

Frontline Sundays

Sermon Preparation Notes

Find the corresponding service plans and small group guides at licc.org.uk/frontlinesundays

These notes suggest ways to approach the Bible passage, connect the text with your congregation's Monday to Saturday lives, and use the Frontline Sundays short films in the service. You'll undoubtedly want to draw on your usual practices and style too. May you be blessed as you help people see their own lives through fresh eyes in the light of God's word.

Frontline Sunday 1: All the difference in the world

Frontline Sunday 2: Wherever we are

Frontline Sunday 3: Whatever we do

Frontline Sunday 4: Whoever we are

Frontline Sunday 5: Together we grow

ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

We are the church in mission – gathered and scattered – and we make all the difference in the world. The church is a body of people living a rhythm of gathering and scattering; usually gathering on Sunday and scattering for the rest of the week. Despite being a minority, Christians make all the difference in the world for Christ – wherever they are, whatever they do, whoever they are – Monday through Saturday. And to grow as disciples for these frontlines, we need one another; we need to be together as a worshipping community.

Suggested passage – 1 Peter 1:1–2

As the first sermon in the Frontline Sundays series, it clearly needs to make sense of the whole series for the congregation. So why not suggest these two verses from the beginning of 1 Peter to set a biblical foundation that subsequent services and sermons can build on?

In his letter to scattered groups of Christians in what is modern-day Turkey, the apostle Peter writes to them to ignite their imagination and inspire hope for the possibilities of their everyday lives in a complex world. Peter begins by using two pivotal words to describe the people of God and then he reminds them of a stunning truth. These two words – ‘elect’ and ‘exiles’ – helped the church know who they were. They, and we in the UK today, are a small minority in nations that, in the main, do not worship Jesus. The image of six ‘red dots’ in a sea of grey ones pictures this. Yet Peter is confident in what God can and will do through them. He concludes his opening greeting by joyfully celebrating the work of the Triune God in them, day by day – making all the difference in the world.

Note: Expository preaching through the whole of 1 Peter would be a great follow-on to Frontline Sundays. LICC will publish a study of 1 Peter in Autumn 2019 as part of the Gateway Seven series.

Preparatory sermon notes

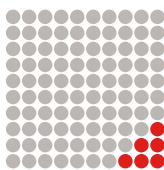
Introduction

In general, if you tell people you go to church they will think it's because you're religious and it's what people like you do. Or they will think it's where your friends are and that it's a good place to connect with people. Or maybe they know how well we support one another and are pleased that you belong to such a community. Whilst there is a grain of truth in all these views, they miss what the New Testament suggests the church is all about. When Peter begins his letter to small groups of Christians scattered across ancient Turkey, he wants them to understand what it means to be the church. He does it by helping them see themselves as part of the Old Testament people of God. He uses two key words and a stunning truth.

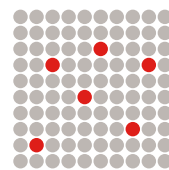
They are God's *elect*

God's purpose from Genesis 12 onwards was that Abraham, and all his descendants, would be blessed and would be a blessing to the world around. Not all these early Christians would have been Jewish by birth. Yet Peter draws them into the ongoing story of God's intention for the world by using the language of calling. Whatever our journey to faith in Jesus was, when we surrendered to his lordship, we became part of this 'called' people. In the visual we're using, we are red dots.

The red dots visualise the statistical fact that in the UK around 6% of people worship in a Christian church once a month or more. It's not many but it is significant. When we gather as worshippers we remind ourselves that we believe a very particular story about the world. We believe it is God's – he created it. We believe it's broken – because of sin; we believe that Jesus' death makes new life possible; we believe that one day everything will be transformed. We live as people with a distinct story in a culture that may not believe any of that. We are red dots. And when we gather we do so to strengthen and encourage one another to be who we are – God's chosen people.



The red dots diagram is in this Sunday's film, and available as a slide in the PowerPoint slide set at licc.org.uk/frontlinesundays



They are *exiles*

The second term that Peter uses is one that recalls the great disaster of the Old Testament – when Israel lost their land. At first they hoped for a quick return. But the prophets told them that most of that first generation of exiles would not return, though they could remain distinct and be a blessing where they were (Jeremiah 29).

