

# Come and See 2024: Questions for Bishop Steven

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Joanna Gallant (00:01)

Well, welcome to this special edition of Come and See and thank you to everyone who sent in questions for Bishop Steven. We've had such a positive response, sadly, we won't be able to answer them all here today, but many of them related to such similar themes, we do hope that we'll be able to address most of your questions. So I'm Joanna Gallant and I'm Head of Discipleship and Social Justice here at the Diocese.

James, would you like to introduce yourself?

James Wood (00:37)

I'm James Wood. I'm one of the discipleship enablers for youth, children and families in the Buckinghamshire area and the school's mission specialist for the Diocese of Oxford.

Steven Croft (00:50)

And I'm Bishop Steven Bishop of Oxford. It's great to be with you all.

Joanna Gallant (00:54)

Thank you. So Bishop Steven, your super fan Emma is back again this year and she's enjoyed Come and See again and wants to know, will you be doing another one next year?

Steven Croft (01:06)

Thanks for all your encouragement, Emma, and indeed everybody else for the positive feedback. Yes, I very much hope we will be doing another Come and See next year. We're beginning to work on themes and ideas, and it's really good to know that take-up has increased again this year, and it's lovely to have all the questions and feedback. So, yes, we will. will.

James Wood (01:29)

Thank you Bishop. Janet and Barbara are asking, can we have Come and See another time of the year too, or even throughout the year?

Steven Croft (01:37)

Oh, very interesting. I think it's a lot of work by a lot of people goes into Come and See and it's really good to do that each Lent, but I don't think we could sustain the new material all year round. But there is lots of people can get into on our discipleship learning hub and all the previous Come and Sees are there on the Beatitudes, on the Lord's Prayer and on the Creed, if people want to explore that. And each is about the same length, as Come and See, and there's lots of good other material there as well as those previous Come and Sees. So if you'd like to go further, there's plenty of material that's already available, although it's not in the dated sequence that you find in Lent

Joanna Gallant (02:22)

Lovely, thank you. So we've had lots of comments about how helpful it's been to reflect on both the Old and the New Testament this Lent. And Alison would like to know if you can recommend any books to read alongside the Bible to help her interpret and make more connections between the Old and the New Testament.

Steven Croft (02:41)

Thank you, Alison. Really good question. And it's a really important theme. People today don't grow up knowing and learning the Bible as much as people used to. And therefore, particularly when people come to faith as adults, there's a lot of learning to be done. And there notes. There are short commentaries on most books of the Bible, if you want to explore a particular book in depth. Again, if you go to our learning hub, you'll find a really interesting five week short course called Opening Up the Bible by Andy Angel, our director of formation, which is really accessible and which is a good overview of the whole of scripture. I've written a number of other things on biblical texts and I'd especially perhaps commend exploring God's Mercy, which is an exploration of Psalm 107, five beautiful images of salvation, and that draws out those pictures in the Psalms and also in the Gospels, if people want to explore that a bit further.

James Wood (03:54)

Bishop, Gordon wanted to know and wanted to thank you for your interest in the series, but would really like to know, are there any healthy examples of coveting something or are all unhealthy and counter to God's wishes?

Steven Croft (04:10)

Thank you, Gordon. That's a really interesting question. I think it depends what you mean by covet. One of the really interesting things about that commandment is that it takes us into the realm of our inner life actions. And if you use covet to mean simply desires, then there are, of course, very healthy and natural desires. And you can think of good things that you might want to do or just neutral things that people want to do, which are neither good nor bad in themselves. But actually, I think the word covet is a very helpful, although old fashioned English word, which does genuinely mean or wrong desire. It might be a wrong desire for something, which in other circumstances would be good, but it's going beyond what is appropriate. And the

the use of the word in the commandments is really interesting because it roots where things go wrong, not in our outward actions or our words only, but within our hearts and therefore leads us to desire that purity in being set right on the inside as well as in our actions and our words.

Joanna Gallant (05:29)

Thank you. So Helen and Kerrigan have enjoyed the focus on Jesus' summary of the law but wondered why there was very little focus upon loving ourselves and particularly when social media is influencing young people and the way they see themselves.

