

A Novel Approach to Bible Study

Personal Issues for Christians for Lent/Easter or whatever the Season

by Rosalie Sugrue

Lent is a time Christians use to prepare for the events leading to the traumatic death of Jesus and the triumphal joy of Easter Day. As Christians we ponder these stories every year and know them well. Lenten study groups are a part of this tradition. Our desire is to be Easter People who follow the Jesus Way. This impacts on all we think and do.

Christianity is not a simple matter of ideological belief. Christianity is about relationships and actions. The Church has its Liturgical Seasons but being a Christian is a year round commitment.

Any Season can be a good time for having a series of study groups thinking through the implications of Christianity with others.

Using a novel to direct our thoughts offers a fresh way to clarify issues of faith and practise in our time. Relating

to a secular story gives us freedom to explore what undergirds our own faith and practise.

These 6 studies are an invitation to share experiences and feelings concerning sensitive issues and how we live our lives as Christians.

Preparation for the Study Series

Read either of the novels *Greens and Greys* or *Green, Ho!*

They are available in print and eBook editions from the publisher's website here: <http://pgpl.co.nz/>

Print and eBook editions of *Greens and Greys* and eBook editions of *Green, Ho!* can also be ordered from Epworth Books: email sales@epworthbooks.org.nz

General Procedure for Each Session

Sit in a circle

If there are more than 8 people, be organised to break into smaller groups of 4-5 for the main discussion.

Regardless of group size, it is helpful to share some considerations in pairs.

Welcome

Give relevant notices and share pastoral matters such as celebrations or concerns

Opening statement (read by the leader at the start of each session):

“It is traditional for churches to have study groups that consider deep questions about our faith and Christian living. Such groups are usually Bible focussed. Each of these studies has supporting Bible texts but today we are going to delve into personal and practical aspects of Christianity by considering the text of a novel.

To keep ourselves grounded in Christian tradition each session will begin with a famous prayer composed by an historic saint.

First listen to an arrow prayer by the Quaker, William Penn (1644–1718)

‘O Lord, help me not to despise or oppose what I do not understand.’”

Volunteer reads the set prayer

See the Six Famous Prayers section below

All read the Sarum [Salisbury] Primer Prayer written in 1588:

Study guide for *Greens and Greys* & *Green, Ho!*

God be in my head and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes and in my looking;
God be in my mouth and in my speaking;
God be in my heart and in my thinking;
God be at my end and at my departing. Amen

Other volunteers read the Bible passages

Introduce today's topic

Have the questions on a whiteboard, OHP, PowerPoint or printed sheets.

Break into smaller groups – to address the concept and the questions.

- Encourage sharing of personal experiences.
- Whatever the topic, it helps to enlarge one's own understanding by feeling into it from another's perspective.

Explore the issue by asking:

- **What was Molly's attitude to this concept?**
- **What is my attitude to this concept?**
- **Why did Molly do what she did?**
- **What would I have done in that situation?**

Come together at the end

- Share your findings, or
- Come to a consensus, and perhaps a
- Commitment or plan of action.
- Detail the chapters to read for next week.

A Concept to discuss at each session (Molly's life and your life)

1. Values learnt in childhood
2. Faith in Youth
3. Sexual orientation
4. Suicide
5. Situation ethics and social justice
6. Mature faith

Issues to consider at every session (Molly's attitude and your attitude)

- Who are you – your culture and how you view others
- Growing in faith
- Growing in Biblical understanding
- Morals – honesty, drinking, sex outside marriage etc.
- Unmentionable topics – what and why, including sexual trauma
- Church – what belonging to a faith community means

Other General Questions and Comments (when time permits)

- What experiences enabled Molly to grow in faith and understanding on today's topic?
- What four principles impressed Molly? (The Wesleyan Quadrilateral)
- What ethic does Molly eventually claim as the only Christian standard?
- Do you agree with Molly's final paragraph conclusion?
- Discuss the difficulties of living with health issues (physical and hidden)
- Consider how mental health affects personality and coping ability
- Comment on Christianity in relation to Molly's marriage and parenting.
- What are the differences between Molly's culture and your culture on this issue?

