - Chabad.org](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/756399/jewish/The-613-Commandments-Mitzvot.htm) . Read them and decide which of these **Mitzvot** you will perform with **Kavannah** tomorrow. And tomorrow evening, reflect on the experience!

“In doing a Mitzvah our primary awareness is the thought of carrying out that which He commanded us to do, and it is such an awareness which places our action in the direction of the divine. Kavanah in this sense is not the awareness of being commanded but the awareness of Him who commands; not of a yoke we carry, but of the Will we remember; the awareness of God, not the awareness of duty. Such an awareness is more than an attitude of mind; it is an act of valuation or appreciation of being commanded, of living in a covenant, of the opportunity to act in agreement with God.” (Heschel)

Heschel contrasts awareness of God with awareness of duty. Think about which of these drives most of your actions as a Christian – duty or Divine awareness. Are you mainly driven by God’s characteristic compassion or by ‘shoulds and oughts’?

Christian action in the church today, however worthy, is often simply a matter of turning up and doing something to benefit others (valuable though that is!). If you personally applied the principles of **Kavannah** and **Mitzvot**, how would your chosen Christian actions and activities change?

# **Week 2 Law and Grace**

We have largely lost the concept that **Mitzvot**, commandments, are actions we do together with God. We have also tended to turn the New Testament ‘commandments’ into an inflexible ideal, a rule book, the keeping of which earns our passage to heaven. Oh yes, we have forgiveness when we break the rules; but often we forget 2 Corinthians 5 v19 and wrongly think that those sins might still count against us at the final judgement. We find it hard to think of a God of infinite compassion and love.

St Paul threw out such accountancy: “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”(Romans 6 v14); “What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (v15)… *“*But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11 v6); “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2 v8).

Think deeply about these verses in a session. Do you really believe them? How do you put them into practice? Note also that we are saved **by** grace, **through** faith; being saved is a **gift** of God’s grace, it is not earned **by** our own faith, nor by our own Christian actions.

St Paul writes to the Galatian Christians (2 v19-21):

*“*For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification [righteousness] comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing*”.*

In considering this passage, think about the evidence for *‘*Christ who lives in me’ in your own life. What forms does this take? How do you access the Christ who lives in you?

In a separate session, consider the similarity between Paul’s *‘*Christ who lives in me’ and the Jewish concept of **mitzvot**, actions taken together with God. Does this have echoes in your own actions?

In Jesus, the compassion and graciousness of God found its fullest expression in his public ministry. His healings, his parables, his teachings, his social life all express compassion, particularly for the poor, the widows and orphans, the ill and the underclasses of his day. Jesus also taught his followers to do the same, to express God’s compassion in action. James summed this up neatly (1 v26-27):

*“*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world*”.*

Is that sort of religion attractive to you? Can you see how it is attractive to those without faith, and to those who never darken the doors of the church? Do you personally interpret James’ words mainly as a ‘commandment’ or as an invitation to express the Christ within you?

Way back in 1983, the then Bishop of Liverpool, David Sheppard, wrote a book called ‘**Bias to the Poor’** (£2.15 on Kindle), expressing what he saw as the thrust of the ministry of Jesus and what he believed the thrust of the ministry of the Anglican church should be. What forms does a ‘bias to the poor’ take in your life and in the life of your local church today?

# **Week 3 Compassion and Gifting**

*‘*Be compassionate as God is compassionate’ (Luke 6 v36).

‘Compassionate’ occurs times 48 times in the OT and 15 in the NT: ‘merciful’ occurs 17 times in OT and 7 in NT. ‘Quite often the Hebrew word for **compassion** and **compassionate** are translated into English as **mercy** and **merciful’** (Borg p47). Compassion and to be compassionate gives a feeling of relationship and empathy whereas mercy and merciful feels like there is hierarchy and a situation of wrongdoing.

“Indeed, it is only when we appreciate this dimension of Jesus’ emphasis on compassion that we realize how radical his message and vision were. For Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue: it was an important social principle, the core value for life in community. To put it boldly, compassion for Jesus was political. He directly and repeatedly challenged the dominant behaviours and attitudes of his social world and advocated instead what we might call a politics of compassion. This conflict and this social vision continue to have striking implications for the life of the church today” (Borg p49).

In thinking about this, consider whether you personally are more compassionate or more merciful? How does your compassion take form in your actions?

For Jesus, God was above all “compassionate” so all people should be like that and society should reflect that (see Luke 6 v36). This leads to equality in a society of boundless compassion. But, for the Scribes and Pharisees, God was above all “holy” so all people should be like that and society should reflect that (see Leviticus 19 v2). This leads to a hierarchical society based on purity boundaries. In a session, read the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10 v25-37). There, Jesus contrasts the purity obsession of the Jewish priest and Levite with the evident compassion in the actions of the Samaritan ‘outsider’. Is the character of God, as Jesus saw it in this parable, revealed more in the actions of outsider than in the actions of the devout people of his day? That is, is the Samaritan more God-like than the priest of Levite? Are there implications for us in the church today, when ‘outsiders’ may be more God-like than ourselves?