Steven Croft (05:48)

That's a really interesting point and there are some parts of the Christian tradition which lay a very great emphasis on restoring love of self, and St. Augustine, one of the great saints of the church, says that there can be no love of neighbour without love of self. You've got to learn how to love yourself. So maybe we should have included a bit more on that. But we did include a great deal on our identity being rooted in knowing that we are loved. And I think that sense of love of self in a healthy way grows out of knowing that we are loved by God. Talking of love of self in isolation has a little bit of a risk of becoming narcissistic and turning in on ourselves and putting ourselves at the centre. I think it's safer and better to set that aspect of loving ourselves in the context of the love of God and seeing how we are loved by God and then being able to respect ourselves and know that we are loved and to love ourselves and take care of ourselves because we are loved by God.

Joanna Gallant (07:04)

That's really helpful.

James Wood (07:07)

Bishop Steven, you mentioned in one of your videos how families come in all shapes and sizes and that this has raised a question for several people about the commandment, honour your mother and father. And Michael what about the situation where parents' actions have been derogative or even harmful towards their own children? What attitude should the children take in that situation?

Steven Croft (07:36)

Thank you for that question, Michael. It's a very important and moving and distressing question. Sadly, things do go badly wrong in all kinds of human relationships, including between parents and children. And this is where it's really important to understand the Ten Commandments as general principles which need to be interpreted. And I...

They need to be interpreted through Jesus' summary of the law and through the law of love. So the commandment to honour your father and mother can't be taken in isolation from all the other commandments. And of course it presumes that your parents or whoever else you're trying to give honour and respect to are worthy and safe to love and respect in those ways.

So it's a general principle. And in order sometimes to do the most loving thing to ourselves and to others, it's important to prioritise personal safety, wellbeing in that. And if people lose our honour and respect, then we may want to, over time and with support, address questions of forgiveness. But it may be that that respect and honour can't then be given in the way that the commandment intends because of people's actions really. So it's always important to put that principle of love and also balancing one commandment against another in examples of that kind.

Joanna Gallant (09:21)

Thank you, wise words. Something people have really appreciated with Come and See is the space each day to pause and reflect but also the encouragement to take some regular rest. Like many people, Bishop Steven, I know you have a very full diary but Sarah wondered what tips you might have to help her continue to find this sort of rhythm of pausing and reflection and rest in her busy life.

Steven Croft (09:27)

I think if people have managed to find time and space during the season of Lent for 40 days, that's really good and well done. And I think it's absolutely right then to look for ways to continue that and build that in. It may be, as people were asking in earlier questions, that you find some other way to pray and to use that time, whether first thing in the morning or in the afternoon when you get home or last thing at night, so that there's something else for you to follow. I think we all need props and supports in that. I think finding good simple ways to pray, which are helpful to you, are really important. So there's a very good app which I use and many colleagues use called Daily Prayer from the Church of England, which will give you for each day, morning prayer with the set readings, evening prayer and also night prayer to suit prayer at different times of the day. And that can be a very helpful aid and support when you're praying and also the Bible readings take you through the Psalms and the scriptures in sequence really, really helpfully. So finding what helps you is really important, but keeping if you possibly can that daily time when you draw apart to be with God and engage with scripture and hold before God your family and friends and the situations you're concerned about in the world is a really central part of our Christian discipleship. So I'd really encourage you to do that. And in every church, your parish priest, vicar or minister will be only too pleased to talk to you about resources for prayer and about helping you forward in that way.

James Wood (11:50)

Making space and keeping the Sabbath we know are important for us all. But sometimes as Christians we are faced with difficult decisions, like Marilyn, whose church always holds their APCM after a Sunday service. And she feels this is breaking a commandment and so chooses not to attend, but wonders, am I being unreasonable?