Today, we are also scattered for most of the time. We don't spend all our time with fellow Christians. We may be the only disciples of Jesus at home, at work, or in our

class. These are the places where we are called to shine (Philippians 2:14–16). So, it's important that we don't 'grey out', lose our distinctiveness, and become the same as the surrounding culture. God has a plan in placing us in our scattered contexts.

'Frontline' is a term to describe these places. Of course, it has all sorts of connotations. For some, it reminds them of a battlefield and, whilst we would want to be careful about this, for some Christians keeping a Christian witness in their place is not easy. Others will have come across the term in their workplaces – classrooms, hospital wards, offices. Frontlines are everyday places where we live, work, study, or play and we're likely to connect with people who aren't Christians. Our hope, and experience, is that it is a term that everyone can relate to – from school child to retiree. We are all the scattered people of God. We all have frontlines.

A stunning truth

Peter concludes his opening greeting with a reminder of the wondrous work of the Trinity in their lives:

- Our situations are known by God – his foreknowledge
- We have been set apart by the Spirit – his sanctifying work
- We can be confident of our relationship with God – the sprinkling of blood is a sign of being included in his covenant

And all that is in the context of 'being obedient to Jesus', aligning ourselves with Christ and his purposes in the world. Peter rejoices with his readers in all that God has done for us. And he reminds them, and us, that we live out the implications of the gospel in our scattered places. We are elect and we are exiles.

The series will go on to explore the implications of this for us wherever we are, whatever we do, and whoever we are. It finishes by looking at what it means to be a discipling community together – for the sake of the world. We are red dots when we gather to strengthen one another as a distinct people. We are red dots when we scatter – to many different places with many different people. People who can make all the difference in the world.

Connecting with the congregation

This is a great opportunity to affirm the congregation and their part in God's purposes. Empower your congregation and help them see each other with fresh eyes by naming the frontlines of specific people, telling their 'frontline' stories, or simply mentioning different frontlines in your local area. e.g. Glenda in the hydrotherapy pool; Bill with the dog-walkers; Sylvia on the checkout in Asda; John and Judy with their foster kids; Kwame in the bank; Stephen with his start-up business; Jess, a new local councillor... You may already have heard something of what God has been doing through these people in those places.

WHEREVER WE ARE

Everyone has a frontline – a place where we do life or work and where we encounter people who don't know Jesus. We don't need to go looking for these, we are already there. We just need to see these places with fresh eyes.

The second service in the series helps people see that God is present in their everyday places and that these can be places where God is at work with us. Even the unexpected places can become places of encounter and transformation.

Suggested passage – Genesis 28:10–22

Encounters with God are transformative, and they happen in the course of life with all its ups and downs. They happen in the places we find ourselves in regularly. They happen, too, in the places that we find ourselves unexpectedly. This particular encounter with God happens when Jacob is in serious conflict with his brother. Esau wants to kill him (Genesis 27:41). Jacob, his grasping younger-by-minutes twin brother, has tricked him out of his birthright. He has taken Esau's future security from him and left him with nothing (Genesis 27:39–40). As Jacob runs away, he meets God in the last place he expected.

Preparatory sermon notes

God meets Jacob in an ordinary place

In church it's easy to rush over the central point of the story. God meets Jacob! It sounds like the sort of church-talk that most will accept in church surroundings but possibly be suspicious about elsewhere.

Outside the church we would want to ask – did he imagine it all? Was it because of the stress he was under? But as Walter Brueggemann has said in his commentary on Genesis, 'Neither of these will do. The narrative shatters our presuppositions. It insists the world is a place of such meetings.'

So, if it's easy to rush over that amazing part of the story, we then try to make it safer for ourselves by thinking that we are most likely to meet God in 'holy' places: churches, chapels, prayer rooms etc. But the Bible is clear: most of the time God

meets people in the least likely places. He meets Moses in a burning bush; Elijah not in a whirlwind, but in a whisper at the doorway to a cave. Jesus met Zacchaeus up a tree; the woman at the well, about her daily tasks; Peter at his workplace, a beach; Mary Magdalene looked for him in a tomb but found him standing behind her. Most of the encounters we read about in the life of Jesus occur in ordinary, everyday places. As Matthew Henry said, 'No place excludes divine visits.' There have been incredible stories of the places people have encountered God: prisons; schools; homes; workplaces; squash courts; pubs; fields etc. It still happens. God is here.

