

Develop a pattern of Bible reading, reflection & prayer

Come & See

Learning from the life of Peter



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Preface

We Christians believe that the Bible tells the great story of God's love for the world he has made and for the people he has called. This story reaches its climax in Jesus, who is the one who leads us to God.

For many people growing up in Britain today, however, it is not self-evident that Jesus is the way to God. In fact, there are a great many people who do not know very much about Jesus at all. They have not been to church. They do not own a Bible and, apart from a few stories that are still told in school, they do not know the great sweep of the Bible story that is the bedrock of the Christian faith and has shaped the whole of our culture. For them, the Bible can seem old-fashioned and irrelevant. If they want to know God or find meaning in life or explore a spiritual dimension to life (and lots of people do want to do this nowadays), there is a whole smorgasbord of other tantalising treats on offer. Often, these alternatives seem more appealing. They are usually less demanding. For many people, there is even the question of whether God exists at all; and how are you supposed to find out anyway? What trust should we put in those documents that tell us about Jesus which we call the New Testament?

To all these questions, there can only be one reasonable response: come and see! Come and find out. Because the invitation of the Christian faith is the invitation to come and see and find God as he is revealed in Jesus. Jesus is God's way to God, and we encounter that story when we open the Bible.

In John's gospel, Jesus says, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). The letter to the Ephesians says that in Jesus we have access to God (Ephesians 2:18). These words of invitation, 'Come and see', are in fact the very words that Andrew said to his brother

Peter when he first encountered Jesus. We are invited to do the same. When we open the Bible and read the stories of the Christian faith, we can come and see Jesus. We can find out for ourselves if the claims of the Christian faith make sense. We can discover what the Bible is really about, what it really says and whether it can really be trusted. We can test it against our own experience. We can allow its challenges to confront our lives.

This will take time. When you open the Bible, you are not being invited just to read a book but to meet a person. The whole of the Bible centres upon the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament points towards him and in the New Testament he is revealed as the one who is our God come down to earth. Therefore, this invitation – like the one that was given to Peter – is to a relationship with God, in and through Jesus. Because the Bible is the indispensable record of what God has done in Jesus, it is also the indispensable stepping stone into this relationship. But it is the relationship with God that matters. This doesn't mean we leave the Bible behind, just that it is not the Bible we worship. The Bible introduces us to Jesus; it then becomes the handbook of our Christian faith, guiding us through life until that great day when we will see God face to face.

This book offers a short introduction to the Bible, particularly the New Testament. What I have done is to arrange a series of Bible readings that tells the story of one disciple, Peter, and the story of what happened to him from his first being invited to 'come and see' through to his own witness to Jesus after the resurrection. He is the one whom Jesus himself described as 'the rock' upon which 'I will build my church' (Matthew 16:18). In this way, I hope that you will learn more about the Bible, be introduced to Jesus and begin to learn how to be a follower of Jesus.

Now, you might be thinking that such a person isn't really a very helpful guide for a beginner like you. But as you get to know Peter through the pages of this book, you will discover a very human, very frail, very fallible follower of Christ. Peter struggles, prevaricates, fails

and soldiers on in the same way that so many of us do. In the end, he triumphs, not because of his brilliance or eloquence but because of his faithfulness to Jesus. Peter kept on coming back to see and find out more. If we do the same – and I pray that this book will help get you started – then we too can become disciples of Jesus Christ and, like Peter, be living stones in the church that Jesus built.

Introduction

This book is for new Christians who want to grow in their faith, and for more experienced Christians who want to reset the compass of their discipleship. It aims to help people:

- grow as followers of Jesus
- develop a love for the Bible
- understand more about the Bible
- establish a regular pattern for Bible reading
- allow the word of God to shape their lives

It does this by telling the story of Peter, finding out how he became a disciple of Jesus and what it meant for his life, and relating this to the life of a disciple today.

In Peterborough Cathedral, where I worked for a number of years, there is a statue of Peter, depicting that moment when, having heard Jesus' call, he steps out of the boat to walk across the water. In the statue, Peter is portrayed with an almost child-like confidence – but he is about to sink. The story of his vocation is a story not just of responding to a call, but of learning what this call involves. He will have to be saved many times before he is able to become the person God is calling him to be. This book is about Peter's journey of faith, not because of Peter's brilliance or even his faithfulness, but because he shows us what being a disciple of Jesus is actually like.