Steven Croft (12:12)

Thank you, Mary. That's a really interesting question. I don't want to get involved in the detail of your own parish and whether they should or shouldn't hold their APCM on a Sunday. Quite a lot of churches have moved to that because they're balancing, I think, the importance of having a lot of people from the parish present. And obviously the time that happens most conveniently is usually when people are coming to church for worship anyway, with, against, not bringing them out during the week and that proves to be a better time. The principle behind the Sabbath is beautifully articulated by Jesus in one of the gospel passages we looked at, that the Sabbath was created for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. Jesus gives a very clear steer with that commandment that actually there ought to be some flexibility and discretion about just how we keep the commandment. It's also true with an annual meeting, although I said I wasn't going to get involved, that actually some aspects of the annual meeting, although they feel like work and therefore shouldn't happen on the Sabbath, they're also dimensions of Christian community. We give thanks to God for all that's gone on during the course of the year. We nominate and elect people to hold office with, in the life of the church and holding that within the context of Sunday worship can be really helpful and valuable as well. So there are two sides to that question. I understand the hesitation, but it's absolutely appropriate for churches to work out for themselves which is the best way forward.

James Wood (13:43)

Thank you.

Joanna Gallant (14:03)

I think one of the things we notice with Come and See is how when we are intentionally traveling with Jesus each day, those deeper questions about life and faith do seem to surface. And for Jane, she's been reflecting upon how she believes in God, how she prays to God, but is aware that she doesn't have a personal relationship with Jesus, which the people at her church are talking about. And she says, I don't know how to get this. And does that mean that I'm not really a Christian or am I bad?

Steven Croft (14:32)

Jane, thank you. What a lovely, honest question. Working backwards, it certainly doesn't mean you're bad. Let's be clear about that. God loves you and loves each person in creation. In order to enter more deeply into a personal relationship with Jesus, happens in different ways actually in different parts of our Christian lives. But there is a really beautiful verse in the book of Revelation, Revelation 3:20, where the risen Jesus is talking to one of the churches in a place

called Laodicea. And this is a church which Jesus describes in the letter as being lukewarm, neither cold nor hot. And Jesus is calling them into a deeper relationship. Maybe what you're seeking, Jane. And Jesus says very powerfully in that letter, listen, I'm standing at the door and knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them and they with me. And it's an invitation really in a very powerful picture for us to open the door of our hearts and to invite Christ in to dwell within us. There are many passages particularly in John's gospel where Jesus promises that the spirit and Jesus himself will come and live in us, which is a wonderful part of being a Christian. So if you come to a moment in your Christian journey either near the beginning or part way through where you are profoundly seeking that deeper and closer relationship with Jesus, using that image and opening the door of your heart and inviting Jesus to come in is a very, very helpful prayer to pray. And again, with this, as with a number of questions we've looked at, having a conversation with someone you trust, somebody who's been a Christian perhaps longer than you have with your parish priest or vicar, minister, can be really, really helpful in those moments. I know I've loved over the years being with people when they've prayed those prayers and invited Christ into their hearts and lives and just seeing what a difference that has made.

James Wood (17:07)

We've had some really thoughtful questions about the relationship between life and scripture, but we've had a particularly interesting one from Callum who would like to ask you how you would understand the divine inspiration of the authors of scripture, not in a conceptual or doctrinal way, but rather how you would understand, imagine or reflect on what divine inspiration might have entailed for the authors of the Bible experientially and what it entails for your own faith and service today.

Steven Croft (17:40)

Thank you, what a really interesting question, Callum, and the term inspired in terms of scripture, and I believing that scripture is inspired, does come from a particular verse in Paul's letters to Timothy, where Timothy says all scripture is God-breathed, the breath of God is infusing the scriptures. And Christians have thought about what that means over the years and have also put that reflection together with all the scholarship on the Old Testament and the New Testament and how we believe the Old Testament and the New Testament came about. And there's a very rich layered understanding of what that inspiration means. So there's inspiration and God inspiring and helping the people who were authors of the Bible and that's in many different ways. So we don't imagine, I don't think anybody imagines that a particular book of the Bible was dictated by the Holy Spirit to somebody who wrote it down. But God is working through the genesis of Old Testament texts over many years through many different people working on them at the moment they are written down. The easiest place to see that I guess is in the books of the prophets where these were people who were inspired by God to preach and teach and their oracles were written down sometimes by them and sometimes as in the case of the prophet Jeremiah by a scribe Baruch who recorded his words. There's inspiration then in the editing and the compilation of the different books of the Bible. So if you look at the book of Psalms, which is one of my favourite books in scripture, you can see patterns in the way the Psalms are arranged, which are absolutely fascinating. So near the beginning of the book of

Psalms, there are far more Psalms of lament, and at the end of the book of Psalms, there are far more songs of praise and rejoicing. So you get the sense through the Psalms of this note of praise getting louder and louder towards the end, and there's inspiration in that as well.