God transforms the ordinary place into a holy place

For most travellers, this place was just a stopping-off place. Somewhere handy to spend the night. But for Jacob this very ordinary place becomes extraordinary. It is a touching point between heaven and earth. Jacob renames the place 'Bethel' which means 'the house of God'. This is what we mean by frontlines – the ordinary places that are the touching places between God and his world that may not know his love. In the film with this series, ordinary places become 'holy' places: for the plumber, it was his customer's house; for the grandma, the front room; for the businesswoman, the office; for the football coach, it was the pitch. When we go to our ordinary places 'in the name of Jesus', they become the touching points between heaven and earth.

Jacob marks the ordinary place with a stone

God assures Jacob that he hasn't finished with him yet (Genesis 28:15). God's purposes will be worked out through Jacob. Jacob has been a schemer his whole life and that's why he is on the run. But in this place, he hears the voice of God reassuring him that God will make a difference through Jacob in the places he finds himself. Jacob 'owns' the place and knows that it is significant.

Jacob met God in a dream. Maybe that's significant. Maybe it's as we slow down that we allow ourselves to become more aware of God's presence with us. When you go 'through the door' into the places you find yourself during the week, go with an expectation that God can be at work there and seek to join in with what he is doing.

Connecting with the congregation

You might like to use the congregation activity in the booklet – This Time Tomorrow – to illustrate the sermon through interviews with one or two people in your congregation. If you're using the Scatter Pack the postcard with its questions will help people to discover the implications of the sermon in their own context.

WHATEVER WE DO

Whatever we do – the ‘work’ of our hands, however small and insignificant it may seem – matters to God. It’s part of our worship and how we serve others and bear witness to God. There can be Kingdom significance in our daily tasks and activities, however great or small.

Suggested passage – Colossians 3:15–24

Paul’s letter to the Colossians describes the kind of community God was calling them to be. But he makes clear that this was not inward-focused. Their daily lives were to be marked by love, kindness, and compassion in their places of work or activity, and in their relationships. The social conditions assumed in the passage aren’t the same social conditions that most of us face today. However, the principles that flow from it are as applicable now as much as then. Commitment to Jesus as Lord is to be worked out in daily life, in relationship with others, and bound up in our service of Jesus himself.

Preparatory sermon notes

Whatever you do...

Most of the people hearing the letter being read out would have been slaves, the household servants. In many ways, they kept the economy of the Roman empire going. But they had very little control over their lives. It would have been tempting for them to think that their daily tasks were insignificant. Paul’s encouragement to them offered a new way of seeing that these daily tasks mattered. Some Christians still feel that their tasks may be important, but that ultimately, they don’t really matter to God. They live with the sense of a Sacred/Secular Divide. This verse destroys that dichotomy. Paul will have none of that.

It may be significant that this clause ‘whatever you do’ is repeated in Colossians 3. It comes the first time in 3:17 where the context seems to be that the ‘whatever...’ will be in a worship context – verse 15 refers to the body of Christ, verse 16 refers to the word of Christ and the songs that are sung together. But Paul repeats the idea in 3:23 where the context is the everyday working context that the household slaves found themselves in. ‘Whatever you do...’ whether it is in our gathered worship or in our scattered everyday lives, it all matters. Whatever we do...

Do it ALL in the name of Jesus

When we do something in the name of Jesus, we are acting as Jesus' representative. We are his ambassadors. So, I can parent my children or be a friend in his name. I can price a job or run a business meeting in his name. I can plumb a sink in Jesus' name, coach a team in Jesus' name, bathe this patient in Jesus' name. We are each called to be Christ's ambassadors, to represent him in what we do and say. What does it mean to do our daily tasks in Jesus' name?