Telling his story in this way will mean jumping around from one bit of the Bible to another. This is not necessarily the best way of reading the Bible, but will have the advantage of introducing different bits of the Bible. The Bible is not one book written by one person, but a vast library containing lots of books written over a long period of time by

lots of different people. This book will give a flavour of the different gospels and the other books in the New Testament.

As we study Peter's story, I will say a little about how the gospels came to be written, the distinctive insights of one gospel compared to another, the different types of writing we find in the different books of the Bible and how they interact with each other. Each chapter also includes suggestions for further reflection and exploration, which will sometimes point us into the Old Testament.

How to use this book

There are 28 chapters in this book, arranged into four blocks of seven to be read over a four-week period. You don't have to read the book like this. You could just sit down and read it from cover to cover. But it is designed to be read a section at a time, one day at a time. This way, you can begin to establish a regular pattern for Bible reading, reflection and prayer.

Each chapter only takes about five minutes to read. At the end of each chapter there are suggestions for further thought, exploration and prayer. Don't feel obliged to follow up all the suggestions for further Bible reading, though this will enrich your experience of the book and help you to see the many connections in scripture, particularly between the Old and New Testaments. But make sure that, after reading each chapter, you do give a few minutes to reflection, thanksgiving and prayer.

A word on the authority of scripture

The New Testament has what you might call a 'derived' authority. Christ, not the Bible, is the 'Word of God'. The New Testament has authority because it is the indispensable body of evidence that tells us about the person of Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity. Its claims

need to be investigated like any other ancient or historical document, but it stands up to examination. Indeed, the more we examine, it, the more remarkable it becomes, for in it we find the first-hand record of Jesus himself and letters written by Paul only ten or so years after the main events of the story. Therefore, because it is a collection of testimonies, stories, letters and recollections, it works like a compass rather than a map, pointing us to the one in whom authority resides, Jesus the Word of God. It is important to bear this in mind when reading this book and whenever we read the Bible. The people who wrote it were ordinary people like us. They had heard and experienced astonishing things, but always they direct our attention away from themselves, away from the written record to the source of what they are recording, Jesus himself.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, who is always leading us into truth, the Bible is, for those of us who did not meet Jesus face to face in his earthly ministry, the way we can best meet him today. Through the Bible, Jesus speaks his words to us today. Therefore, as you read this book, I hope you will learn to love the Bible and be excited by its claims and challenges. But, more importantly, I hope you will be led closer to Jesus. The word was made flesh: we must not turn it back into a word. That would be a denial of all that the biblical writers set out to achieve. Rather, they want that word to be born in you.

Week One:

THE CALL



Andrew brings his brother to Jesus

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

JOHN 1:35-42

How did you first come to know Jesus? There are many different ways to faith. Some people are brought up in a Christian home and cannot remember a time when they didn't believe. For others, a religious upbringing stifled a faith that was then abandoned or rejected before something else happened to bring them back to the way. And, of course, most people today are brought up with little or no knowledge of the Christian faith.

But you are reading this book because something has brought you to the beginnings of Christian faith. For each one of us who is following in the way of Jesus, there are people and events that have helped us to come to know God.

For Peter, it was his brother Andrew. Andrew was already a follower of John the Baptist and so was on the lookout for what God was doing. The writers of the four gospels see John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus, the one who prepares the way.

The 'next day' referred to at the beginning of this reading means the day after the baptism of Jesus. This was the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus came to the River Jordan to be baptised. This was very strange. John's baptism was for 'the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4). Surely Jesus was the one person who didn't need forgiveness! Indeed, in Matthew's gospel, John says to Jesus that he should be baptised by him, not the other way round (Matthew 3:14–15).

In John's gospel, the account we are looking at today, John calls Jesus 'the Lamb of God'. This title is very significant. Its meaning is not obvious to 21st-century ears, but for those first followers of John, gathered at the River Jordan, and for Andrew when he again saw Jesus, it carried great weight, for the Old Testament often referred to the Lamb of God.

Hearing Jesus called 'the Lamb' reminded them of Abraham's words when he was asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham assured Isaac that 'God himself will provide the lamb for the offering' (Genesis 22:8), and because he was prepared to be faithful to God, even in this appalling duty, God spared the boy.