There's inspiration in the New Testament writers. You imagine Paul writing his letters to the churches, wrestling with really difficult problems and probably discussing them with Sylvanus and Timothy and his other associates and the Holy Spirit working through all of that, or inspiring Luke the historian to record and imagine what people said in their speeches as he writes that down. So that's one whole level at which the Holy Spirit is working and inspiring.

At another level, that inspiration has been discerned by the Church as the books of Scripture have been assembled into the canon, and there was a big process in the early Church of reflection, particularly how the New Testament should be seen alongside the Old Testament, and why these particular books should be in Scripture and seen as inspired, and others were not. And that's the Spirit working through the Church there, the Spirit works through different pastors and teachers down the centuries as people reflect on Scripture. And most powerfully of all, the Spirit is at work as each of us comes to the Bible today and we read and encounter and find new things in the text which apply to our own lives. And we have a sense of meeting with God in Scripture because the Spirit is at work not only in the original formation of the text, but in our encounter with God today. So it's a very rich concept of biblical inspiration, which goes alongside the task of biblical interpretation and putting love at the centre.

Joanna Gallant (21:35)

Thank you. So one of the things this year's Come and See has been asking is, who is my neighbour?

And with the wars raging around the world and people losing their homes and their livelihoods and family members on a daily basis, we've had a number of questions where people are struggling with the sheer volume of suffering that we're all seeing. They're asking, is there really such a thing as a just war? And how can this loving God that we've been walking with through Lent allow all of this to happen? And Catherine's question really sort of summed this up for many of them.

She says, I struggle at times to reconcile God's unfathomable love for us with the scale of suffering we see in his world today. Does his love extend to all humans?

Steven Croft (22:33)

Thank you for all of those questions and comments and indeed for some of the emails that have come in during Come and See. And of course, we all share the distress of the terrible events happening around the world, which have accumulated in recent years and particularly the events unfolding in southern Israel and Gaza over recent months. It's been the most intense period of reflection on global suffering that I can remember in my lifetime, I think, and is really

powerful and moving and provokes those questions in all of us. I think, Catherine, I would turn your question around and say that in, although we can't understand or reconcile in our minds the profound truth that God loves each person in creation with these terrible examples of suffering that we see each day. It is, I find, even more important and a very important counterweight to all of that, to reflect on God's promises and the love of God in the midst of that human suffering. I think that helps me to be a better person. I think it helps us all to live in a better way, to contemplate that love and then to do what we can about those global situations in our prayers, in our giving, and in our neighbourliness ourselves. I know many people are particularly disturbed by the events unfolding in Gaza, which continue to be deeply, deeply tragic. And maybe we feel powerless to do anything about that. But we can actually redouble our engagement with our Muslim and Jewish and other neighbours here to make sure that the conflicts in other parts of the world don't disrupt and pull apart our communities here. And we do need to realise whilst we invent the suffering and ask very natural questions of God and our faith, we do need to realise that the majority of this suffering is caused by people's inhumanity to people, that it's not God of course causing the suffering. It's deep -seated conflict over many years which has erupted in a particularly violent and destructive way and all of that arises out of the difficulty and pain and sin in people's hearts and lives and therefore we need to be holding that too in our prayers. And again, that needs to drive us, I think, back to Jesus' summary of the law and the commandments and God's principles for good human relationships and good human behaviour.

James Wood (25:51)

As well as global concerns, we've had questions about the national and local church. Wendy says how difficult she finds it to watch a television program and hear the continual use of Jesus Christ as a swear word. She wants to know why is the church not doing more to speak out against this.

Steven Croft (26:15)

Thank you, Wendy. And yes, I find that distressing as well. And I think it's a very good thing that we're distressed by that, that the really precious name of Jesus is used very casually and in a blaspheming way. And I commented, I think, in one of the videos how the second commandment not to misuse the name of the Lord, your God is the most forgotten and neglected probably of all the commandments. I think as a church we can do things about that, but the most powerful thing that we can do is to set an example in our own lives and actually seek to model something different in our speech, letting our yes be yes and our no be no, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, and not going down the route of the careless use of God's name.