Six Famous Prayers

1. Peace – *St. Francis of Assisi, 1181–1226*

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith,
Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console,
not so much to be understood as to understand,
not so much to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying that we awake to eternal life.

2. Day by Day – *Richard of Chichester, 1197–1253*

Thanks be to thee, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which thou hast won for us,
for all the pains and insults
which thou hast borne for us.
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and brother,
may we know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen

3. God of Goodness – *Julian of Norwich, b 1342)*

God, of your goodness, give me yourself;
for you are sufficient for me.

I cannot properly ask anything less,
to be worthy of you.

If I were to ask less, I should always be in want. In
you alone do I have all. Amen

4. May there be peace within – *St Teresa of Avila, 1515–82)*

May today there be peace within.
May you trust God that you are exactly where you
are meant to be.
May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are
born of faith.
May you use those gifts that you have received,
and pass on the love that has been given to you.
May you be content knowing
you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your bones,
and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance,
praise and love.

It is there for each and every one of us. Amen

5. Interdependence – Reinhold Niebuhr, 1892–1971)

O God, you have bound us together
in this bundle of life;
give us grace to understand how our lives depend
on the courage, the industry, the honesty and
integrity of our fellow beings;
that we may be mindful of their needs, grateful for
their faithfulness,
and faithful in our responsibilities to them;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

6. From silly devotions – St Teresa of Avila, 1515–82

From silly devotions and from sour-faced saints,
Good Lord, deliver us.

Let nothing disturb you; let nothing dismay you;
All things pass: God never changes.

Patience attains all it strives for.

Those who have God find they lack nothing:
God suffices.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
Yours are the only hands
with which he can do his work,
Yours are the only feet
with which he can go about the world,
Yours are the only eyes
through which his compassion
can shine forth upon a troubled world. Amen

Novel Chapters of Particular Relevance to the Discussion Topics

(GG) indicates only in *Greens and Greys*. (GH) indicates only in *Green, Ho!*

Session 1. Rules and Promises Learnt in Childhood

Golden Rule Days; Danny Boy; Behind Locked
Doors; Safe on Canaan's Side

Session 2. Faith Discovered in Youth

Salad Days; Life after Deac; Over the Hill; Religion
and Myth; The Shamrock

Session 3. Sexual Orientation

Wear some Flowers in your Hair; There's No Place
like Home

Session 4. Suicide

Dark Encounters; Funiculi, Funiculà; Wellington
(GG)

Session 5. Situation Ethics and Social Justice

When Irish Eyes are smiling: Positively Married;
Hokitika; Dunedin

Session 6. Mature Faith

Plain Living; Reflections (GH); Creative Visualisation
(GH); Wellington (GG)

Chapters relating to General Topics

Growing in Faith and Biblical Understanding

Reflections; Religion and Myth; Plain Living

Unmentionable Topics – Including Sexual Trauma

A Bible rape story – 2 Samuel 13:1-22

Bible Stories; A Shocking Story; Yield Not to
Temptation; Up from Down Under; On the Line;
Stock Taking; Riding Down from Bangor; Blood,
Sweat and Tears

Morals – Honesty, Drinking, Sex Outside Marriage etc.

When Irish Eyes are Smiling; A Bonking Binge;
Barefoot and pregnant; Night Ramblings (GH)

Health Issues (Mental, Physical and Hidden)

Hospital descriptions and 'diary entries' – only in
Green, Ho!

Session I — Values Learnt in Childhood

Prayer I: Peace – *St. Francis of Assisi, 1181–1226*

All read the Sarum [Salisbury] Primer Prayer written in 1588.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.
⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.
⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.
⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.
⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Proverbs 22:6 (NRSV)

Train children in the right way and when old they will not stray.

Proverbs 6:20-22

My child, keep your father's commandment, and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them upon your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you.