Hearing Jesus called 'the Lamb' reminded them of the sacrificial lambs that were offered each year at the Passover festival, solemnly remembering God's liberation of his people from slavery.

Hearing Jesus called 'the Lamb' reminded them of the gentle lamb led to the slaughter that the prophet Jeremiah talked about (Jeremiah 11:19).

Jesus is the one who does not need baptism because he is the Lamb of God who comes to bring forgiveness. Jesus is the one who chooses

baptism because he is the suffering servant, the innocent lamb led to the slaughter. Through his baptism Jesus demonstrates his solidarity with all people. 'He became sin for us' is the striking phrase that Paul uses (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus comes and stands alongside the sinful, the wretched, the broken, the dispossessed and the lost. He says to Andrew, 'What are you looking for?' This is a crucial question for the human race. What are you looking for in life? Whom are you going to follow?

Following Jesus

You are reading this book because you have begun to follow Jesus. You have begun to find in Jesus the things you are looking for in life – assurance that in the midst of this wonderful and crazy world, you are loved; assurance that you are forgiven; knowledge of a purpose and a destiny to life beyond the things we see around us and yet immediately available to those who walk in the faith of Jesus Christ.

These things you are beginning to discover are the things Andrew discovered on the afternoon he spent with Jesus. He began to see life and faith and God in a new way, and what he found with Jesus that afternoon was so good that as soon as he got home he told his brother Simon all about it. 'We have found the Messiah,' he said. 'Messiah' is another word that we do not readily understand, but for Andrew and Simon, brought up in the Jewish faith, it meant everything. 'This person I have spent the afternoon with,' Andrew is saying, 'is the one chosen by God, the one our people have been waiting for throughout their history, the one who will usher in the reign of God on earth.'

So Andrew brings Simon to Jesus and the story of Simon's vocation begins. Jesus gives him a new name – and I shall say more about this another day. Let us pause here and reflect on how we have become travellers in the way of Christ.

For reflection and prayer

Give thanks: Who are the people who have helped you to discover and embrace the Christian faith? What has their witness meant to you?

Reflect: How can you be a witness to others?

Explore: Read these passages from the Bible that will take you deeper into the themes of today's passage.

- Isaiah 42:1–9: a description of the servant of the Lord, often referred to as the 'suffering servant' and, from the very earliest days of the church, always interpreted by Christians as a description of Jesus. It was meditation upon these passages from the Old Testament that helped the first Christians to understand the significance of Jesus' suffering and death.
- Revelation 22:1–7: a vision of the new creation in which the Lamb of God is seated upon the throne and is the source of light and life.

Pray: Jesus, thank you for calling me. Help me to follow you all the days of my life.

Jesus asks Peter to go fishing

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master; we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

LUKE 5:1-11

We now pick up the story in Luke's gospel, though straight away it is a little confusing since we are reading about the same incident – the call of Peter – but the story is completely different. This can seem a bit of a problem for those beginning in the Christian way or looking at the Bible for the first time. How can both these stories be correct? Surely either Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, and that was how

it began, or this incident while fishing is the true account?

This is where we need to learn a little more about how the Bible came to be written. As far as we know, Jesus himself did not write down anything during his ministry: certainly there is nothing remaining. Most of the people who followed him would not have been able to read or write anyway, and, even for those who could, recording things in those days was not the simple matter that it is today. People could not follow Jesus around, making notes of what he said or did.

All that we know about Jesus rests upon the memory of the first generation of Christians. This does not mean that the information is unreliable. Yes, people would have remembered things differently, and, because all human memory is selective, some people would have remembered some things in a particular way, according to their own interests and concerns. Certain features of Jesus' teaching, though – particularly his parables – would have been preserved as stories, pretty much the way Jesus told them. This is the way ancient cultures preserve and pass on their traditions and stories.

You can visit cultures today in certain parts of the world and witness this oral tradition at work. In some tribal cultures, still largely unaffected by Western culture, the story of the tribe, its history, laws and legends, are faithfully passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth. This would have been normal for the culture of Jesus' day. There was a written culture for an educated elite and there was an oral culture. Almost all of Jesus' teaching, and the stories of what he did, would have been kept in this oral tradition. They seem to have been written down only when the generation with first-hand knowledge of Jesus began to die out and when the infant church wanted to order its life and witness.

