

Complex Characters

September 2022 (4 September - 1 October)



The Bible, like a busy pub at closing time, or a heaving post office queue a few days before the Christmas delivery cut off, or a beach on the one day of summer it hasn't rained, is full of characters. And like the pub, post office, and beach some of these characters are somewhat... complex. The Bible is a rich and fascinating trove of people wrestling with what it is to be human. As we follow the twists and turns of these characters jostling together, it offers sharp insights into what it means to be alive. Dreamers, schemers and screamers!

Once before we looked at the Bible through the lens of 'complex characters' surveying a grab bag of striking personalities. This month, off the back of 'The Simple Life' we thought it would be fun to think about complexity again! Our faith is often like that isn't it? Quiet for a season and then loud. Chaotic and then calm. Simple and then complex.

So, we step once again into the Bible in search of complex characters, but this time we're also going to expand the concept to think about these complex characters in the complex environments they lived in. As we move from summer to harvest we read about these men and women in the context of climate change and the environmental challenges that face us today. Each of the people we will look at had to deal with the opportunities and limitations of their environments adapting to pressures of land and weather.

When we come to the Bible we meet a complex world full of complex characters a mirror to our own complex world and the complex characters like you and I in it. Through

this conversation between the two we seek the universal and simple truth that all these complex characters are beloved by God.

Each week of the four week theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and prompts for thought, extracted from their original themes and represented here in an updated form.

Generations of complexity (4 September)

Famine, stars, naming, visiting, laughter, tears, binding, birthing... Reflecting on the complex characters of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and their descendants. These lives we read about in Genesis were shaped by history, geography and meteorology – just like ours. Like us, they were complex individuals reacting to a complex, pressured environment. Forces of nature, personality and spirituality come together in a complicated family.

1. **Genesis 12:**
10-20
 1. **Famine. Scarcity.** Displaced.
 2. **Stars watching over us as we look up.** Thinking about descendants, passing on character traits.
2. **Genesis 15:** 1-6
 3. **New names.** *Choose an aspect of long reading to focus on.*
3. **Genesis 17**
 4. **Three visitors.** Getting into Abraham's mindset.
 5. **Laughter and then tears.** Hagar's sorrow.
4. **Genesis 18:** 1-15
 6. **The binding of Issac.** Stop!
5. **Genesis 21:** 1-21
 7. **Next generation/s.** Issac and Rebekah and on. *67 verses! You will need to choose an aspect of long reading to focus on.*
6. **Genesis 22:** 1-19
7. **Genesis 24**

Creativity, responding to crisis (11 September)

This week we think about creative responses to unprecedented circumstances with the help of Joanna (and the other women referenced in Luke 8) who bought in to the ground floor ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. What motivated these women to go out on a limb and support him? What can their example show us about how we respond creatively to the climate crisis today?

To explore all this Joanna is going to 'read' the texts for the week and give us her thoughts... A character from Luke reading the Gospel of Luke!

1. Luke 8: 1-3
 2. Luke 5: 17-26
 3. Luke 6: 46-49
 4. Luke 10: 38-42
 5. Luke 13: 20-21
 6. Luke 16: 1-13
 7. Luke 24: 1-12
1. **Supporting Jesus.** What made Joanna et al crowdfund Jesus?
 2. **When God closes a door — Jesus opens a roof...?** A creative solution?
 3. **Building wisely.** Wise and foolish responses to crises.
 4. **Martha and Mary.** What did Joanna think of the sisters?
 5. **Parable of the yeast.** Could Jesus have got this analogy from Joanna?
 6. **Dishonest steward.** What would Joanna make of this story?
 7. **Clothes like lightning.** Earth shattering tomb.

Heavy weather, complications and cliffhangers (18 September)

Doubt, catastrophe, frustration, twists, turns, satire. A prophet who doesn't want to prophesy, a big fish that gets awful indigestion, a strange plant and a cliffhanger ending. Jonah is a complex book about a complex character in a complex situation. What does his stormy story have to tell us about the complicated situations and challenges we face today as a result of environmental pressures on our climate?

1. Jonah 1: 1-3

1. **Jonah runs.** How long do you think the gap was between verses 2 and 3? Was Jonah already pulling the suitcase out from under the bed before The Lord had finished speaking? Was there some soul searching? What's it like to be in that verse 2.5 place? Do we find ourselves in that 2.5 place when we think about the urgent climate change challenges we have to face?

2. Jonah 1: 4-17

3. Jonah 2

2. **A giant fish.** Well that's quite a curveball eh?

4. Jonah 3

3. **Straight from the belly of the fish.** Picture the scene, the sounds, the smell... It must have been... intense! As we think this week about the pressure climate change is putting on nature it could be fruitful to think about what it means to engage more of our senses in prayer, not simply sound/silence like we often do, but paying more attention to the natural world.

5. Jonah 4

6. Jonah 4: 10-11...

4. **Jonah speaks.** How long to do you think the gap between verses 2 and 3 was this time? Imagine the fishy Jonah trekking to Nineveh. Would people have stopped and stared? Would they have commented on the reeking prophet?

7. Matthew 12: 38-42

5. **Jonah rages.** Under the burning sun.

6. **Jonah replies...?** We return to verses 10-11 because there is no verse 12... The question is left unanswered. How do you think Jonah might have responded?

7. **Jesus and Jonah and us.**

The complexity of kindness (25 September)

The complexity of kindness, that is able to dig deep and respond generously and creatively in the midst of heartache and disaster. In literature we often celebrate complicated baddies with cruel mischievous plans but in real life the baddies are often all too predictable and dull in their greed and arrogance whereas the people who are managing somehow to do good and be kind in the midst of crisis are richly complex. They're not superheroes, they're real people like you and I but who manage to find wells of kindness within them. This week we delve into *Ruth* to see how Ruth and Naomi, two complex women with complex motivations, respond to heartache with compassion. The pressures we face as a result of climate change now and over the coming years will require us to respond with great determination and resourcefulness but also great kindness.

1. Ruth 1: 1-7
 1. **Land and loss.** Upheaval, turmoil and sorrow.
2. Ruth 1: 8-22
 2. **Naomi and Ruth stick together.** In the face of disaster and calamity.
 3. **Gleaning.** Digging into gleaning, saving what is left over.
3. Ruth 2
 4. **The threshing floor.** A strange interlude.
4. Ruth 3
 5. **What's going on here?** What is going through Ruth's mind? Boaz's mind? The next-of-kin's mind?
5. Ruth 4: 1-12
 6. **New hope.** In the midst of the pain and upheaval, hope is found.
6. Ruth 4: 13-17
 7. **Jesus's genealogy.** One of the few women mentioned. Thinking about the legacy of kindness that Ruth left behind. How can we participate in this same legacy of kindness? How can it inspire us to face the challenges that meet us through climate change today?
7. Matthew 1: 1-7