

Small Group ideas

Week 1

5 March | Living in the shadows

John 10:10

Film clip 1: Narnia - Living in a cold world

What would it be like if it was 'always winter but never Christmas'?

Our present-day experience of Christmas may be one of such rampant materialism that it becomes a burden rather than a simple joy. Try and think beyond that into wartime austerity, and indeed the more simple lifestyle of ordinary people, before the late 1950s brought in the era of 'You've never had it so good.'

What would it be like in those circumstances, if it were always winter and never Christmas? Even in our day, ignoring the pressures, what are the blessings that Christmas brings?

The witch has created an atmosphere of suspicion: "... even some of the trees are on her side". Ironically though, as we watch Lucy going off with Mr Tumnus, we may well feel uncomfortable. Nowadays a child going off with a male (even a male faun) to his home is automatically seen as questionable at best and dangerous at worst.

How much is our present society eroded by suspicion and lack of trust?

Reading: John 10:7-11.

Jesus very specifically talks of someone who wants to rob and destroy, very much like the White Witch. **In what ways might belief in a personal devil damage or strengthen the way we live our Christian life?**

'You've made me feel warmer than I've felt in 100 years.' Lucy is a daughter of Eve and son of Adam - i.e. a human made in God's image. **How does Lucy show warmth and humanity to Mr Tumnus?**

Share about one small touch of warmth and humanity from another, recently or in the past, that has made a difference to your life.

Film clip 2: Shadowlands - Living in the 'shadowlands'

What picture does this paint of C S Lewis? In what ways does this film clip imply that Lewis might be insulated from real experience and not living life to the full?

In the film the term 'shadowlands' seems to suggest a life not fully lived, an awareness of something further never reached. It implies that the academic world of books is a narrow imitation of real life. Conversely, however, it makes it clear that Joy was drawn to Lewis in the first place by the depth of reality she found in his writings.

What does 'having life to the full' mean to you? How much does it mean breadth of experience and how much does it mean depth? Does being called to be a Christian disciple have any bearing on how you might view this?

The term 'shadowlands', as coined by Lewis in his writings, refers to this earthly existence in contrast to the more vivid and 'real' world to come. It comes in the final Narnia story, *The Last Battle*, where the children find themselves in Aslan's country, a metaphor for Heaven and a brighter, deeper version of both earth and Narnia, the 'shadowlands' they have left behind.

What difference, if any, might a belief in a future life make to our understanding of having life to the full now?

Reflection

Reader 1

Jesus said: 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they might have life and have it to the full.'

Silence

Reader 2

In *The Screwtape Letters*, the senior devil teaches the novice to keep his human 'patient's' mind as much as possible in the past or the future, or on distant abstract matters, as a way of diverting them from the full life God intended. He explains that there are two things God wants us to attend to. The first is eternity, for that is our final destination. The second is the present moment, because, as he points out in a thought worth mulling over:

'The Present is the point at which time touches eternity.'

In the Shadowlands clip, Joy posed the question, 'Do you go around with your eyes shut?' How much are your eyes fully open to the present moment? How much have you closed your mind to matters beyond this world?

Silence

Reader 3

It is possible, says Lewis, to look back on life and realise that it has been spent neither in doing what you ought to have done, nor what you really wanted. *Screwtape* reminds his young apprentice of the subtle ways in which evil can rob and destroy us:

"It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out ... The Christians describe our Enemy as 'one without whom nothing is strong'. And Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years "

Silence



Week 2

12 March | Living with the beyond

John 17:24

Film clip 1: Shadowlands - Living with the unattainable

What moments have you had in your life that you would describe as magical?

Lewis tells his students that: 'The most intense joy lies not in the having but in the desiring.' **Would you describe this as your experience? Is it true therefore, that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive? If so, why? Is this just a view of cynicism and disillusionment, or is there more to it than that?**

Reading: Matthew 6:19-21, 25, 33.

Do you find it hard to think in terms of 'storing up treasure in heaven'? If so, why?

Film clip 2: Narnia - Living with the unbelievable

Why do you think Edmund denied his experience of Narnia?

Have you ever found it difficult to share your beliefs or your spiritual experience with others? When you have ventured to try to explain them, how have others reacted? If you have chosen not to share them, what were your reasons?

List aspects of Christian belief that you find difficult to reconcile with a contemporary 'logical' or 'scientific' worldview. Then decide for each one whether it is because they seem or are illogical, because they are too hard to understand or explain, or because they are simply unfashionable.

If you were asked what makes you most convinced of a spiritual dimension to life (something or someone 'out there' beyond what you can see or prove), how would you answer?