There are actually quite a lot of accounts of the life of Jesus (called gospels), but in time the church gave authority to four of them. The gospel of Mark was, in all likelihood, the earliest, probably written within 40 or 50 years of the death of Jesus. Matthew and Luke were

written later, based upon Mark (thus you will find that the basic order of events and many of the stories are identical) but adding in other material that had been gathered together. Then there is the gospel of John, coming from a different tradition and containing different material. Consequently, the exact nature of Peter's call is different in John than it is in Matthew, Mark and Luke (often called the Synoptic gospels because they all have the same basic synopsis of the story). We cannot tell which is precisely right in saying how Peter first met Jesus, but both stories have important things to say to us about the life of faith and encounter with God, and both rest on the authentic collected memory of the early church. Rather than being put off by this inconsistency, I believe it opens up to us one of the great excitements of the Bible.

The Bible is the story of God's love for and involvement with his people, but it is written by the people themselves: it contains their own reflections upon the God who has inspired and redeemed them. It is not dictated by God. Therefore, when we read the Bible, we learn about God, but we also learn about what it means to be a follower of God and about how those followers in the past sought to make sense of their discipleship.

The pattern of calling

This story, shaped in its telling by many other stories in the Bible about how people were called by God, has four elements that are very striking and chime with our own experience of coming to know God.

- First, there is an awareness of God's presence. Jesus gets into Peter's boat and, pushing out a little from the shore, starts teaching the crowds.

Can you remember your first awareness of God's presence in your life?

- Second, there is fear and apprehension. Peter, having been fishing all night and caught nothing, does not want to try again. Then, when this astonishing catch of fish is hauled aboard, Peter falls to his knees before Jesus and asks him to leave.

Can you remember feeling unworthy of God's attention or love? Or frightened of what following him might mean? Or amazed by his actions in the world?

- Third, there is reassurance. The great catch of fish, however mystifying and fantastic, is a sign of God's generosity and sovereignty. Then Jesus says to Peter, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' Jesus has a new purpose for Peter's life.

Can you remember receiving a sign of reassurance, or coming to believe that God was commissioning you for something, that he had a new purpose for your life?

- Fourth, there is acceptance. Peter and his companions drop everything and follow Jesus.

How much of this have you done? You are following Jesus, but how much are you still carrying with you that you need to put down?

This pattern of awareness of God, apprehension and fear, reassurance and acceptance is repeated throughout our lives as God's call is renewed in our lives and as we face up to the fresh challenges of being a disciple. Through the rest of this book we will see what it means for Peter.

For reflection and prayer

Give thanks: How are you aware of the presence of God in your life?

Reflect: How can you discern the pattern of Peter's calling reflected

in your life?

Explore: The following passages from the Bible are also stories about calling. Read them and see if you can discern the same pattern of awareness, apprehension, reassurance and acceptance.

- Exodus 3:1–12: the call of Moses.
- Isaiah 6:1–8: the call of Isaiah.
- Luke 1:26–28: the call of Mary.

Pray: Generous God, help me to face up to my apprehension and fear. Help me to accept your call.



Enabling all ages to grow in faith



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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

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When we look at the life of Peter – fisherman, disciple, leader of the church – we find somebody who responded wholeheartedly to the call to ‘come and see’. Come and meet Jesus, come and follow him, come and find your life being transformed. This book focuses on Peter, not because he is the best-known of Jesus’ friends, nor the most loyal, but because he shows us what being a disciple of Jesus is actually like. Like us, he takes a step of faith and then flounders, and needs the saving touch of God to continue becoming the person he was created to be.

Come and See provides a pattern of Bible reading, reflection and prayer. Twenty-eight readings, arranged in four sections, offer short passages from the story of Peter, plus comment and questions for personal response or group discussion.



Before his appointment as the 98th Archbishop of York, **Stephen Cottrell** was the Bishop of Chelmsford. He is a member of the House of Lords and served as a member of the Select Committee for Communication. He is a well-known writer and speaker on evangelism, spirituality and catechesis, and is one of the authors of the *Pilgrim* course.

There is a compelling reality to this discipleship journey in the breadth and searching in the New Testament sweep of scriptures offered here.

The Good Bookstall



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