Do it with ALL your heart

How do you help people who are looked down on, who are thought to be insignificant? Paul subverts the slave-owner relationship by helping slaves see that they are actually working for the Lord, not just their owners. As they work with ALL their hearts – it is part of their worship, they are serving the Lord.

What sort of actions and words will make this true in our lives, in the life of our neighbourhood, our workplace, our school or our club?

Connecting with the congregation

The congregational activity in the booklet, which suggests a way of offering the daily 'work' of our hands to God, is a great way to connect the sermon to their everyday contexts. You might also like to visit one or two of your church members as part of your sermon preparation this week, perhaps even on their frontlines. Or gather a small group together to discuss the passage and discover how their lives might illustrate the text for the rest of the congregation. They may raise questions, too, that could be helpful to answer in the sermon for the whole community.

WHOEVER WE ARE

Whoever we are – however insignificant we feel – we make all the difference in the world because we are on our frontlines, first as a son or daughter of the King; a child of God. Our value, our worth, our significance, and our life on the frontline flows from this identity. This is liberating.

Suggested passage – Matthew 6:5–14

The Lord's Prayer can be so familiar that we skate through it not stopping to think too much about what we are praying, and even less about what it means for us as God's people caught up in what he's doing in the world. The wonder about the prayer is that it starts with an assurance of our identity. Take a look at the congregation activity in the Frontline Sundays service plans. You may wish to incorporate this into your sermon.

Preparatory sermon notes

Praying to be established in our identity as children of God

Our Father in heaven

It's life changing to know that we're first and foremost sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. Whoever we are, we're loved with all wisdom and understanding. There will be times in life when this will be the main anchor in the storm, the key that unlocks our prisons, the truth that brings us the greatest joy. Our Father in heaven is also the gateway to purpose.

Praying for our part in the Father's business

Hallowed be your name

When we become Christians, we can act as though we've enlisted God for our lives: our concerns and causes. However, when we begin to pray this prayer, we're reminded that what's actually happened is that God, through Jesus Christ, has co-opted us into his purposes. We align ourselves with his cause and his way of doing things and so glorify him. And of course, his 'family business' embraces all things – it's global, it's redemptive, it's liberating – and it includes us and our daily contexts.

Praying for regime change

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

Change can be challenging. Safety, security, and comfort can seem very attractive. But followers of Jesus are called to pray for regime change – that God's will would be done, here and now. This Kingdom clashes with alternative ways of life. When Jesus first taught this prayer there was an all-powerful empire. The Jewish people were working out what it meant to be the people of God under these difficult conditions. Some believed they should concentrate on personal piety, some thought that they should accommodate the political powers around them, some took to the desert to withdraw completely, whilst most ordinary people just tried to get on with life. But Jesus came and declared that the Kingdom of God had arrived in and through him. We join in that prayer for our times and places.

Praying for today's needs

Give us today our daily bread

Praying for today's bread suggests an attitude of constant reliance on our heavenly Father. It's a description of our relationship with him and affirms our significance to him. This can present a challenge to those of us who like to feel in control.

Praying for yesterday's mistakes

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors

This is a prayer that Jesus gave the disciples when they asked him to teach them to pray. Jesus recognised that there would be some things that would need to be dealt with regularly – we would need to be forgiven and we would need to forgive. We're not as good as we think we are and people around us are not as good as we wish they were. Jesus breaks the cycles of failure with forgiveness: between us and God, and between each other.

Praying for tomorrow's walk and 'work'

| **And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one**

Jesus seems to think that we shouldn't be too confident about our own ability to keep going as disciples. There's an enemy who wants to seduce us away from the ways of the Kingdom, and so times of testing will come and here we are called to pray for protection and deliverance. We don't go onto our frontlines alone but the powerful, protecting, life-giving presence of God is with us.

Serving God on our frontlines is not about 'trying harder'. It's about learning to allow the resurrection power of God to work in and through our lives as we embrace the things that God has asked us to do. But it begins with a clear sense of our identity.

Connecting with the congregation

You may wish to use the film at the end of the sermon as a pause for reflection. We can be confident that we can make a difference, not only because of what we do, but because of whose we are, and what God is doing in us as well as through us. We can be secure in our identity and therefore confident in our everyday places.