C. S. Lewis questions how many people abandon their faith because they have been convinced by reasoned debate. He suggests it is rarely as logical or decisive as that.

What do you think are the things most responsible for people leaving the Christian faith - painful experience, hurt feelings, or the inability to reconcile faith with reason? Can you think of any other factors?

Reflection

Reader 1

This life has frequently been compared with a journey to a far country. This explains, says C. S. Lewis, the restlessness we often feel:

“The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure and merriment, he has scattered broadcast. We are never safe but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and pose an obstacle to our return to God. A few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.”

Silence

Reader 2

Jesus said:

'Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also ... But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.'

Silence

Reader 3

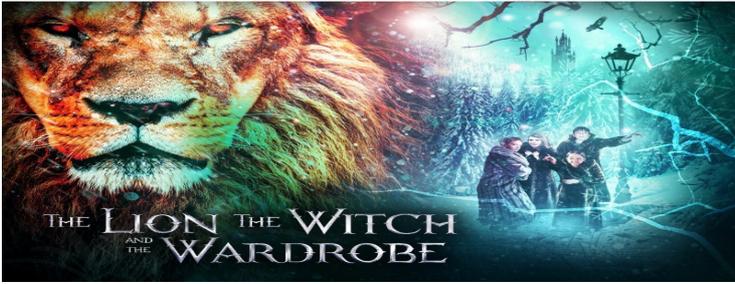
Augustine of Hippo, a fifth-century bishop, said: You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.

Silence

Reader 4

In the final Narnia story, the characters come through the stable door into Aslan's world, a beautiful sunlit country where the landmarks are familiar and yet everything is different. The Unicorn expresses what they are all feeling:

'I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this.'



Week 3

19 March | Living with the unexplained

John 9:1-6

Film clip 1: Shadowlands - The purpose of suffering

'What if the answer is yes?' Could Lewis be right? Could God possibly want us to suffer? Put aside for the moment the personal reactions this idea provokes in you, and brainstorm as many circumstances as possible in which pain and suffering might be a good thing?

In his introduction to *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis suggests that all the great religions were first preached and long practised in a world without chloroform.

What thoughts does this provoke in you about human capacity for belief in God? Do you think our contemporary 'civilised' world is less willing to accept suffering than previous generations?

The blows of his chisel which hurt us so much are what make us perfect.

Can you think of any painful experience in your life which has helped you to grow and learn? Share it if you feel able.

Discuss: "Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world." But it is still possible to close our ears. Do you ever shut out information about suffering and if so, why? Is it ever valid to do so?

Read: John 9:1-6.

'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'

Is it inevitable that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children? If so, is it fair?

What do you make of the verse: 'He was born blind so that God's power might be seen at work ...'? What ways might God's power have been at work in the man before Jesus came along?

Film clip 2: Narnia - The purpose of sacrifice.

What similarities did you notice between this episode of Aslan's death (and what you know of what precedes and follows it) and the story of the death of Jesus in the gospels?

A quick overview of our tumultuous, suffering world might lead us to conclude that Jesus' sacrifice was in vain. Did it change anything at all? And if so, what?

What difference, if any, does the idea of a suffering Saviour make to your view of the sufferings you experience?

Reflection

Reader 1

Jesus explains that his mission to bring life in its fullness came with a terrifying price tag:

'The thief comes only in order to steal, kill and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life - life in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep ... No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up and I have the right to take it back. This is what my Father has commanded me to do.'

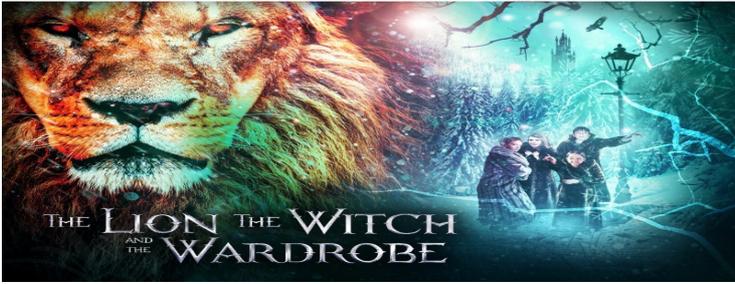
Silence

Reader 2

C. S. Lewis explains that a truly loving God is far more awesome than we often realise:

"You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked [is] not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you could be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work ... and venerable as a father's love for a child .."

A space for quiet reflection on the enormity of God's love.



Week 4

26 March | Living with what's been given

Matt 11:29-30

Film Clip 1: Narnia - The gift of a purpose

Do today's children get too many toys or too much amusement? What dangers might lie behind all this bounty? Do you think there is something wrong with our attitude to childhood? If so, what?