*“*In the message and activity of Jesus, we see an alternative social vision: a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion*.”* (Borg p53).

In a separate session, consider how you would see such a society working practically? How might you act to bring it about?

Perhaps the above interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan is unfair. Perhaps the priest and Levite were following the primary commandment to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, while the Samaritan was following the second commandment to love his neighbour. When questioned by a scribe on commandments and priorities:

“Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’” (Mark 12 v29-31).

Is one of these two commandments more important than the other, in your view?

It probably seems like a crazy exercise, but spend a session listing who are your neighbours – particular named ‘neighbours’, not generalised groups. Which of these do you approach loving **as** you love yourself? What are your reactions to this list?

Sam Wells distinguishes four types of marginalised persons: the disadvantaged, the oppressed, the afflicted and the isolated (though people can be more than one of these). He says that:

*“*Many treatments of this subject evince anger and dismay at inequality, injustice, indifference, and inertia, often assuming a working-for model of fixing problems and bringing solutions… But **being with** assumes that sustainable change comes from people in the context themselves, and that to discover the glory one needs to walk alongside them, listen to their perspectives, and refrain from withdrawing to a place of expertise, superiority, or safety…. Being with the excluded means rejecting the assumption that the excluders are the centre of the story. It is a practical, visible, and tangible statement that the story is where Jesus is, and Jesus is with the excluded – excluded at birth in a stable, excluded as an infant in Egypt, excluded in obscurity in Nazareth, excluded as a prophet among the rejected of his time, excluded as a criminal, executed in agony and shame…” (p219).

What is your reaction to this? How do you see your own actions in the light of this analysis? Are you drawn to take any particular actions?

Everyone is different. Everyone has the potential to make a unique contribution to the common good. St Paul recognised many different ways of making such a unique contribution in a series of lists, including Romans 12 v6-8, 1 Corinthians 12 v7-11 and Galatians 5 v22-26. Your unique gifting means that there are particular contributions that only you can make, here and now; the trick is to find them! Being too busy doing 1001 generalised activities, simply because ‘someone needs to do them’ blinds us to that uniqueness and exhausts us – and suggests that we are trying to pull our weight in the church or even to earn our passage to heaven by good works! Gradually moving your portfolio of activities towards those for which you are uniquely gifted is the obvious way to maximise your personal contribution to the common good. List what do you do now, that others could take over. List what you could take up that expresses your uniqueness in action? What will you do with these lists?

# **Week 4**

This week we shall look at a number of important social action projects in this diocese. Please spend one session per project and discern whether you are drawn to help in some way.

[Social Justice - Bristol Cathedral (bristol-cathedral.co.uk)](https://bristol-cathedral.co.uk/about-us/social-justice/)

[https://www.inhope.uk/](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.inhope.uk/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1721940495203052&usg=AOvVaw3cJyxxb9krDvb7omJCgyhT) - homelessness, hunger, addiction and poor mental health.

[https://streetpastors.org/locations/bristol/](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://streetpastors.org/locations/bristol/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1721940495203099&usg=AOvVaw2cEVuBPj72OWjRUiyGhxtI) - care and support to people on the streets at nighttime.

[https://harbourproject.org.uk/](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://harbourproject.org.uk/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1721940495203115&usg=AOvVaw3Il830JVNFHuI-bYKTpITb) - refugee and asylum seeker support in Swindon.

[https://www.tlg.org.uk/](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.tlg.org.uk/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1721940495203128&usg=AOvVaw3BMlEqIDeiqmtw2fPfdSxe) - national Christian charity bringing hope and a future for struggling children.

[https://www.christianactionbristol.org.uk/](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.christianactionbristol.org.uk/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1721940495203138&usg=AOvVaw18Smc0KGVd_1iSDdqjmBOS) - climate etc

And always remember to watch yourself and others for sign of burn-out (‘persistent, impairing, emotional exhaustion’); see also [Stress - Every Mind Matters - NHS (www.nhs.uk)](https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues/stress/). Being alert to this is, after all, loving your neighbour as yourself.

Review this month’s sessions. What has made the greatest impression on you? What activities would you like to stop doing? What activities would you like to begin doing? How will you take this forward?

# **Follow-up Resources**

* Heschel AJ (1955, 1983 Edn.) *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. F.S.G. New York. [esp. p314-316]
* Borg MJ (1994) *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time.*  Harper One
* Samuel Wells (2018) *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World* Canterbury Press [especially chapter 10]
* Silf M (2017) *Born to Fly; a Handbook for Butterflies-in-Waiting* DLT
* <https://www.christianactionbristol.org.uk/>
* <https://christianclimateaction.org/>
* <https://www.bristolnorthwestfoodbank.org.uk/>

iab/ 6/8/24 VF