TOGETHER WE GROW

If we are going to be fruitful when we are scattered on our frontlines for the long-haul then we need to be faithful in gathering together. To continue to have an impact we need to stay strong and encouraged: we need one another. We, as red dots, need to stay red in a sea of grey dots. Our scattered and gathered lives are irrevocably connected.

Suggested passage – Hebrews 10:19–25

The Bible has so much to say about our relationships as the people of God; there are so many passages to choose from. But Hebrews 10 starts with God, not us. It starts with the good news of Jesus Christ and that seems a fitting conclusion to the series. Our lives are lived in response to that which God has first done for us through Christ. We gather to encourage one another, to remind one another about the full story of the gospel we have been invited into and as a consequence to equip one another for our everyday lives.

Preparatory sermon notes

The point of the passage is that we need each other! Our times together as church are a great opportunity to cast the vision for whole-life missional discipleship. What we practise together as a church is what we live out in our everyday lives. We can help one another to:

Hold on to hope together

As a church family, we need to help one another to hold on to this faith. There are many things that would tempt us to give up following Jesus or at least grow cold in our faith. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us in three ways.

He urges us to draw near to God. In the Old Testament this was only done by the priests, the ones separated out for that purpose. Here it is open for everyone, because Jesus opened the way.

Secondly, we have complete assurance of our faith – as we focus on Jesus we discover who we are as a result of what he's done for us.

Thirdly, we experience peace as we come with things that weigh heavy on our hearts and we discover that we have been sprinkled with his blood. We are renewed – we are reminded of our baptism vows, ‘our bodies being washed with pure water.’

Spur one another to good works

‘Spur’ is a strong word. It has the idea of ‘inciting’ or ‘provoking’ one another. It’s a strange word when linked with ‘love and good works’. But its strength suggests the importance of helping one another to live our faith on our frontlines. We can grow weary of doing good. People can be ungrateful or even manipulative of us. Our best efforts may not seem to lead to lasting change. It’s easy to give up, to become self-centred. The writer to the Hebrews recognised that we can help one another by not allowing each other to give up. To keep the challenge before us. To keep going. What would that look like in your church life together? How do you already help one another be attentive to his purposes through each person on their frontline? How could you help one another more? What do you learn together that might help you when you’re apart?

Keep meeting together

In emphasising our frontlines, we do not want to suggest that our life together is not important. In fact, if this is the place where we are reminded of the core elements of our faith, and if this is the community that will help us remain faithful to our calling, if this is the community that will affirm the significance of where we are Monday through Saturday, then meeting together is vital. It’s central to our spiritual disciplines. The gathered worship life of our church is where we teach, guide, challenge, equip, encourage, love, and commission one another for our lives on the frontline.

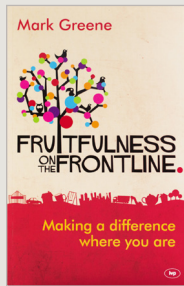
Connecting with the congregation

It would be great to hear stories from the congregation about what they’ve been learning from God through the series. This could be a preliminary to commissioning the whole church for their frontlines.

There is an example set of commissioning liturgy and prayers in the PowerPoint slide set at licc.org.uk/frontlinesundays

Love Frontline Sundays? Wondering what to preach next?

Fruitfulness on the Frontline



Explore the central texts behind the '6Ms' of fruitfulness, a practical framework to help your congregation live for Christ on their frontlines – a great follow-on from Frontline Sundays.

The *Fruitfulness on the Frontline* suite (which has a small group course and book) includes sermon preparation notes for three different eight-week sermon series, one of which works through Colossians, picking up on 'Whatever you do'.

| See licc.org.uk/fruitfulnessonthefrontline

Whole Life Preaching



This video series for preachers explores how a frontline focus can transform the way we preach. Hear from expert preachers and teachers about their own strategies for bringing the Bible afresh into the everyday lives of their congregation each week. Videos are free to watch and

share online and each comes with a discussion guide for your team, as you practise shaping your own frontline-focused sermons.

| See licc.org.uk/wholelifepreaching

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Through research, teaching, writing, and consulting, The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity works to equip churches and empower individuals to serve God in their Monday to Saturday lives.

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