Concept to discuss at this session

I. Values (including rules and promises) learnt in childhood

- **What was Molly's attitude to this concept?**
- **What is my attitude to this concept?**
- **Why did Molly do what she did?**
- **What would I have done in that situation?**

Issues to consider at every session (Molly's attitude and your attitude)

- Who are you – your culture and how you view others
- Growing in faith
- Growing in Biblical understanding
- Morals – honesty, drinking, sex outside marriage etc.
- Unmentionable topics – what and why, including sexual trauma
- Church – what belonging to a faith community means

Other General Questions and Comments (when time permits)

- What experiences enabled Molly to grow in faith and understanding on today's topic?
- What four principles impressed Molly? (The Wesleyan Quadrilateral)
- What ethic does Molly eventually claim as the only Christian standard?
- Do you agree with Molly's final paragraph conclusion?
- Discuss the difficulties of living with health issues (physical and hidden)
- Consider how mental health affects personality and coping ability
- Comment on Christianity in relation to Molly's marriage and parenting.
- What are the differences between Molly's culture and your culture on this issue?

Session 2 — Faith in Youth

Prayer 2: Day by Day – *Richard of Chichester, 1197–1253*

All read the Sarum [Salisbury] Primer Prayer written in 1588

Ecclesiastes 11:9

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

Proverbs 1:8

Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching.

Proverbs 20:21

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

Ephesians 5:18

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.

Proverbs 23:25

Let your father and mother be glad, let her who bore you rejoice.

Psalms 103:5

Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord O my soul and do not forget his benefits – who forgives all your iniquity ... who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Concept to discuss at this session

2. Faith in adolescence

- **What was Molly's attitude to this concept?**
- **What is my attitude to this concept?**
- **Why did Molly do what she did?**
- **What would I have done in that situation?**

Issues to consider at every session (Molly's attitude and your attitude)

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Session 3 — Sexual Orientation

Prayer 3: God of Goodness – *Julian of Norwich, b 1342*)

All read the Sarum [Salisbury] Primer Prayer written in 1588

Acts 10: 9-36

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹²In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ¹⁴But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' ¹⁵The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. ¹⁷Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate ... The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. ²⁴The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends ... ³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵... anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶

John 13:34-35

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Concept to discuss at this session

3. Sexual Orientation

- **What was Molly's attitude to this concept?**
- **What is my attitude to this concept?**
- **Why did Molly do what she did?**
- **What would I have done in that situation?**

Issues to consider at every session (Molly's attitude and your attitude)

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Session 4 — Suicide

Prayer 4: May there be peace within – *St Teresa of Avila, 1515–82*)

All read the Sarum [Salisbury] Primer Prayer written in 1588

Matthew 7:1-2

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the beam in your own eye.

Galatians 5:13-14

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

John 3:17

For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Concept to discuss at this session

4. Suicide

- **What was Molly's attitude to this concept?**
- **What is my attitude to this concept?**
- **Why did Molly do what she did?**
- **What would I have done in that situation?**

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- Comment on Christianity in relation to Molly's marriage and parenting.
- What are the differences between Molly's culture and your culture on this issue?

Session 5 — Situation Ethics and Social Justice

Prayer 5: Interdependence – Reinhold Niebuhr, 1892–1971

All read the Sarum [Salisbury] Primer Prayer written in 1588

Proverbs 31:9 (NRSV)

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Amos 5:24

Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Micah 6:8

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?

Matthew 11:18-19

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon";¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

Concept to discuss at this session

5. Situation ethics and social justice

- **What was Molly's attitude to this concept?**
- **What is my attitude to this concept?**
- **Why did Molly do what she did?**
- **What would I have done in that situation?**

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Session 6 — Mature Faith

Prayer 6: From silly devotions – *St Teresa of Avila, 1515–82*

All read the Sarum [Salisbury] Primer Prayer written in 1588

Matthew 22:37-40

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commands hang all the law and the prophets.

1 John 4:12

No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Philippians 4:8

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Concept to discuss at this session

6. Mature faith

- **What was Molly’s attitude to this concept?**
- **What is my attitude to this concept?**
- **Why did Molly do what she did?**
- **What would I have done in that situation?**

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Concluding Discussion

- How can we achieve healthy intergenerational discussion on sensitive issues?

1 Corinthians 13:4-13

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; ⁵it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. ¹³So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.