I don't think it would do a great deal of good for bishops and church leaders to be continually writing to the BBC every time they heard a swear word, but sometimes it's helpful for congregation members as well as church leaders to raise their voices if there's something particularly upsetting that we find. And that does happen from time to time when television or the media cross a threshold.



Joanna Gallant (27:44)

Thank you. We've also heard from Pam who would like to know how you see the role of the parish priest in the small rural parishes for the future. And also while Michael is questioning why the leadership of the Church of England neglects prioritising resources at a parish level because he feels that's to the detriment of the local parish support.

Steven Croft (27:47)

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for both of those questions. I think to Pam's question, the role of the village parish priest in particular has changed a lot over the last two or three generations. It's no longer been possible to sustain a priest in a village of a few hundred people who would be full time there. And of course, as the population has moved to the cities. So, the church has needed to resource the populations in the cities as well as in the countryside. So across our own diocese, we've developed patterns of clergy looking after several different villages in joint benefices. And whilst there can be problems and difficulties there on the whole, I think that works really well. And our parish clergy in rural areas do a brilliant job of being with people in different ways, in different times. And as a diocese, we've not reduced our clergy in rural areas now for more than 12 years. It's been really good to be able to sustain that commitment for the sake of the rural church, which is really, really important. In terms of Michael's question about whether church leaders are not prioritising local church ministry, I would say, well, I think we are.

And there is a continual debate about how much is needed for central resources and services and how much is needed locally. And rest assured, Michael, we regularly compare ourselves as a diocese with other dioceses across the country. We think we're one of the most efficient dioceses in the country in terms of the amount of resource we dedicate to central services as opposed to local ministry by far the majority of our expenditure is invested locally and we're absolutely committed to sustaining the numbers of clergy we have into the future. There's also debate nationally which is a slightly different debate because different dioceses are interpreting and finding different ways forward but in terms of our own diocese we're absolutely committed to that local investment and I think that's reflected back in the incredibly generous way in which parishes give to the parish share, which supports clergy locally primarily.

James Wood (30:43)

Bishop Steven, you've been a parish priest yourself and have experienced many challenges and delights of that role. But before we come to an end of this Q&A, Leila would love to know, when did you know you wanted to become a bishop? And Lyn would like to know, what is the most important prayer you say each night?

Steven Croft (31:03)

Well, thank you. I think nobody ever really wants to become a bishop, I think. God calls some priests to be bishops for the sake of the whole Church, and it's not something generally that people are encouraged to go looking for or kind of wanting to do. It's an enormously privileged ministry and an enormously testing and challenging one. I became aware of my call to be a priest when I was a teenager, 16 or 17 years old, and I'm absolutely passionate about young people being open to that call early in life. And I became aware that God may possibly be calling me to be a bishop in my late 40s, early 50s, but you, you have to test that sense of call very carefully and in the classical tradition of the church, the wise thing to do, people say, when you begin to get that call is to run away as fast as you can. But sometimes the call persists and you end up being in these really interesting but demanding roles. In terms of the most important prayer I pray at night, I think I'm going to have two answers to that question. The first is I try and say thank you to God for the different moments of the day. And secondly, I try and recall and remember and ask God, where have you been in my life today? Where have I discovered you, perhaps in unexpected ways through this day? Those two things, thank you, and noticing where God has been at work remain very important to me.

Joanna Gallant (33:10)

We're sort of coming to the end now but we've had some wonderful feedback already this year about Come and See and to close we've got this lovely comment from Irene. Irene said I just want to thank Bishop Steven and all those who produced the very best Lenten study material that I've ever used during the 70 years in which I've listened to or attended Lent groups. So thank you Irene for that. That's really encouraging.

Steven Croft (33:37)

Thank you Irene.

Joanna Gallant (33:40)

And thank you all for all the questions that you sent in. We hope we've managed to answer as many of those as possible. And we really look forward to you joining us on the journey of Come and See next year. So thank you very much. And thank you, Bishop Steven and James.

Steven Croft (33:56)

Thank you Joanna, Thank you James. Thank you everybody.