Have you ever been given a really good gift (material or spiritual) - one which has gone on enhancing your life rather than just giving temporary pleasure? What was special about it?

List the worst-case scenarios that we or our children might face during the next 50 years.

List ways in which we or they might be better equipped - spiritually, mentally or physically - to face these challenges.

Read: Matthew 7:7-11:

Can we treat God like Father Christmas, bringing a wish list of things we want to have? Or should we expect him to deal only with needs?

Film Clip 2: Shadowlands - The gift of the present moment

When Joy's illness goes into remission, she and Lewis visit the Golden Valley. As a child, Lewis had a painting of this place on his wall. He always identified it with Heaven.

'The pain then is part of the happiness now. That's the deal.' **What do you think this statement means and do you agree with it?**

Back in the Old Testament, Job asks a penetrating and fundamental question: 'Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?' **What would your answer be?**

Have you ever had an experience where pain and happiness (or joy) have gone hand in hand? Share it if you feel able.

Read: Philippians 4:10-13: the secret of contentment.

Is this sense of contentment the same as that expressed by Lewis in the film? If not, what is different?

In the film, Lewis says he is '... not looking for anything else to happen, not wanting to be anywhere else. Here, now, that's enough.'

Do you ever feel this sense of contentment, or that which Paul speaks of in Philippians? If so, how do you think you acquired or learned it?

Reflection

Reader 1

This is the same passage as that we read earlier, only this time from Luke's gospel. Listen out for the difference - the very specific gift offered at the end:

'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you ... Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ... If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Silence

Reader 2

In this passage, from one of C. S. Lewis's science fiction novels *Perelandra* (also known as *Voyage to Venus*), the Lady, a sort of Eve figure on an unspoilt planet, learns that it is possible to ruin what you have by yearning after what you cannot have:

'One goes into the forest to pick food and already the thought of one fruit rather than another has grown up in one's mind. Then, it may be, one finds a different fruit and not the fruit one thought of. One joy was expected and another is given. But this I had never noticed before - that at the very moment of the finding, there is in the mind a kind of thrusting back or setting aside. The picture of the fruit you have not found is still, for a moment, before you. And if you wished - if it were possible to wish - you could keep it there. You could send your soul after the good you had expected, instead of turning to the good you had got. You could refuse the real good; you could make the real fruit taste insipid by thinking of the other.'



Week 5

2 April | Living with absence

Matt 5:4

Film clip 1: Shadowlands - When belief is tested

When confronted with someone who has been bereaved or is suffering, in what ways do people try and express concern and consolation? List as many as you can, clichés and platitudes included. Start with the reactions shown in the film and then add others from your own experience.

If you have gone through a time of grief, which of the different reactions listed in the brainstorm were most helpful? Which was better, silence or attempts at consolation? What made the difference?

Is it better to rail at God in the face of grief and suffering or accept it passively and without question?

Have there been times in your life when the sheer hurt of some-thing blocked out any sense of God? If so, did that sense of God come back and if so, how?

Read: Matthew 27:39-50: the crucifixion of Jesus.

How do you react to the knowledge that Jesus also faced a terrifying sense of being abandoned? Does it comfort you or alarm you?

Film clip 2: Narnia - When God is absent

The battle is won, the witch is vanquished and the children are made kings and queens of Narnia.

Do you think the kings and queens of Narnia would have governed better with Aslan's presence or without it? In which would they have learned more?

Why might God's 'absence' be good for us? List as many reasons as possible.

Do you think the Church has tried to 'tame' God? If so, in which ways?

Read: Matthew 28:16-20: Jesus' final appearance to his disciples - and his final promise.

Does Jesus' final promise mean that we should always be aware of God's presence at those times when we most desperately need him? Can he be 'with' us even though we have no sense of his presence?

In the book of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe it is Mr Beaver, rather than Mr Tumnus, who describes Aslan as not being a tame lion, adding, 'He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him'.

The gospel story ends with a series of unpredictable appearances by the risen Jesus.

Does the idea of a sudden unexpected meeting with Jesus frighten or excite you?

Reflection

Reader 1

Jesus said: 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it in abundance.'

In the silence, think about the promise of Jesus to give us life in all its fullness. Consider the possibility that fullness encompasses grief as well as joy, pain as well as pleasure, responsibility as well as release.

Silence

Reader 2

In one of the Chronicles of Narnia, *The Silver Chair*, a schoolgirl called Jill finds herself suddenly transported to a beautiful mountain where she meets Aslan. He gives her a mission to help restore the land of Narnia. But first he tells her about some vital signs that will help her fulfil her task and sends her on her way with a warning:

'Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so down in Narnia ... And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances. Remember the signs and believe the signs. Nothing else matters.'

Silence